Addressing Sexual Violence in South Africa: 'Gender activism in the making'

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Introduction

"What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoints of children [adolescent girls] both as knowers and as actors?" asks sociologist Ann Oakley (1994, 24). To this we add the questions: What approaches, mechanisms and structures would make it possible for girls and young women, as knowers and actors, to influence social policy and social change in the context of sexual violence? To what extent might this work deepen an understanding of gender activism amongst youth? This chapter seeks to deepen an understanding of girls and young women's political activism in relation to sexual violence by studying what we term here 'gender activism' and 'in the making' in relation to a group of 14 girls and young women from rural South Africa enrolled at a university in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The young women participated in a project, Girls Leading Change, which aimed to address sexual violence on campus. We use the term 'activism in the making' as a way to signal the nature of our own involvement as adult researchers, but also to problematize the public face of activism in the area of sexuality and sexual violence carried out in a mainstream institutional environment. While Girls Leading Change builds on a number of different components of community involvement in relation to sexual violence, in this chapter we focus on the ways that the young women engaged with a number of different campus-based policy makers in looking at sexual violence. In so doing, we consider the significance of gender and political activism as critical to altering the policy landscape for addressing sexual violence in institutions.

As has been highlighted in numerous studies, South Africa has one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the world, and while absolute numbers are unreliable because of under-reporting, adolescent girls and young women are particularly at risk. Compounding the under-reporting of sexual assault is the fact that rates of prosecution are low; a 2005 study indicates that fewer than 1 per cent of cases actually result in a conviction. According to the ANC

Women's Caucus (1998), "before her 18th birthday one in three South African girls will be sexually assaulted". There is a consistent (and unrelenting) possibility of sexual violence that runs counter to girls' safety and security in schools and communities, and to their reproductive health, particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS (Moletsane, Mitchell and Lewin 2015). As Gqola (2016, 5) highlights in *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, the situation is very much one of what she terms "pornography of an empire". As she notes: "although all women are in danger of rape, Black women are the most likely to be raped. It is not for the reasons that would seem to be 'logical' or obvious. It has little to do with numbers and much to do with how rape and race have historically intersected in mutually reinforcing ways" (ibid. 5).

There is clearly no one initiative or set of interventions that can be regarded as the answer to addressing the widespread incidence of sexual violence in the lives of girls and young women, and indeed – as we highlight in an introductory essay in an issue of *Agenda* meant to focus on interventions addressing sexual violence (Mitchell and De Lange 2015) – there are many more articles about the situation than there are about sustainable interventions. A promising area, though, is the fact that various governments in both the Global North and Global South have begun to study how the development and implementation of a youth strategy might play out in relation to a variety of thematic areas of importance to youth. Some studies focus on participation, agency and citizenship (Alparone and Rissotto 2001; Camino and Zeldin 2002; Combe 2002; Denov and Gervais 2007; Fielding 2007; Gaunle and Adhikari 2010; Hallett and Prout 2003; Livingstone, Bober and Helsper 2004; Livingstone and Tsatasou 2009; Mackinnon and Watling 2006), while others look at targeted areas such as youth sexuality (Mitchell, Weber and Yoshida 2008).

Another angle on political activism is to consider the question of what form the public voice of young people might take. To date this has been studied largely in the arena of online activism. Rheingold (2008) and Jenkins (2009) note, for example, that when adolescents and young adults engage with online participatory cultures and digital communication (blogging, social media networking, instant-messaging and online sharing of user-generated content), they are learning to develop a public voice. Civic engagement (political activism, deliberation, problem solving) requires the effective use of a public voice (Levine 2008; Rheingold 2008). According to Levine (2008, 120), "a public voice is always one that can persuade other people – beyond the closest friends and family – to take action on shared issues". Levine differentiates a private voice as one that is not intended to interest a community or to address their concerns. An example of a private voice, Levine explains, is an e-mail or a social networking site that is meant for people close to the author. In contrast,

a political blog is an example of a public voice, where the author expresses opinions or perspectives on current issues to draw in or influence a larger audience. A public voice, however, is not limited to addressing political matters, but also comprises cultural production, where engaged people come together in communities or associations. Topics thus extend beyond politics to include discussing bad software, how to fix technical problems and poor customer service, for example. While such topics may be issues that belong to the private sector, Levine (2008) argues that once they are made to reach a larger audience through media such as blogs, they represent a public voice. Rheingold (2008, 101) adds that this "voice [is] the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communication from those of others. Moving from a private to a public voice can help students turn their self-expression into a form of public participation". A public voice is not just active, but also generative.

