



“Stop the War on Women’s Bodies”: Facilitating a Girl-Led March Against Sexual Violence in a Rural Community in South Africa

RELEBOHILE MOLETSANE

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

ABSTRACT *Internationally, there is increasing recognition that girls and young women are engaged in various forms of resistance and activism to address social issues that impact their lives. However, in contexts that are hostile to girls and young women due to unequal gender norms, girls are often silenced, and activism is met with disapproval and even violence. Where activism does occur, the voices of girls and young women engaged therein are often ignored. It is for this reason that adult activists often team up with and support girls and young women’s activism at the community level. In a rural community in South Africa, adult researchers and activists from a university worked with participating girls and young women to address sexual violence in the community. Within this collaborative project to commemorate the annual National Women’s Day, and with the assistance of the adult researchers, the participants organized an awareness march against sexual violence in their community. This article examines this intergenerational collaboration and the role of adult feminists in enabling girls’ voices to be heard regarding their experiences of sexual violence and how it might be addressed. The article concludes that in contexts where unequal gender norms produce high rates of gender-based violence, including sexual violence against girls and young women, girl-led activism is likely to occur with the support of adult activists with access to resources, and whose skills and relative authority gives them access to decision-makers and policy makers in communities and organizations.*

KEYWORDS activism in the making; community dialogue; girl-led activism; gender-based violence; intergenerational activism; sexual violence

Correspondence Address: Relebohile Moletsane, School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood Campus), Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa; Email: moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za

ISSN: 1911-4788



Introduction

Although they are often at risk from sexual and gender-based violence... girls and women – young and old – are not only victims. They have multiple identities and through their [various] roles... they often demonstrate incredible resiliency, coping and survival skills. It is imperative that all efforts to protect women and girls from sexual violence recognize this and do not simply depict them as helpless victims. Protection initiatives need to recognize these multiple identities. Rather than reinforce perceptions of women and girls as inherently vulnerable, we need to empower and support them to act to assert their rights within their families, organizations and communities. (Kirk & Taylor, 2007, pp. 13-14)

This call by Jackie Kirk and Suzanne Taylor made at the UN Security Council in 2000 followed on the footsteps of sociologist Ann Oakley's insightful question, "what would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of [young people] both as knowers and as actors?" (1994, p. 23). The question and the work that followed arguably inform much of the scholarship on young people's participation in research and development activities today. Since this call to action, various scholars and activists have argued for interventions against injustices to be informed by the experiences and voices of those directly impacted. With regard to girls and young women in particular, scholarship that recognizes their active participation in various struggles for social justice is increasing. Kirk herself, in an article with Stephanie Garrow, reiterated the central role that girls need to play in decision-making around issues which affect their lives, arguing that "working with girls as 'knowers' implies acknowledging the centrality of their lived experiences of [sexual violence], understanding their diverse perceptions of the barriers to [girls' safety], and committing to work with their various proposed strategies and processes" (Kirk & Garrow, 2003, p. 6).

Yet, as Jessica Taft, in her book, *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas* (2010) argues, there are few studies that focus on girls' activism. Instead, "finding documentation of [girls'] stories, their organizations, and their words is not easy; they are rarely considered and written about as significant political actors. They appear, but they do not speak" (Taft, 2010, pp. 15-16). Specifically, in contexts characterized by unequal gender norms that produce among other consequences, high rates of gendered violence, including sexual violence, and where, as a result, girls and women are often silenced and ignored, such gender activism among teenage girls is limited. It is for this reason that in what Mitchell, de Lange and Moletsane (2018) are calling "gender activism in the making," I was part of a group of adult researchers from a South African university who facilitated a girl-led march against sexual violence in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal. The girls and young women, aged between 18 and 22, who call themselves "Leaders for Young Women's Success" or L4YWS, are part of the "Networks for Change and Wellbeing: Girl-led 'From the Ground Up' Policy-Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa"

project (hereafter referred to as the Networks for Change and Wellbeing project). The project aims to study sexual violence from the perspectives of the girls, as well as to use this perspective to inform social change and policy at various levels. To commemorate the annual National Women's Day,¹ the L4YWS expressed a desire to organize an awareness march against sexual violence in their community.

