

BOOK REVIEW

***Ending Gender-Based Violence: Justice and Community in South Africa* Hannah Britton. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-0-252-08496-6)**

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On August 1, 2018 thousands of women marched under the banner #TotalShutdown to bring South Africa to a standstill about the extraordinary high levels of sexual violence (42,289 reported rapes for 2019/2020) (Department of Police 2020) and intimate femicide five times higher than the global average. They demanded action, and they demanded to be heard. A bit more than a year later, in the first week of September 2019, thousands of protesters congregated in front of the gates of the parliamentary precinct in Cape Town, once more demanding action after the brutal rape and murder of a nineteen-year-old student inside a post office when she went to pick up a parcel close to closing time. Protest against gender-based violence (GBV) is ongoing in South Africa, but lasting solutions seem ephemeral, other than harsher sentencing for perpetrators, reinforcing the carceral state.

Hannah Britton's book is therefore timely and significant for South Africa's search for solutions to gender-based violence. What makes this book different is the approach she took with the research, which spanned more than a decade. Britton investigated localities and spaces where violence is perpetrated, community beliefs around GBV, the police's treatment of rape complainants, and the friction that happens at points of contact. Her book is a critique of the carceral state, a state that has not been successful in curbing sexual violence.

Britton's research goes beyond extant research that has focused on contested causes of sexual violence, such as past perpetrator violence, economic and social exclusion, psychological emasculation, and women's increasing access to women's rights, as well as a large body of medical literature on HIV and sexual violence. She homes in on the nitty-gritty complexity of violent spaces, actors' agency, and stakeholders' involvement in and understanding of sexual violence. Chapter 1, "Genealogy of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa," deals comprehensively with these causes, but Britton shows how they play out in communities where people live and are violated.

The book is structured around four Ps: place, people, police, and points of contact, each shedding light on how understanding these dimensions of violence in a nuanced way opens up possibilities through which violence can be decreased.

Chapter 2, "Place," shows that community-building matters, and how GBV presents itself in communities enlightens our understanding of the violence. Britton shows that place matters—whether it is rural or urban or places where migrants congregate and xenophobia is rife, and how there is a lack of focus on GBV in white neighborhoods as well as a lack of engagement with GBV in white neighborhoods.

Many South Africans believe that the police are part of the GBV problem rather than the solution, but what the case study of Mabitso (pseudonym) illustrates is that police can build community. In this case, a committed woman station-commander recruited a tough investigator and an experienced counselor in collaborative efforts with a trauma team, victim-support services, community police forums, and youth forums. This station served as a point of contact between the community and government.

The legacies of the apartheid geography of overcrowding and flimsy informal housing informs issues of the slow response time by the police and often reduces access to outreach programs. Britton returns again and again to the structural violence that underlies the physical manifestations of GBV—structural violence caused by inequality, mass poverty, and desperate acts of migration. Interviews with the police confirm that living in environments of deprivation causes serious mental health issues that go untreated. In this chapter we hear echoes of Agamben’s “bare life” and Rob Nixon’s “slow violence.”

But as Britton herself contests, creating a binary relationship, with the police as the sane people dealing with a deviant society with underlying mental health issues, can easily lead to the normalization of violence. She cautions against this view. She also shows how race and class are tightly entangled, so that in spaces where white people live, they are loath to report violence or visit a Thuthuzela Care Centre (TCC—one-stop rape-reporting centers at police stations). They would rather go to a private doctor or counselor.

In chapter 3, “People,” Britton illustrates the involvement of religious organizations in dealing with GBV and shows the difference that progressive religious leaders make, while also deftly pointing out the challenges posed by the government’s moral regeneration program that may reinscribe normative gender roles, often entrenching regressive gender attitudes that shift the blame onto women. The research shows that there are good relationships between some traditional leaders and the police, but Britton is also concerned about the potential shortcomings of this relationship when police tell survivors to go to the traditional leader to resolve the issue. On the other hand, it is also apparent that some women prefer informal justice mechanisms under the auspices of traditional leaders. It is weighing regressive gender norms, which normalize women’s subordination and gender-based violence, against the good that some of these leaders may do. Britton chooses to focus on these two groups and not on other civil-society groups or women’s organizations because of the pervasive, embedded relationships of these two groups with communities.

Chapter 4, “Police,” gives a nuanced explanation of the police treatment of GBV. The South African police are notorious for their poor treatment of rape survivors, or their perceived general laissez-faire attitude toward GBV. This chapter shows that generalizations about police behavior do not do justice to those officers who really try to make a difference. There are police who try to build communities through sector policing, community crime forums, and community police forums. Interviews with staff at different police stations show the challenges, but also the human side of policing. What gives food for thought are the stories about the secondary trauma of police officers and how many of them are survivors of GBV, who are also short on counseling and coping strategies.