Much of this work on public voice and civic engagement remains gender neutral, or privileges male youth as participants, although as Caron, Raby, Mitchell, Thewissen-Leblanc and Prioletta (2016) note in their study of the vlogs posted on YouTube produced by Canadian young people that are examples of what they term "social change-oriented youth voices", both males and females can be speaking out on issues of feminism and sexual violence in ways that challenge normative practices. In studies that do focus on the participation of girls and young women in addressing gender violence, the notion of how this work can inform policy and programming is typically neglected or offered as 'next steps'. At the same time, emerging work within feminist studies and girlhood studies looks at how girls and young women might themselves shape policies (see Mitchell 2011; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008). How might this work inform an agenda of "learning from the ground up" (Kapoor and Choudry 2010) through the political activism of girls and young women?

Activism and Political Engagement

Studying Girls and Political Identity

To date the idea of young women and activism in relation to sexual violence remains understudied although there is an emerging body of work on young women as activists (see MacKay 2011; Taft 2010; Trigg 2010) that helps to frame this chapter. Taft's work, in particular, is central to raising questions about the political identity of girls and young women. As she observes in *Rebel Girls*:

> Girls' activism is an extremely underexplored scholarly topic, largely invisible in the academic literatures on girlhoods and on social movements.

> Research in the growing field of girls' studies has focused primarily on
> girls' self-esteem and psychology, sexuality and sexual behavior, friend-
> ships, schools and peer relationships, media consumption, production
> and cultural practice, and issues of growing up and constructing identi-
> ties in various contexts.
>
> TAFT 2010, 8

As she goes on to comment: "These works often describe girls' acts of resis-
tance to dominant gender norms, or address girls' consumption of commodi-
fied versions of feminism, but very few have made girls' politics or political
identities the central focus of study" (Taft 2010, 8). Taft describes activist strate-
gies of girls and young women in North and Latin America in which girls spoke
about the value of political education as an activist tool, highlighting the place
of teach-ins, cultural events, screening of films and so on. She notes one sig-
nificant difference between girls in North America and girls in Latin America
where girls have a mastery of political language. As she writes: "Compared to
their North American peers, Latin American girls have more places where they
can practice expressing their critical knowledge, expand on their skills of po-
litical analysis, and learn more extensive political vocabularies" (Ibid., 109). As
a consequence, Latin American girls expressed more confidence in formal po-
litical spaces than North American girls, who struggled to find the right politi-
cal language to voice their needs and concerns.

Young Women's Activism in Addressing Sexual Violence in South Africa

We know that many South African youth have taken centre stage as politi-
cal activists at various points over the last four decades. Notwithstanding the
critique of what this meant in terms of 'lost childhoods' or 'lost youth' (see for
example Jolly 2010), the dismantling of apartheid can be traced to the youth
protests in Soweto in 1976, although the specific role of girls and young wom-
en has been overshadowed by the study of youth masculinities and violence
in the struggle (see for example Marks 2001). Many young people also played
a key role in the activities of the Treatment Action Campaign, calling for the
roll out of ARVs, but also for awareness raising more broadly with regards
the need for sexuality education in connection with HIV and AIDS. However,
the particular political angle of this work is less well developed than activism
more generally (see Walsh, Mitchell and Smith 2002; Mitchell 2015), and the
role of girls and young women is not a key theme (see also Jungar and Oinas
2010). But what does activism and political engagement look like when we
seek both a gendered lens and a youth lens, and particularly in relation to

addressing sexual violence? To what extent can there be an activist agenda to combat sexual violence for girls and young women who are at the very same time themselves discovering and performing their sexual identities? While South African girls and young women bear the brunt of negative socio-economic outcomes, there is scant literature on their activism in addressing these issues.

A few exemplary projects and writings about the activism of girls and young women in South Africa are emerging. These all point to the scarcity of young women's participation in the country as a whole, but more specifically on university campuses and in various civil society organizations. For example, in an examination of the gender dynamics in the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and especially the glaring absence of women in leadership positions in the organization, Mbali (2009, 1) writes:

> … while women AIDS activists have challenged sexism in wider society in the post-apartheid period, sexism has simultaneously acted as a barrier to their ascent to leadership positions within AIDS activist organisations.