This article examines this activism in the making and the role of adult feminists in helping to make the girls' voices audible while ensuring their safety in a community where they are often punished for going against the norm. Building on Mitchell, de Lange and Moletsane's (2018), work, the article asks three questions:

- 1) What is the role of adult researchers and activists in facilitating girls' activism?
- 2) How can such adult-facilitated activism enable girls' voices to be heard in relation to their experiences of sexual violence?
- 3) How can adult-facilitated activism enable girls' voices to be heard in relation to how sexual violence might be addressed?

Girls' Activism in the Context of Gender-based Violence

There are abundant studies that "describe girls' acts of resistance to dominant gender norms, or address girls' consumption of commodified versions of feminism, but very few have made girls' politics or political identities the central focus of study" (Taft, 2010, p. 4). Yet, as Kirk and Garrow (2003) argued, if we believe that girls' voices are key to developing policies and sustainable programs that address the inequalities and the violence that are often sustained by non-inclusive decision-making, we need scholarship that examines the extent and nature of their activism and their involvement as knowers and actors in their own lives. Therefore, to what extent and in what ways have girls engaged in activism in various contexts? What drives such acts of resistance?

The story of Malala Yousafzai, is perhaps one of the most prominent cases of young knowers and actors who engage in activism against injustices around the world today. Yousafzai suffered an extreme form of gender-based violence in 2012 when she was shot in the head by the Taliban for her activism for girls' education in Pakistan. A more recent example is that of Emma Gonzalez, who became the face of the student movement against gun violence after the mass shooting that claimed the lives of 17 people at a Florida high school in February 2018 and who has faced criticism and threats of violence for her activism. Not many girls and young women can rise

¹ On August 9th 1956, 20,000 South African women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the administrative capital of the country, to hand over a memorandum protesting against the pass laws imposed by the Apartheid regime. Post-apartheid, August 9th is commemorated annually as South Africa's National Women's Day.

above their oppression in the way that these two girls did. In many communities around the world, speaking out against social injustices may expose girls and young women to further aggression, including physical violence. Even in these contexts, girls and young women have continued to raise their voices against the gender-based injustices they face. However, most of the literature on girls' activism against gender inequality and gender-based violence in various contexts tends to focus on what could arguably be viewed as relatively safe activist contexts. For example, Keller (2012) examined blogs as spaces for girls' feminist political activism in two communities in the US. The author concludes that "through the practice of blogging, teenage girls are actively reframing what it means to participate in feminist politics, drawing on opportunities that the Internet provides to embrace new understandings of community, activism, and even feminism itself" (Keller, 2012, p. 429). Similarly, Edell, Brown and Tolman (2013) explored girls' activism in SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge), a US organization which has used blogging and online discussions (as well as marches and summits) to work with girls between the ages of 13 and 22 to understand and challenge the sexualization of girls and young women in popular culture. Such online platforms, where the girls may choose to be anonymous, can function as a protective measure against possible backlash from the girls' families and communities. Yet, as Janet Morahan-Martin (2000, p. 683) warned almost two decades ago, "women have been targets of online oppression, harassment, and some have become real-life victims because of their online participation and/or activism." Thus, cyber violence makes even these online spaces unsafe for young people, often resulting in negative emotional impacts for victims.

Studies of girl-led activism around various issues that face girls, including child marriages, access to education, gender-based violence and bullying are also emerging. Taft (2010) arguably leads this work with her explorations of girls' entry into activism and how they understand and talk about their activist identities. For example, in her transnational study of girls' activism, she explores how girls negotiate what it means to be girl activists. According to Taft (2010, p. 18), girl activists tend to have a complex relationship to being girls, in which they reject "particular [limiting] elements of girlhood and ...[redefine] what it means to be a girl." The study also examined the strategies and practices engaged by girl activists across various contexts, identifying commitment to learning, political education and participatory practices as some of the transnational and local features of girls' activism.

