

Soweto's Female Comrades: Gender, Youth, and Violence in South Africa's Township Uprisings, 1984-1990

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Previous literature on South Africa's township uprisings has overlooked girls and young women's involvement in activism and political violence. Through oral history interviews with former male and female comrades, this article presents new evidence of girls' involvement in student politics and collective action in Soweto. Seeking to participate alongside male comrades rather than separately from them, these young women erased their femininity and adopted many of the characteristics of struggle masculinity in their dress, behaviour, and use of violence. However, the gendered hierarchies of township life shaped the nature of female comrades' involvement in protest and violence, as their adolescent experiences of sexual violence and subordination remained salient in determining why and how they engaged in the liberation struggle. While female comrades participated in many of the same forms of protest and violence as male comrades, they speak most nostalgically and in most detail about their roles in policing and punishing perpetrators of sexual violence. This article demonstrates that the gendered hierarchies that shaped girls' lives were central to their involvement in the liberation struggle, and how for female comrades, this involvement was not always or only about politics and ideology, but was also a means through which they addressed the injustices and victimisation they faced as young women growing up in apartheid's townships.

Introduction

In 1989, South Africa's *Weekly Mail* reported an incident that occurred in a shebeen in Orlando East, Soweto, in which four balaclava-clad women armed with guns entered the bar, opened fire, and killed a man while injuring several others. The women made it clear to the shebeen's patrons that their attack was in response to a recent gang rape in Soweto, in which nine women were abducted and raped. Reportedly, the female 'hit squad' included one of the rape victims. During the attack, the shebeen queen reported, one of the young women stood up on a table and yelled, 'You can't attack innocent women without being punished. Today we are going to stop this carnage, because all men are responsible.'¹

¹ *The Weekly Mail*, 23 February 1989.

When read against historical accounts of township life and political violence in the 1980s, this story comes across as anomalous and perhaps sensationalised. In 1984, as South Africa's liberation struggle entered its final, turbulent decade, many of the country's townships mounted renewed resistance against the state and its allies. A defining characteristic of the township uprisings which ensued was the centrality of African students and youth, who engaged in both non-violent protest and militant confrontation with the apartheid state, and bore the brunt of state retaliation. Township residents – and the youth in particular – increasingly took the law into their own hands as part of a broader campaign for 'people's power' launched by the African National Congress (ANC). While much of the youth's political efforts were directed towards rendering apartheid ungovernable and defending townships from police, so too were they dedicated to ridding the township of social deviants including criminals and informants who jeopardised the struggle.

Yet academics have argued that girls and young women were largely excluded from these efforts. In both academic and popular narratives of this definitive period, the 'comrades' – as young activists were loosely known – are overwhelmingly depicted as male, with little attention paid to politicised girls and young women. Jeremy Seekings concludes that as township struggles against apartheid grew increasingly confrontational from 1984 onwards, women were largely 'demobilised' from political activism, and 'were drawn into sustained violent action only rarely.'² In wider histories of township culture, too, girls and young women rarely appear as more than marginalised bystanders or victims of male-instigated violence. While rates of sexual and gender-based violence against women increased through the latter twentieth century, there was 'little evidence' of girls' attempts to defend themselves or rally against gangsterism and violence.³ However, no extensive historical study of younger African women in South Africa during these years has ever been conducted. While we know much about young men who were involved in activism or violent confrontations in the 1980s, and equally as much about older women engaged in the struggle primarily through women's organisations, a persistent paucity remains in our understanding of female students and youths who conform neither to the focus on motherhood that dominates women's history, nor to the masculine images of gangsters and activists that characterise histories of South African youth. Based on extensive oral history interviews with male and female former student activists, this article presents new empirical evidence of girls' involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle and ensuing political violence in the township of Soweto from 1984 to 1990. Rather than being dissuaded from political activism by increasing

² J. Seekings, 'Gender Ideology and Township Politics in the 1980s', *Agenda* 10 (1991), p. 77; J. Seekings, *Heroes or Villains: Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1993), p. 83.

³ C. Glaser, 'The Mark of Zorro: Sexuality and Gender Relations in the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand', *African Studies* 51, 1 (1992), p. 60.

levels of violence as Seekings suggests, Soweto's female comrades cite their experiences as witnesses of state violence as central motivating factors in their decisions to join the struggle. Furthermore, once these young women joined student organisations, they were not averse to the increasingly militarised tactics used by young activists, but actively supported and themselves participated in acts of political violence aimed at making the state ungovernable and policing the moral boundaries of their communities.