Further, the author observes that even when women are in leadership positions or, in many cases, are in the forefront of the activism within these organizations, it is usually the men to whom the public, including the media, turn for commentary. Identifying poverty and sexism as two interacting factors that inhibit women's appointment to leadership positions, she argues for economic policies that promote adequate funding for a women's-rights approach to addressing HIV and AIDS.

Focusing on the challenges and triumphs of young women's activism in higher education institutions, Bennett and Chigudu (2012) edited an issue of *Feminist Africa* titled, "Researching Sexuality with Young Women: Southern Africa". In their editorial, citing the work of Teresa Barnes (2007), they suggest that "most higher educational institutions are actively hostile to feminist notions of what it may mean to strengthen women's independence, and simultaneously wary of the use of gender within socio-political education" (Bennett and Chigudu 2012, 4). Consequently, with a few exceptions (such as the community theatre collective, the Mothertongue Project or the Ignition Project in Cape Town), as the authors observe, it is not always obvious how activism is driven by young women themselves. However, as Oinas (2015) observes, there may be a need for greater nuance in studying the activist practices of young women. What are the consequences for young women who come forward on issues that are sensitive and that could make them particularly vulnerable? Who defines which struggles are political or activist?

In the same issue of the *Feminist Agenda* noted above, Bennett reports on a Ford Foundation-funded action research project involving young women in several southern African universities "which undertook to raise consciousness, as 'research', about what young women were experiencing around questions of sexuality on their campuses, and to trace and theorize 'action' initiated by each team which aimed to challenge and transform (if only for a day) the campus" (Bennett 2012, 22). The teams in the different countries focused largely on the issue of 'reproductive security' in which the young women addressed questions related to gender-based violence and policy, the politics of space and sexuality, the meaning of HIV-prevention campaigns and the politics of gender and sexual pleasure. From the various projects, Bennett observes that while the young women were willing to explore ideas of sexual pleasure, they were reluctant "(initially) to take active leadership within campus cultures around the promotion of ordinary … ideas about women's rights to control their own fertility, sexual pleasure, and sexual experience" (Bennett 2012, 24).

Lewis, Tigist and Van Vuuren (2013), drawing on Wasserman's (2010, 10) notion of how popular culture might be seen as a "platform for the articulation of controversial or popular political views", examine the ways in which young people in South Africa have used media platforms for alternative forms of activism. In their article, they suggest that young women, often marginalized by their age and sex, tend to use such media platforms as cognitive spaces in which they can voice their ideas about the social, cultural and political issues that impact on them. The authors observe that young women in the Cape Town area use media platforms such as Facebook, and technologies such as cellphones and websites to express themselves on a variety of civic issues. The young women adapt these spaces into activist tools and forums in which they often voice their concerns, including sexual and other forms of violence they face in the home, the community and institutions. Citing the 'Confessions' movement on Facebook as an example of civic engagement among young women students enrolled in three universities in South Africa (University of Cape Town, University of the Western Cape and Rhodes University), the authors observe that 'Confessions' has provided opportunities for many young women to voice their experiences of abuse, including sexual abuse. Commenting on the courage of one young woman who wrote about her sexual abuse, they conclude:

> It seems to be her "facelessness" that gives her the power to speak out, to create a sense of solidarity which establishes the link between her own experience and interpretation of violation and the political realities of young women's routine subjection to violence, often in schools or universities. In many ways, then, the widespread use of social media

> among many young women – whether platforms are set up for them
> or serve broader purposes – creates opportunities for their expression
> about "personal" and daily communication that more traditional forms
> of mobilising and action tend to neglect. And opportunities for such
> frank communication about the everyday can offer crucial routes into
> consciousness-raising and transformative politics among young South
> African women.
>
> LEWIS, TIGIST and VAN VUUREN 2013, 52

In 2016 universities in South Africa were in the grip of a #FeesMustFall
movement – student activism to open access to university for eligible young
men and women from poor and middle class backgrounds – which intends
to facilitate greater transformation. Within this context of transformation,
young women students at university were also protesting against their lived
experiences of sexual violence and focusing on disrupting existing patterns
of sexual violence. A university in the Eastern Cape province was the first
to see young women students' activism against a perceived 'rape culture' at
their university – with the young women publishing on the internet what they
called a 'reference list' of male students who had perpetrated sexual violence
and demanding that the university acts against the offenders. The women students
used their bodies as a form of protest, some baring their breasts. Their
picketing was met with resistance from the university leadership, eventually
through an interdict barring them from accessing the campus, and with hard-
handed treatment from the police (being picked up and goaled) although their
picketing was legal (Charter 2016a, see also Charter 2016b).