In another transnational study, Gianturco and Sangster (2017) report on the work of girl-led non-profit groups in 13 countries in Asia and Central Asia, North and Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Oceania, where girls between the ages of 10 and 18 engaged in activism aimed at addressing such issues as child marriages, domestic violence, human trafficking, war, education, health and the environment. The girls used strategies and tools such as signing petitions, writing poems, creating art, making videos,

blogging, developing mobile apps, lobbying governments, and addressing United Nations meetings.

But why do girls become activists? What makes girls like Malala Yousafzai and many others take action against injustices, particularly when such activism may involve some level of danger? Taft (2017) reports on a study in which she interviewed and observed teenage girl activists in five cities in North and South America. Of particular relevance to this article is her finding that girls tend to see themselves as “‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ activists;” she concludes that this “enables valuable political flexibility and openness” (Taft, 2017, p. 27). Similarly, in reflecting on their work with university-age women students, Mitchell, de Lange and Moletsane (2018), refer to activism in the making, in which adults facilitate young people’s engagement in taking action against the injustices they confront in their own lives, while ensuring their safety against gender- and age-based violence for challenging unequal societal norms.

But what ethical issues arise when adults facilitate girls’ activism in contexts characterized by unequal gender norms and often, age- and gender-based violence against those who transgress the norms of the community? Emily Bent (2016), in her article, “Making It Up: Intergenerational Activism and the Ethics of Empowering Girls,” reflects on this question, albeit in pre-existing activist networks in North American contexts. She notes:

Intergenerational activism creates relational messiness between adults and girls since effectively partnering with girls requires disruptions of generational power with practitioner-scholars learning to make it up as they go along. [There are] complex and contested ways in which girls and adults build activist partnerships in adult-centered and sometimes politically hostile settings. In exploring the environment within which North American girls experience political (dis)empowerment, I question the ethics of empowering girls under current spectacular discursive conditions. (Bent, 2016, p. 105)

For the research team in the Networks for Change and Wellbeing project, our aim was to facilitate girl-led activism, and in this particular case, a girl-led march to raise awareness and start community dialogue around the issues and strategies for addressing them. Yet, we were very aware of and concerned about the unequal gender norms that governed relationships between men and women, and girls and boys in the community, as well as the age- and gender-based norms that govern what girls may or may not do or say in the community. This is in the context of the well-documented high rates of poverty and gender-based violence in South Africa, and in rural communities in particular. For example, recent reports suggest that over 51,000 cases of sexual assault were reported to the South African Police Services (SAPS) between April 2015 and April 2016 (SAPS, 2016). While these numbers are high, many activists suggest that due to under-reporting, they represent only a fraction of the cases that occur in communities. Naidoo (2013), for example, suggests that although an estimated 500,000 incidents of rape occur each

year, only one in 20 cases ever reach official police records. Rural areas such as the district where the L4YWS reside tend to be particularly hit by this violence. Research indicates that over 40% of actual and attempted sexual assaults perpetrated against girls under 18 years occur in rural settings (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, & Rose-Junius, 2005; Petersen, Bhana & McKay, 2005; Bhana, 2012). Taking into consideration the under-reporting of cases, the numbers could be even higher.

Within the project itself, we are aware of the unequal power relations between ourselves as adult researchers (aged 33 years and up) with more resources and authority, and our participants (who are younger and have limited social power and access to resources). To what extent is our intervention truly empowering to these girls and young women? To try to “democratize” the research process, our project uses a workshop approach involving participatory visual methods (PVM) to engage participants in not only understanding the various forms of sexual violence, but in also identifying and developing strategies and resources for addressing it. PVM involves members of marginalized groups (such as girls and young women) in the co-construction of knowledge, a critical examination of the world around them, and action to address social problems, such as gender-based violence (Stringer, 1999). By positioning participants as knowers and actors, and therefore as co-researchers, PVM aims to minimize power differences between researchers and participants, and create opportunities for the voices of the latter, in this case girls and young women, to be heard. It is simultaneously a tool for inquiry, representation, and taking action.