Nonetheless, student and youth organisations in the township were male dominated, with girls making up an estimated ten to thirty percent of active COSAS membership.⁴ Outside of the struggle, the township was clearly demarcated into gendered spaces, with boys and young men establishing a masculine, and often violent, street culture in which girls had little involvement or power. The normative experience of being a student activist was consequently a male one, and comrade culture was deeply masculinist and often disparaging towards young women. To be accepted into this culture and take up arms alongside young men, female comrades needed to erase their femininity and adopt many of the defining characteristics of struggle masculinity. In Soweto, female comrades wore trousers and *takkies* (trainers) instead of skirts and highheels, engaged in militant action alongside their male comrades, and emphasised their bravery, strength, and willingness to use violence. They saw themselves as 'comrades' or gender-less soldiers rather than girls or women, and eschewed the idea of participating in the struggle separately as women, insisting on engaging alongside male comrades.

However, female comrades' gender was salient in shaping why and how they engaged in the township uprisings. While their involvement in violent confrontations was often motivated by the same class and generational consciousness, and feelings of adventure and camaraderie as young men, their gendered upbringings marked by their feelings of inferiority, confinement to the private sphere, and experiences of sexual violence also shaped their participation in collective action. For female comrades, engaging in collective action was in part a means through which they could address specific gender inequalities and victimisation, not only by defying traditional gender roles through their use of violence, but also by using their newfound authority to directly target the perpetrators of sexual violence. While female interviewees attest to being involved in most forms of political violence performed by the comrades during the 1980s, they speak most animatedly and in most detail about policing and punishing perpetrators of sexual violence. In corroboration with the *Weekly Mail's* article presented above, interviewees attest that when a rape was reported to the comrades, it was often female comrades who were put in charge of

⁴ These estimates were made by interviewees themselves (both male and female), but roughly corroborate other scholars' findings for student groups in other areas. See C. Carter, "'We Are the Progressives': Alexandra Youth Congress Activists and the Freedom Charter, 1983–85', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17, 2 (1991), p. 215; Seekings, 'Gender Ideology and Township Politics,' p. 81.

punishing the perpetrator. Thus, the story of the all-female hit-squad becomes much less jarring and anomalous.

This article argues that just as joining the struggle offered young men a means of asserting their masculinity and a path towards becoming a man, so too did it offer certain young women the opportunity to challenge hegemonic or emphasised femininities and construct alternative, militarised gender identities. Doing so not only granted them greater political agency, but also offered a direct means of countering their susceptibility to sexual violence, drawing new moral lines of acceptable and unacceptable male behaviour, and advocating a more assertive role for young women in community struggles. Despite the corresponding hardships and trauma being a comrade brought for girls and young women – including stigmatisation, police harassment, and for some detention and torture – female comrades predominantly look back on their time as activists with nostalgia, and continue to identify as ‘comrades’ today. This article goes beyond ‘lifting the veil’ of girls’ experiences, and complicates existing conceptions of violence, motivation, and gender in South African history. It demonstrates that rather than being a male prerogative, violence was also used by girls and young women to carve out social space during the 1980s. By stepping outside the resistance paradigm, we can see how the gendered hierarchies that shaped girls’ lives were central to explaining their involvement in the liberation struggle, and how for female comrades, this involvement was not always or only about politics and ideology, but was also a means through which they addressed the injustices and victimization they faced as young women growing up in apartheid’s townships.

The ascendancy of the youth to the forefront of South Africa’s liberation struggle drew considerable academic interest in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁵ Seeking to dispel state-sponsored portrayals of the youth as anarchic and inherently violent, scholars highlighted the ‘political precocity’ of young activists.⁶ Recently, scholars have revisited the township uprisings, paying more attention to violence, motivation, and strategy.⁷ Yet little analysis has been done on identity and gender, leaving a picture of young activists as conceptually male. Comrade culture was

⁵ See C. Bundy, ‘Street Sociology and Pavement Politics: Aspects of Youth and Student Resistance in Cape Town, 1985’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13 (1987), pp. 303-330; A. Sitas, ‘The Making of the ‘Comrades’ Movement in Natal, 1985-91’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, 3 (1992), pp. 629-641; Seekings, *Heroes or Villains*; Carter, ‘We Are the Progressives’; I. van Kessel, ‘“From Confusion to Lusaka”: The Youth Revolt in Sekhukhuneland’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, 4 (1993), pp. 593-614.

⁶ Bundy, ‘Street Sociology and Pavement Politics,’ p. 330.