To commemorate Women's Day in August, 2016, the Human Sciences
Research Council hosted a seminar entitled *Sexual Violence on University Campuses: The Limits and Possibilities of Protest*, where Irene de Vos from the General
Counsel of the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) – who
acted as counsel for the #RUReferenceList women – pointed out how the
treatment of the picketing #RUReferenceList women students differed from
the treatment of the protesters in the #FeesMustFall movement in the same
university town. In spite of their right to picket and petition – as indicated in
Sections 16 and 17 of the Constitution – police entered the campus and then
used stun grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets, while some university staff described
the protesting women as a 'wild angry mob'; moreover, the university
got an interdict against the women students protesting in #RUReferenceList
but not, at that time, against the students in the #FeesMustFall protest. The
picketing that took place at a university in Eastern Cape spread to other universities
signalling that the time for universities to stop sweeping the rape culture

under the carpet to protect the name of the university and stop protecting the male perpetrators was over, and that universities should ensure that policies are tightened and implemented, changing how universities and other institutions respond to reporting rape.

Another recent demonstration of gender activism occurred when President Zuma of South Africa spoke after the local municipal elections held in August 2016. Four young women silently stood on the stage with their placards reading "Remember Khwezi" while the president was speaking. Khwezi is the pseudonym for the late Fezeka Kuzwayo, the young woman who accused the president of raping her. As February (2016) points out, "[t]his seems to be no country for women who accuse powerful men of rape", for after Zuma's acquittal, Khwezi needed to flee the country and go into exile. The protesting young women were not only refocusing the country's attention on Khwezi's plight, but were also pointing out Zuma's denigration of women and ambiguity on women's rights issues.

To summarize, while many researchers and feminists bemoan the dearth of gender activism among young women often marginalized by sex and age in communities and institutions, it is clear that the situation is changing.

Exploring Gender Activism among Rural Girls and Young Women in the Eastern Cape: The Case of Girls Leading Change

In exploring the gender activism of girls and young women in South Africa, we take as one case a consideration of the 'activism in the making' practices of a group of 14 young women with whom we have been working in the Girls Leading Change project at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth in Eastern Cape. As noted above, the place of adults in youth activist movements (and even 'who is a youth?') is not straightforward; both adults and young people participated in some movements in South Africa, such as the Treatment Action Campaign. Our own involvement in this project started with initiating the work in the first place, as women academics, working in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. Naydene's position in the study is particularly one of an 'insider' at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, holding the position of Chair in HIV and AIDS Education.

When the 14 participants first came together under the name Girls Leading Change (chosen by the participants), we were interested in what a girl-led initiative on addressing sexual violence might look like. How might the participants offer a perspective that puts those who are most at risk in a position to take action? It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a complete

analysis of all the work of this group, which has extended over a period of three years. During that time the participants have created cellphilms about sexual violence, produced policy posters and authored action briefs. Long after the young women had presented their policy posters and action briefs to some of the policy makers on campus, it was clear that they had much more to say and, indeed, perhaps speaking to these policy makers was only a small part of what needed to be said. In one of the follow-up sessions where the young women had an opportunity to reflect on the processes thus far, it was evident that talking about sexual violence so publicly and in a collective way had also evoked a great deal of the personal for them, reminding us that 'the personal is also political'. This is obvious in a collection of personal narratives the young women produced in 2016 entitled, *14 Times a Woman: Indigenous Stories from the Heart.*

But far from this being a project simply of cultural production, what has been critical has been the participants' work in 'engaging' policy makers on campus. What does it mean to take up sexual violence not just as a set of arts-based activities carried out as part of a series of workshops, but to actually engage with the issues directly with people who could change policies and practices? What have been the responses of those approached and how do the young women position themselves in this work? Unlike the work of Marks (2001) and Trigg (2010) which looked at youth activism in a retrospective way, this study is still very much on-going. This means that while it is not possible to study the impact of this work on the individuals and the community as a whole since it is still underway, it has been possible to observe the work 'up close' and in action.