In preparing for the march, we were confident that the L4YWS had developed the capacity and agency to speak up against gender inequality in the context of the project. Their participation in the march illustrated how they had begun to find ways to speak about their experiences of gender-based violence in the community. The community dialogue they organized with our help following the march was aimed at enabling a conversation about these issues and finding strategies for addressing them. However, our concern was whether they would be able to do so with their parents, community leaders and elders in the audience. More importantly, would speaking up against established gender norms place them in danger of sanctions and even violence from these adult figures in the community? What was our role in protecting them against this potential danger when we would be leaving and going back to the city and the university at the end of the march and community dialogue? I reflect on these questions in the sections that follow.

A Biography of a Girl-led March

On August 9, 2017, a girl-led march aimed at raising awareness about gender-based violence against girls took place in Khethani, a rural community in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Khethani is

located in the Okhahlamba Municipality under the rural district of uThukela. uThukela is located at the foot of the Drakensberg mountain range, which forms part of the boundary between South Africa and Lesotho. A report by the municipality suggests that a variety of social issues face the residents in this area, including, among others, unemployment, poverty, high rates of HIV, tuberculosis, gender violence, poor access to social services such as healthcare, as well as poor infrastructure (Okhahlamba Local Municipality, 2015). Our community partner in the project, Isibani Community Centre, provides a variety of services such as food and clothing distribution, home-based health care, HIV counselling and testing, and support to victims of violence (see <http://isibanicentre.org/tl/index.php>). In our first meeting with Isibani, in line with national reports about sexual violence in rural settings, staff reported high levels of gender-based violence in the area, including sexual violence.

As discussed above, the march took place in the context of our work with girls and young women in the Networks for Change and Wellbeing project, which focuses on girl-led approaches to understanding and addressing sexual violence against girls and young women. In this project, we have used a variety of participatory visual (PVM) and others arts-based methods, including drama, drawing, collage, photo-voice, and cellphilms (video made with cellphones) as tools for engaging the girls and young women in the research process, and in identifying the issues as well as the strategies and resources needed to address them (Mayoux, 2008). Importantly, the element of fun makes PVM an ideal approach to engaging young people as knowers and actors, where they learn new skills and also, crucially, get opportunities to analyze the issues that affect them and their communities from their own perspectives and inform the strategies for addressing them.

In our PVM workshops with the L4YWS (see Figure 1), reports of gender-based violence in the community and their schools emerged. These included forced and early marriages, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and physical violence (see Treffry-Goatley, Wiebesiek, Larkin, Ngcobo & Moletsane, 2016). When prompted to think about what could be done to address the situation, the group invariably pointed to the adults and the formal structures in the community: the police, the ward councilor, their parents and community leaders. One of the objectives of the Networks for Change and Wellbeing project is to investigate the role of girls as knowers in informing the study of sexual violence, and as actors in its eradication. To enable this thinking, during one of the PVM workshops with the L4YWS, as one of the adult researchers in Networks for Change and Wellbeing, I facilitated a group discussion about the role of the L4YWS in taking action against sexual violence against girls and women in the community. The purpose of the activity was to move the group towards recognizing their own agency in taking action, particularly in the context of unequal gender norms and high rates of gender-based violence in the community. One of our major learnings from the discussion was that, in addition to considering what other

stakeholders (the police, parents and other community elders) can and should be doing to address sexual violence in the community, the L4YWS must also think about what they as individuals and as a group could do. After brainstorming a few “taking action” activities, as discussed above, the L4YWS proposed organizing an awareness raising march to coincide with the commemoration of the National Women’s Day on August 9th. In preparation, they developed placards in which they identified the issues around gender-based violence and what action was needed to address it (see Figure 1). After much discussion, the group decided that the march would be followed by a community dialogue involving various stakeholders from the community, and that the dialogue would also focus on raising awareness about violence against women and girls, and identifying strategies for addressing it.