The fifth chapter, “Points of Contact,” culminates in showing the importance of the points of contact that survivors have with the criminal justice system that are all embedded in the legal/prosecutorial/carceral model (126). This chapter makes it very clear why there is such huge under-reporting of rape. Survivors are faced with a state that

is more concerned with prosecution and incarceration of perpetrators than in the psychological recovery of survivors. At points of contact, survivors deal with the law and the medical profession—starting with the reporting at police stations of which only sixty-two have functioning TCCs, where a statement is taken, the rape kit completed, and counseling offered. The biggest challenges for employees of the TCCs are the emotional labor that they must perform and economic and employment vulnerability, leading to constant turnover of staff.

The next stop for the survivor may be the Sexual Offenses Courts, which have been rolled back and then re-established, but are chronically under-resourced. The Sexual Offenses Courts have a conviction rate for rape at about 80% while for criminal courts it is below 10% [<https://www.ru.ac.za/perspective/2013archive/sexualoffencescourtsare-backifonlytheydnevergoneaway.html>] (Accessed 11 Sept 2022). They also demand good training for officers in order to work in these specialized courts, something that can become soul-destroying in the long run.

Pivotal in the failure of the criminal justice system is ineffective or bad leadership such as the far-reaching consequences of Jackie Selebi's (former National Police Commissioner) dismantling of the Family Violence, Child Protection, and Sexual Offenses (FCS) units, because they were considered too costly. Britton reinforces what service providers have been saying—that years of hard work to address gender-based violence were undone by these closures.

The chapter shows that at any of the points of contact, the focus is on prosecution. Prosecution tied up with neoliberal measures of success also means that cases that are deemed too difficult to win are not selected for prosecution, because prosecutors have to show success. But as Britton argues, prosecution and harsher sentencing do not address the root causes of GBV, such as institutional, economic, and community violence.

Britton ends the book with a reflection on the carceral state in which she argues that carceral frameworks create binaries between victims and perpetrators, constructing patriarchy as the monolithic cause of gender-based violence. As she rightly points out, “the criminalization of poverty and mass incarceration are old strategies that are being extended into today's context across the globe” (150). Carceral strategies are bound up with neoliberal ideologies that focus on the individual perpetrator and absolve the state of its responsibility to address economic, social, and racial inequalities so characteristic of the apartheid and colonial past in South Africa. The state is also very weak on creating conditions for the prevention of violence.

Britton's research clearly shows that community networks and local leadership are crucial for dealing with GBV. Most communities have given up on national leadership and mistrust government initiatives. But relying on local leaders also has its downside because of the difficulty of shifting normative beliefs strengthened by traditional authorities and religious organizations.

What is needed is a multifaceted approach to solutions for GBV. Although South Africa has created fruitful ways for dealing with sexual violence, such as a strong legal framework (through the struggle of feminist activists), key points of intervention and multisector responses are often reactive, after violence has been perpetrated. Britton suggests that contributing to a solution will be to build on community-based interventions, but this cannot be done without the commitment of national government. Increasing resources to local communities runs the risk of being depleted by corruption and inefficiency and also makes it easy for national government to shift the blame and accountability to the local level. As Britton herself argues, the cases in her project demonstrate that strong community networks are important in breaking the silence about

sexual assault and may overcome resource inequalities that may prevent policy implementation (157). Implicit in her argument is that solutions for GBV need to come from the ground up, not from the top (national government) down.

This book makes very clear that solutions to GBV will have to be multipronged with strategic interventions in different spaces and on different levels. The four Ps need to be taken seriously—places (where), people (victims and perpetrators), police (the first point of contact), and points of contact (what follows after the visit to the police station) in the search for solutions. Superimposed over the four Ps are structural violence, inequality, and poverty—challenges of colonial and apartheid legacies, but also of chronic government mismanagement. Solutions will therefore have to be short-term and long-term.

In the past two and a half years, the South African government has released a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence, and together with the corporate sector launched a fund to deal with GBV. The struggle against gender-based violence is continuing, but the numbers of rapes and femicides remain steady. Everyone who is involved in this struggle will benefit from reading Britton's book, because of how it contextualizes factors that shape GBV in South Africa. The book builds on and draws from previous research by South African scholars to give a more holistic view of GBV.

My one point of criticism is that as a South African, I found the fact that the research sites were pseudonymous quite annoying. I understand that the aim was to protect those communities and possibly also to prevent stigmatization because of negative exposure. Nevertheless, as someone who has worked with GBV in South Africa for so long, I would have loved to know where best practices are implemented and how to draw on those examples, rather than be confronted with faceless spaces and places.

Reference

Department of Police (2019). Crime Stats 2019/2020. Available at [<https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php>]. (Accessed 28 March 2020).

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