The Participants

The 14 young women came from rural areas of the Eastern Cape to attend university in the biggest city in the province. All were just out of school and were enrolled for an undergraduate teaching degree at university. We posted an invitation on the first year education student email list, targeting young women who were from rural areas, to participate in our project. The first student who made herself available talked to other students she knew who came from rural areas as they were taking the same intercity bus to Port Elizabeth. Our sampling strategy was therefore a snowball one.

Our own positioning in the fieldwork is important as a way to frame the types of campus activities. Although we have engaged in participatory visual research in many different settings in South Africa, this study probably comes closest to representing something of an insider stance based on our work as women in the academy. At the same time, the study reflects key themes in much of the research on sexual violence we have carried out together in

rural settings. (De Lange, Mitchell and Bhana 2012; Moletsane, Mitchell and Lewin 2015). Drawing on this work in rural contexts we already knew about many of the challenges that young women often face just to graduate from high school and get accepted into university. In some of the settings where we have worked, it has been difficult to reach policy makers, perhaps because we ourselves have had to figure out who the appropriate policy makers might be at the district, provincial or national levels in education. But we have been working in university settings for decades and we saw that we could bring to bear some of our insider knowledge of what "from-the-ground-up" or grass-roots policy-making might comprise.

The Process

We wanted to explore with the young women what sexual violence on campus looked like from their vantage point as first-year women students, but also recognized from our own previous research and the work of others the importance of producing locally relevant visual and concrete artefacts (cellphilms, policy posters and action briefs) which could be used in dialogue with policy makers on campus (see Figure 19.1).

In the first session we introduced the purpose of the project, spent some time contextualizing the work, and then engaged the young women in a participatory video process (see also Mitchell and De Lange 2011) in relation to the prompt of "'feeling safe' and 'feeling not so safe' in and around the university as a female student". The process included brainstorming the issues, deciding which examples were most urgent, and developing a storyboard to produce cellphilms.[1] Working in groups of three or four, each group produced a short 2 to 3 minute cellphilm using the cellphones from the collection in our research equipment. While the issues they identified covered a range of concerns, the four cellphilms that were created focused on the following themes: their not
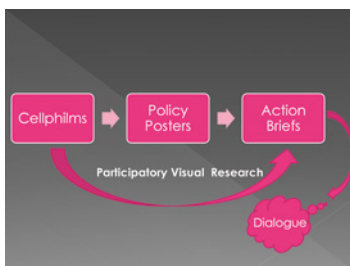

FIGURE 19.1
The participatory research process
IMAGE: CLAUDIA MITCHELL, NAYDENE DE LANGE, RELEBOHILE MOLETSANE

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1   Dockney and Tomaselli (2009) write at length about the idea of cellphilms or videos made with a cellphone.
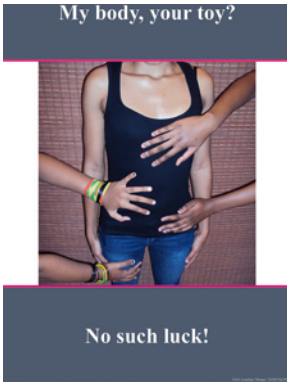
FIGURE 19.2
An example of a policy poster raising the issue of harassment
IMAGE: NAYDENE DE LANGE

being safe because of inefficient security in residence; having as young women to negotiate a place in residence with an off-campus residence manager; vulnerability during sport matches held on campus when some spectators overstep boundaries and pose a threat to their safety; and male students harassing the young women when they cross the square in front of the male student residence. After viewing and discussing the cellphilms, they added several other issues: date rape and sexual harassment by other groups of on-campus staff. In a subsequent session they transformed the themes of their cellphilms into policy posters (see Figure 19.2, for an example of a policy poster), which could strengthen the message of the cellphilm. In the end the girls created six policy posters, each made up of a visual (a photograph they took to depict the issue or a drawing they made) and a carefully constructed and powerful message. In a later session, they re-represented their ideas about the issues as 'action briefs' as a specific genre for taking action. Creating the action briefs involved working with a template of first offering a brief situational analysis, then articulating the problem as they saw it and, finally, suggesting solutions for addressing the issue. The solutions in the six action briefs (see Figure 19.3, for an example) focused on what they themselves could do, but also what they expected others (e.g. policy makers) to do. Using participatory visual work in this way enabled the findings to be immediately available to the girls and young

FIGURE 19.3
An example of an action brief
IMAGE: NAYDENE DE LANGE

women as central to the dissemination process. (See also De Lange, Mitchell and Moletsane 2015; De Lange, Moletsane and Mitchell 2015).