Figure 1. L4YWS’ Preparatory Workshop (Photo by Relebohile Moletsane)

In collaboration with Isibani Community Centre, we applied to the Okhahlamba Local Municipality for permission to hold the march and community dialogue. While this meant that the L4YWS did not directly negotiate with the authorities about holding the march, and that this aspect of the event was not “girl-led,” this was an aspect we were willing to sacrifice. In a community where women and girls are often denied access to speaking platforms, and those who do can be sanctioned or punished, our status as adult university lecturers is likely to have influenced the municipality to grant

us permission to facilitate the march. Once we had received permission, planning began in earnest. Part of the planning involved a facilitated workshop in which the L4YWS discussed the march, the focus of the community dialogue and program – including who would be invited to speak – and what the role of the group would be at the march and dialogue. The group created placards with slogans and messages against gender inequality and gender-based violence and what is needed to address it, which they planned to carry and to provide for other marchers to carry during the march around the community.

After several phone calls and meetings with the municipality and the South African Police Services (SAPS) to arrange times and routes, invite local NGOs and government officials, and arrange transport for those from outside Khethani, the research team left the rest of the preparations to the L4YWS. These included developing the program for the community dialogue, advertising in schools, and invitations to peers, youth organizations, neighbors and family members.

The day of the march and community dialogue finally arrived. The marchers met at the Khethani Community Hall from where they departed for the march around the community. In addition to the L4YWS, the event was attended by other girl-led and youth-led groups from the community. These included the “Social Ills Fighters,” another group of girls we have been working with in a neighboring village, as well as the Khethani Youth Ambassadors, a group of young people (boys and girls) who have been trained as facilitators in HIV prevention programs in schools around the community. Adults from the community were also in attendance. These included staff from local NGOs, representatives from the SAPS, fire fighters, the local ward councilors, and other members of the community. Interestingly the older members of the community (parents, guardians and others) who took part in the march were mostly women, some with the aid of walking sticks; men only joined us for the community dialogue that followed the march.

The march, involving about 150 participants, left the Khethani Community Hall, and guided by SAPS cars and marshals, for about two hours, took the group around the community. The spirited group braved the heat to cover the approximately five-kilometer route around the small settlement, waving the posters created by the L4YWS for the event, with slogans such as *Stop the War on Women's Bodies*; *No Means No*; *Break the Silence*; and *Rape Culture is Not Our Culture* (see Figure 2). Throughout the march, they chanted slogans and sang songs about the negative impacts of gender-based and sexual violence, and what is needed to address it.

One of our concerns about marching in the community was the potential backlash and possible violence against the marchers. We need not have worried as some curious onlookers in the homes and the streets cheered the marchers on, while others simply looked on. Moreover, the presence of uniformed SAPS members, some in marked cars and others walking beside

and behind the marchers, may have discouraged those who would have caused us trouble during the march. The SAPS not only guided and perhaps even protected us on the route, but were also helpful in identifying and picking up some of the older women who grew tired and seemed overwhelmed by the heat, and driving them back to the hall for the rest of the march.



Figure 2. Marching Through the Community (Photo by Lisa Wiebesiek)

Back at the community hall, more people had joined, making the total number of attendees about 250. After a short rest and some refreshments we had brought from the university, the community dialogue was opened by a local woman councilor who talked about the various issues that confront the municipality in relation to the welfare of young people in the community (see Figure 3). After this, the young people took charge with the L4YWS performing a drama they had developed about gender-based violence and their experiences of how the police handled reporting. It was interesting to watch members of the police reacting (some uncomfortably) to how the young people portrayed their (often) inadequate and inappropriate handling of cases of gender-based violence reported to them. During their allocated spot in the program, one of them, a woman constable, acknowledged these criticisms and appealed to the community to work with SAPS by reporting and following up on cases.

The drama performance was followed by a member of the Khethani Youth Ambassadors performing spoken word poetry about violence against women and girls, and the Social Ills Fighters, the second group of girls our research

team works with in a neighboring village, performing a song linking gender-based violence to HIV infection. Input from the audience was also encouraged, with several members of the community reiterating the extent of gender-based violence and the role of parents, the community, and the police in addressing it.



