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Women's football: sexed bodies and interfering discourse : if gender is the social organisation of sexual difference through various social practices, discourses, and politics of representation, to what extent can the media popularisation of female soccer in South Africa be read as an interference in the hegemonic organisation of gender relations and heteronormativity?

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2012-08-15
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/11762

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Appendix C: 3. *Lesbian Soccer Team Fight for Rights in SA*, Barry Moody, Mail & Guardian, 5 May 2010



Down the road from a Constitutional Court that is charged with upholding gay rights, South Africa's only lesbian soccer team fight not just for the ball but to overturn brutal prejudice and discrimination.

The "Chosen Few" play with skill and huge enthusiasm despite the scrappy dirt wasteground bordered by a large puddle on which they are obliged to train, a few hundred metres from the imposing Constitutional Court in central Johannesburg.

"We tried many other places," said Lerato Marumolwa, one of the best players, pointing ruefully at a well-kept green pitch 500m away. "But they just won't let us in."

Such frustration is minor compared to the so-called "corrective" rape, murder, insults and beatings that South African lesbians have frequently suffered, despite the widely admired, post-apartheid constitution which was the first in the world to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

More than 30 lesbians are reported to have been murdered in the last decade, and the British NGO ActionAid said in a report last year there was an increasing trend of homophobic attacks and murders by men who believed they would "cure" lesbian women.

Marumolwa (21) and her teammates are more than just soccer players. They campaign to overturn prejudice against black lesbians, which is greatest in the townships where most of them live.

The group demonstrated outside the court where one of the murderers of former South African national women's soccer team player Eudy Simelane was tried and sentenced last year.

In a shocking crime that exposed the amount of hatred suffered by lesbians in the black community, Simelane was raped and stabbed 25 times in a township on the edge of Johannesburg.

The Chosen Few was launched in 2004 by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) and the players say the team has become a refuge for them, in contrast to the danger and prejudice they suffer in their townships.

Bronze medals

"In the townships we get discriminated, we get raped, we get beaten up. People swear at us ... FEW is my family. It is a space where I feel at home, I can be myself. We come from different backgrounds but when we come here we are one thing, we are a family," said Marumolwa.

"At home we have to watch what we do, what we say. We don't go around at night. FEW is a good space for us."

The team won bronze medals in the soccer competition at the Gay Games in Chicago in 2006 and at the International Gay and Lesbian Football Association Cup in London two years later.

This July and August, just after the World Cup ends in South Africa, they will compete again at the Gay Games in Germany.

Phindi Malaza, the FEW programmes coordinator and manager of the Chosen Few, said the organisation was set up as a space for black lesbians to counteract the homophobia in townships.

"One of the purposes of the team is that they do advocacy work around campaigning and talking against hate crimes. So the team has been that kind of a tool where they are able to support each other ... they are not just playing soccer but pushing issues of advocacy."

Malaza said almost all FEW's funding came from overseas and there was no backing from the South African government despite the Constitution. "I feel there is really no support in government or the political leadership. You never hear any condemnation of hate crimes."

Forme prison

FEW has its offices in the former apartheid-era women's prison, now a museum, next to the Constitutional Court.

Twice a week the players, most of whom began playing soccer in their childhood, sing as they change their clothes in the courtyard and then walk down the hill to the training ground next to a petrol station.

Singing and dancing are important in building morale in the Chosen Few.

They dance down the pitch in formation before matches and end games with a huddle and recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

"The singing shows the team spirit and gets us in the mood," said Bathandwa Mosho (19).
They play other women's teams but are the only openly lesbian one.

"There are other teams where there are lesbians but the coaches don't allow them to be who they want to be. They know we are lesbians and we are free," said Marumolwa.

Another player, Sethemane "the General" Mamabolo (22) said in a break from a hectic five-a-side training match: "This team means a lot to me, because we are like sisters. We are the family. We fight for our rights. We are the voice of black lesbians out there."

South Africa stands out in Africa for its legal protection of gay rights -- it was the continent's first country to legalise gay marriage. In many other African countries, homosexuality is illegal.

FEW's Malaza acknowledges this but says: "There is a long way to go. We have this Constitution that everybody is supposed to be following. Our policies are great, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done on the ground for people to be on a par with what the Constitution is saying."
- Reuters