The Dialogues

The visual artefacts provided a powerful portfolio of work the young women could draw on when communicating their ideas on addressing sexual violence to university policy makers. As noted above, using our own knowledge as women academics of the structures of the institution, we considered the importance of taking up the dialogue with small groups of policy makers, and planned the presentations with the project team members first introducing the project and the young women each presenting an aspect of the work, concluding with open ended discussion. The first meeting, which was an hour long, was set up with the Dean of the Education faculty and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Engagement, who knew about our work and with whom we could test out our communication process in initiating dialogue. The dialogue was gentle and created a space for the 14 young women to express views on sexual violence to an audience of policy makers. The audience showed appreciation for the work and indicated that they would take it up in other fora of the university. Part of the conclusion of the dialogue was to officially hand over a portfolio of the artefacts to the policy makers, to visually document the event by taking a group photograph, and to ask who else we should be talking to, creating a type of snowball process. Each of these components served as clear steps in terms of strategy: leaving a trace, visual documentation, and 'what next?'

With a smaller group of six young women the second dialogue was with the Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (CANRAD), a centre which promotes gender equality. The discussion was rich and interesting, and opened up opportunities for disseminating the work to a wider audience during the annual Diversity Month which was to be held later in the year. Here too, the portfolio of artefacts was officially handed over, a photograph taken to document the event, and a discussion about further people with whom to share our work was held. At the end of this successful dialogue we were encouraged to set up a dialogue with the Director of Institutional Planning and the Director of Transformation, Monitoring and Evaluation. In this third dialogue it was pointed out that the university has a sexual harassment policy, yet it was clear in the discussions that the young women, as first year students, were not aware of what the policy could do for them. This showed the disjuncture between policy and practice, particularly so if it is a policy made in a top-down way. The young women, on the other hand, had specific ideas about what policy should look like, and the ways in which the development and implementation of policy should be 'from the ground-up' and led by them.

The fourth dialogue was with four high ranking officials: the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Institutional Support, the Dean of Students, the Residence Manager and the Head of Protection Services, with each suggesting how they could draw on the girls and their expertise in addressing sexual violence on campus. One, for example, indicated how the girls might comprise 'safety ambassadors' on campus; another, how they might be involved in the orientation programme of the new intake of first-year students. Another invited the girls to make the same presentation in one of the residences and dialogue with student leaders. This official also requested sets of policy posters which could be displayed in the residences. Another indicated that he had been unaware of the issues the girls raised and that his eyes had been opened. The Deputy Vice Chancellor for Institutional Support acknowledged the important work the young women were doing and congratulated them on taking up the series of dialogues which were typically scheduled for an hour, but this time extended past the hour; during this time they were deeply engaged in discussion with the university leaders, speaking animatedly about their work and how it had changed their lives. Here we noted how their approach had changed, as they confidently responded to the questions, demonstrating their understanding of sexual violence and what needed to be changed.

The dialogues have continued, and have included engagement with several other university leaders at another campus 330 km away. With each it has been possible to note how the young women spoke more powerfully to the issues at hand. Their presentations and dialogues saw them invited to speak at a Feminist Dialogue event sponsored by *Agenda*,[2] give a presentation during Diversity Month celebrations, participate in a panel at a Humanising Pedagogy week and address the audience at a stopping gender violence event organized by the 'Kwanele! Enuf is Enuf!' initiative. In the Humanising Pedagogy week they also included a photovoice activity in which they elicited other students' views on how to stop sexual violence. In another event some of them participated in the initiation of a university gender forum. Each of these dialogues offers supporting evidence on how their voices have been acknowledged as important to be heard in addressing sexual violence in higher education institutions. Zethu, one of the young women leading change who was sitting next to Naydene during a dialogue event, whispered that it felt so good that we, the researchers, did not answer on their behalf, and that she felt that they had responded well to the questions posed. It seemed that indeed the girls were leading the policy change they want to see.

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2   Their presentation 'Girls leading change in addressing sexual violence at a South African University' was part of an Agenda Feminist Dialogue 'Transforming violent culture and building platforms for young women' which took place in Durban in June 2014.