Figure 3. At the Community Dialogue (Photo by Lisa Wiebesiek)

With the help of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's communications unit who sent out a press release prior to the march, the event was picked up by several national and local media, including radio stations and newspapers. A number of radio stations interviewed me just after the march, in my capacity as the co-principal investigator in the Networks for Change and Wellbeing project. These included stations that broadcast in local African languages such as Lesedi (Sesotho), Ukhozi (IsiZulu), Ikwewezi (IsiNdebele), as well as English-medium stations such as SAFM and Lotus FM. For example, in their introductory remarks, Lotus FM, a local radio station located the march within other KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) provincial initiatives organized around the National Women's Day holiday:

Willies Mchunu, KZN Premier, has called on South Africans to stand united in their diversity, as thousands of women did in their March against Apartheid laws, to the Union Buildings in 1956. He addressed the KZN Women's Day Rally, at Vryheid. Relebohile Moletsane, a University of KwaZulu-Natal Professor took part in a March aimed at raising awareness about violence against women in the

community of Kethani, Winterton. The March was part of the Networks for Change and Wellbeing: Girl-led from the Ground Up Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa led by UKZN and McGill University in Canada. [In addition, the] Sunflower Women's Football Club has embarked on a Campaign called Girls Play Safe, in response to the recent spate of killings of women and child rape. (Loftus FM, August 10, 2017)

Among the print media, *The Mercury* (First Edition, 29 Aug 2017), led with the headline “Youth Group Leads Women's Month Awareness March.” The article reported:

Taking a stand against gender-based violence, a group of girls and young women from [a school] in the rural community of Khethani in Winterton, led a march to raise awareness about violence against women in their community in support of Women's Month... Some 150 people, mostly girls and young women, but including mothers and grandmothers, a representative from the local Mayor's office, UKZN project staff members and some senior South African Police officers, took part in the march. Afterwards, they gathered at a community hall to engage in dialogue and seek collective solutions to the issue of gender-based violence... (Desai, 2017, p. 9)

With the euphoria of the march behind us, we left the community hall and Khethani and went back to the city and our university work. The process evaluation for the 2017 research period, including the various workshops and the march is scheduled for early 2018. This will involve the participants in reflecting on their experiences of the march and community dialogue, and the community's responses to both the event and the group's participation therein. In the remainder of this article I reflect on the march and the participation of the L4YWS as activists in the making (Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane, 2018).

What Difference does this Make? Reflections on the March

While the march and dialogue in Khethani ended without any negative incidents from the community or the municipal and community authorities, Bent's (2016) caution that intergenerational and adult-facilitated activism can be messy and may pose danger for girls and young women in adult-centred and gender unequal settings, warrants some reflection. This article does not aim to evaluate the impact of the march on the L4YWS and the community members who attended. However, it is important to reflect on some of the implications of the initiative, for the L4YWS, their families and community, and for us as adult researchers who facilitated and supported a girl-led march against gender-based violence in the community.

One set of questions that require reflection is: What kinds of discussions took place in the families of the members of the L4YWS after the march? How did the girls' and young women's intimate partners react to their

activism work? How were the L4YWS viewed by their peers and by adults in the community after the march? Without the presence and protection of the research team, to what extent and in what ways did their participation in and leadership of the march empower or disempower them in the context of unequal gender norms and gender-based violence in their community? A second set of questions relates to the influence of the march on community responses to sexual violence against girls and women. For example, what sustainable influence, if any, will the march have on the L4YWS and the community of Khethani, particularly in relation to their responses to gender-based violence against girls and young women?

For obvious reasons, I cannot claim that this once-off, protected (by the SAPS and municipal leaders) and adult-facilitated girl-led march has changed gender relations and addressed gender-based violence in the community of Khethani. After all, a one-off march can never be a “magic formula or quick-fix solution for ensuring young women’s leadership and activism. The process is slow and requires support, resources, energies and a commitment to [gender equity for all]” (Wilson, 2004, p. 20). However, the event did enable the girls and young women who led the march to have their voices heard, albeit for this one day, by peers and more importantly, by the adults and community leaders who do not normally give them opportunities to voice their perspectives on issues that impact their lives and the community. Beyond this embodiment and presence through the media broadcasts and newspaper article, the girls and their voices (as mediated by my interviews with these organisations) possibly reached about 12 million radio listeners and about 234,000 newspaper readers. This will not in itself change the gender regimes prevailing in the various communities. However, not only did the community of Khethani listen to girls and young women talk about their experiences of sexual violence in the community, possibly millions of people around the country heard about the girls’ initiative and its focus. Whether they will act on what they heard cannot be established in this article. Suffice to say that it is possible that a seed, however small, was planted in the minds of girls and young women and adults in the community and possibly across the country. Taking up the challenge posed by Kirk and Taylor (2007) to the UN Security Council in 2000, as a research team and adult activists, we facilitated this girl-led march so as to enable and support the L4YWS to have their voices heard in relation to their experiences of sexual violence in the community. The aim was not only to raise awareness about the issue, but to also start a community dialogue that might lead to identifying and developing solutions to “*Stop the War on Women’s Bodies*,” as one of the posters at the march read.

Our presence and support in enabling the L4YWS to prepare for and lead the march is likely to have shielded them from some negative repercussions, possibly including violence from the community. However, it is also possible that our presence as outsiders to the community and the nature and purpose of the march might have generated negative repercussions for the members of

the L4YWS. Some communities in South Africa tend to view feminism and feminist activism as “unAfrican,” and activists are often punished for resisting the unequal gender norms. As Gouws (2015) observes, drawing from what many regard as African cultural norms and values, public discourse in some sectors of society tends to be patriarchal, relegating girls and women to subordinate positions and seeing them as lacking agency and in need of protection from men. Thus, challenging these norms, as feminists often do, is seen as disrespecting African culture, and as unAfrican. Similarly, for the L4YWS, participating in a march that aimed at challenging unequal gender norms, which are supported by elders in their community, might be viewed as disrespecting African culture and therefore, as unAfrican. I can only hope that this outsider-supported activist initiative has not exposed the members of the L4YWS to further discrimination and violence in their families and communities, and within their friendships and intimate relationships.

Conclusion

This article reflected on a girl-led, adult-facilitated march that aimed to raise awareness about sexual violence against girls and young women in a rural community in South Africa. The biography of this march illustrates the ways in which adult researchers and activists might facilitate and support girl- and young women-led activism against sexual violence and for identifying and developing strategies for addressing it. First, as discussed above, the L4YWS were able to speak about their experiences of sexual violence and have started what we hope will be a series of community dialogues aimed at understanding these issues and finding strategies for addressing them. Second, speaking against gender-based violence in front of adult community members, at least for this one day, in a sort of a #HereToo activism, and a local version of the global #MeToo movement, served, as one of the posters at the march read, to “*Break the Silence Against Sexual Violence*” in the community. The participants’ agency to speak up was possible, in part, because of the support of the adult researchers. As Rivard (2015) found in her work with Rwandan school girls, it is often easier for university researchers, who are outsiders, to negotiate access to high ranking government officials than it is for girls whose status in the community is the lowest, and who lack the material resources and skills to negotiate such access. In the case of the L4YWS, access to the municipal officials had to be negotiated via several phone calls and visits to their offices, a task that would have been impossible for the girls and young women to achieve due to their low status in the community, but also the resources required. Third, not all girls and young women, particularly in such gender-unequal settings, will be able to speak up and challenge the unequal gender norms that expose them to the high rates of sexual violence in their homes and communities. Yet, the

girl-led march discussed in this article illustrates, as Jackie Kirk's work reminds us, the significance of girls' activism and girls' voices as knowers and actors, in informing sustainable interventions and policy for addressing social issues. Taking such voices seriously is key to developing policies and programs aimed at addressing the high rates of sexual violence against girls and young women in communities. The march also illustrates the important role that adult activists have to play in nurturing girls' and young women's activism against sexual violence. In this and similar communities, it is this intergenerational collaboration that is likely to inform effective and sustainable policy and programming at various levels.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported through an International Development Research Centre (IDRC) grant (award number 107777-001) and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant (award number 895-2013-3007). The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the IDRC or SSHRC.

I would like to thank the L4YWS for their participation in the march and the project, and Lisa Wiebesiek for her leadership in the organization of the girl-led 2017 National Women's Day March in Khethani and her report on the event.