Discussion

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to identify the overall impact that this initiative has had on the young women and whether they see themselves as gender activists, we are nonetheless able to offer several observations and key questions. The first is that this work needs to be strategic. Perhaps this is just our own take on years of experience working in higher education institutions, but it was, in our view, something within the realm of political education that was worth passing on to the girls and young women, especially in the context of the question, 'who needs to know?' A second point is that this work is not always popular. Inevitably there can be the perception that this work is 'stepping on toes' in relation to the structures that already exist. This is something that is being taken up on many university campuses in the UK, Canada and the US and not just in South Africa. Universities are realizing that even though they may have sexual harassment policies, the actual implementation / enforcement of these policies is not clearly delineated. The 'in the making' of this activism then was to make sure that there were opportunities to debrief, where possible, after the sessions so that that girls had a chance to both respond to and learn from the events as another type of political education. At the same time, we return to the work of Taft (2010) and an observation she makes that most of the work on young women and activism involves participants who are at university level or older, and rarely addresses activism in high school settings. Given the insidious nature of sexual violence in South African schools, the involvement of girls and young women 'looking back' as has been the case in Girls Leading Change, and with the potential for working alongside girls in school may be a particularly productive (and safe) approach. Finally, we want to return to the issue of our own positionality as adult women and the potential for intergenerationality in this work. The emergence of what the South African feminist journal *Agenda* refers to as an African Feminisms discourse suggests a space for work in this area, although to date there has been little written about the role of feminist researchers in the emerging political landscape of girl-centred activism in relation to addressing sexual violence in South Africa.[3] Who can be allies in this work? To what extent do issues of race, language or geography continue to be reproduced or are there ways that initiatives in a new climate of activism can challenge colonialism? What is the role for other players and actors such as women researchers, teachers or mothers? Of course, as Ratele (2016) argues, further questions about the role of boys and

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3   A promising direction in this regard was seen in the Forum at the AWID conference held in Cape Town in 2008, "Young feminist activism and intergenerationality".

men, as well as those involved in their socialization in the fight against sexual violence, need to be further addressed. In his book, *Liberating Masculinities*, Ratele (ibid.) argues that masculinities, which often produce violence against women, are culturally constructed. For him, this presents opportunities for not only liberating boys and men from violent forms of masculinities, but those who are involved in the social construction of such masculinities as well.

Conclusions and Implications

Clearly the issue of the activism of girls and young women in addressing an issue that is both personal and social / collective in a contemporary South African context is far from simple. While the concerns are constantly 'in the public' as can be seen in everything from the Jacob Zuma trial of 2005 to the Oscar Pistorius trial of 2014, it is not clear how the issues can be taken up only through public protest by girls and young women. Other activist platforms are needed. On the one hand, these are issues of sexual and reproductive health rights which run far deeper than protesting the treatment of public figures, and have a great deal to do with access to safe abortions, contraception, HIV testing, and prophylactics, as well as the opportunity to continue schooling in the context of teen pregnancy. These are rights that are often contested in local contexts (see Moletsane, Mitchell and Lewin 2015). The vast number of studies that highlight sexual violence in and around schools, male teachers abusing their power, gang rape and so on, should incite girls and women as well as boys and men to engage in political protest. In raising such concerns we are left with a number of questions. What kind of support is required to develop and sustain an activist agenda amongst girls and young women in relation to sexual violence and other sexual and reproductive health issues? It should not be something that girls and young women have to do on their own, and the issue of allies, as noted above, is critical. What are some of the cautionary notes we should pay attention to as researchers? We have focused on collective action in Girls Leading Change, with the idea that group members are also able to provide support for each other and, in so doing, potentially subvert individualistic 'empowerment' approaches. This in and of itself is also a strategy – part of the political education referred to by Taft (2010) and reminiscent, perhaps, of gender activism in the popular education movement in South Africa and elsewhere in the 1990s (see for example Walters 1996; Von Kotze 1996), albeit as adult-focused as opposed to youth-focused. At the same time we might also ask if we risk doing 'most harm and least good' in our efforts to support an activist agenda for girls and young women. Girls Leading Change has been very

much an 'on the ground' campaign. However, as noted above, media spaces, in spite of their potential for cyber-violence, may still represent safer spaces, and ultimately having even broader reach in the context of social media. The lessons learned from the use of social media in the so-called Arab Spring to spark a revolution should not be lost when it comes to the lives of girls and young women. A decade ago Honwana and De Boeck's (2005) collection *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa* omits for the most part sexual violence as a political and activist issue for youth. Clearly there is more work needed in this area of 'gender activism in the making' as a long term strategy for transforming violent cultures.

Acknowledgements

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