References

- Bent, E. (2016). Making it up: Intergenerational activism and the ethics of empowering girls. *Girlhood Studies*, 9(3), 105-121.
- Bhana, D. (2012). "Girls are not free" – In and out of the South African school. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(2), 352-358.
- Desai, S. (2017, August 29). Youth group leads Women's Month awareness march. *The Mercury* (1st ed.), p. 9.
- Edell, D., Brown, L. M., & Tolman, D. (2013). Embodying sexualization: When theory meets practice in intergenerational feminist activism. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 275-284
- Gianturco, P., & Sangster, A. (2017). *Wonder girls: Changing our world*. New York: Powerhouse Books.
- Gouws, A. (2015). The public discourse on rape in South Africa: Turning women into vulnerable victims. In M. Verwoerd & C. Lopes (Eds.), *Sexualized violence in the national debate: Cross-border observations on India and South Africa* (pp. 66-75). Cape Town, SA: Heinrich Böll Foundation Southern Africa.
- Human Rights Watch (2001). *Scared at school: Sexual violence against girls in South African schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Jewkes, R., Penn-Kekana, L., & Rose-Junius, H. (2005). "If they rape me, I can't blame them": Reflections on gender in the social context of child rape in South Africa and Namibia. *Social Science & Medicine*, 61(8), 1809-1820.
- Keller, J. M. (2012). Virtual feminisms: Girls' blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(3), 429-447.
- Kirk, J., & Garrow, S. (2003). 'Girls in policy': Challenges for the education sector. *Agenda*, 56, 4-15.

- Kirk, J., & Taylor, S. (2007). Ending sexual violence against women and girls in conflict contexts: UN Security Council Resolution 1325. *Forced Migration Review*, 27, 13-14.
- Lotus FM. (2017, August 10). Newsbreak: KZN marks Women's Day 2017 with a rally and a march [radio broadcast]. Durban, SA, Lotus FM.
- Mayoux, L. (2008). Uganda: Kabarole Research and Resource Centre's participatory, self-managed microfinance model. In *Gender in agriculture sourcebook* (pp. 117-124). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Mitchell, C., de Lange, N., & Moletsane, R. (2018). Addressing sexual violence in South Africa: 'Gender activism in the making'. In E. Oinas, H. Onodera & L. Suurpaa (Eds.), *What politics? Youth and political engagement in contemporary Africa* (pp. 317-336). Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.
- Morahan-Martin, J. (2000). Women and the internet: Promise and perils. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 3(5), 683-691.
- Naidoo, K. 2013. "Rape in South Africa – A call to action." *SAMJ: South African Medical Journal*, 103(4), 210–211.
- Oakley, A. (1994). Women and children first and last. Parallels and differences between children's and women's studies. In B. Mayall (Ed.), *Children's childhoods observed and experienced* (pp. 13-32). London: Falmer Press.
- Okhahlamba Local Municipality (2015). *Okhahlamba Local Municipality 2013/2014 annual report*. Bergville, KwaZulu-Natal, SA. Retrieved from www.okhahlamba.org.za/docs/reports/2015/Okhahlamba
- Petersen, I., Bhana, A., & McKay, M. (2005). Sexual violence and youth in South Africa: The need for community-based prevention interventions. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(11), 1233–1248.
- Rivard, L. (2015). *Gender, physical education, and sport: Bringing forward Rwandan girls' perspectives on their lived experiences of physical activity and sport in secondary schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). McGill University, Montreal, QC.
- SAPS (South African Police Services). (2017). *Crime in the Republic of South Africa for the period April 2016 to March 2017*. Retrieved from www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php
- Stringer, E. T. (1999). *Action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taft, J. K. (2010). *Rebel girls: Youth activism and social change across the Americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Taft, J. K. (2017). Teenage girls' narratives of becoming activists, *Contemporary Social Science*, 12,(1-2), 27-39.
- Treffry-Goatley, A., Wiebesiek, L, Larkin, R, Ngcobo, N. and Moletsane, R. (2016). Ethics of community based participatory research in rural South Africa: Gender violence through the eyes of girls. *Learning Landscapes*, 10 (1), 341-361.
- Wilson, S. (2004). Building and supporting young women's leadership for social justice. *Agenda*, 60, 16-21.