⁷ B. Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2004); T. Simpson, ‘“Umkhonto We Sizwe, We Are Waiting for You”: The ANC and the Township Uprising, September 1984-September 1985’, *South African Historical Journal* 61, 1 (2009), pp. 158-177; F. Rueedi, ‘“Siyayinyova!”: Patterns of Violence in the African Townships of the Vaal Triangle, South Africa, 1980-86’, *Africa* 85, 3 (2015), pp. 395-416.

described as 'highly masculinist', characterised by strength, bravery, fearlessness, aggression, and violence, and used by young men as a means of asserting their masculinity.⁸ As male youths came to define themselves as the defenders of their communities, argues Seekings, they 'relegated women to the role of nurturers in the home,' and dissuaded their participation in the struggle.⁹ Yet, Seekings and Charles Carter acknowledge that in both Tumahole and Alexandra, particularly in younger activist demographics (amongst secondary school students rather than post-school 'youths'), girls often made up at least one third of student organisation membership.¹⁰

The persistent lack of understanding of girls' political agency in South Africa can in part be explained by the methodological difficulties of accessing their voices. While Seekings acknowledges the fragmentary nature of his sources, he does not highlight that his argument is drawn primarily from interviews with male activists. As Rachel Johnson critiques, 'the jump that he then made was that political activity was a matter for men, because they said it was.'¹¹ As work on girls and subcultures demonstrates, girls' invisibility from certain groups is not always indicative of their non-involvement, but can rather be a product of academic research itself.¹² Often, investigations into youth groups are conducted between a male researcher and his male informants, thus excluding females' experiences. Within my own research too, there was a great disparity between male interviewees in how much agency they granted to female comrades; although none denied their existence, some claimed they only ever played marginal, background roles, while others praised their integral, equal contributions. These inconsistencies do not render such testimonies unusable, but provide a window into the subjective, gendered memories of the struggle, and how male interviewees use their narratives of the past to inscribe politics as a male arena. As Helena Pohlandt-McCormick encourages, by listening to a greater multiplicity

⁸ P. Delius and C. Glaser, 'Sexual Socialisation in South Africa: A Historical Perspective', *African Studies* 61, 1 (2002), p. 48; C. Campbell, 'Learning to Kill? Masculinity, the Family and Violence in Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, 3 (1992), pp. 622-623; T. Xaba, 'Masculinity and its Malcontents: The Confrontation between "Struggle Masculinity" and "Post-Struggle Masculinity" (1990-1997)', in R. Morrell (ed), *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (Scottsville, University of Natal Press, 2001), pp. 109-110.

⁹ Seekings, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 84.

¹⁰ Carter, 'We are the Progressives', p. 215; Seekings, 'Gender Ideology and Township Politics', p. 81.

¹¹ R. Johnson, 'Making History, Gendering Youth: Young Women and South Africa's Liberation Struggle after 1976' (PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2010), p. 38.

¹² A. McRobbie and J. Garber, 'Girls and Subcultures,' in S. Hall and J. Jefferson (eds), *Resistance through Rituals* (London, Hutchinson, 1976), p. 105.

of perspectives historians can challenge previous orthodoxies and open new lines of historical inquiry.¹³

This article is based predominantly on oral history interviews conducted by the author between 2014 and 2016 with thirty female and twenty male former student activists, as well as informal discussions with parents and other Soweto residents.¹⁴ Many individuals were interviewed repeatedly over the three years, and group interviews were also conducted. By far the greatest challenge faced in conducting these interviews was an ethical one, as most interviewees spoke about their involvement in violence openly and unequivocally, but also wished to have their full names used in my research. As a compromise, only their first names have been used here, while other biographical details have been omitted.¹⁵

Soweto's female comrades who are the focus of this article were all secondary school students in their teenage years when they joined student organisations. Interviewees were members of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), or the Soweto Student Congress (SOSCO) following COSAS' banning in August 1985. They mostly came from the middle economic strata of township society; they were neither destitute shack dwellers, nor members of the African middle class who often sent their female children to boarding schools such as Inanda Seminary.¹⁶ They describe themselves as active, politically curious 'tom-boys', who wanted to participate in politics alongside male comrades, rather than separately from them. They deliberately did not join women's organisations, and rarely spoke about women's liberation as a primary objective of their activism. Very few female interviewees ascended to positions of leadership within student organisations. This was due to both a tendency for female comrades' political involvement to be shorter than men's because of parental pressures, obligations of motherhood, or fear of police harassment, and the patriarchal nature of the struggle itself. While this article argues that female comrades played more decisive roles in the struggle than previously argued, it acknowledges that such girls were more the exception than the norm in their communities. One can assume that alternative girlhoods centred around education, religion, employment, beauty contests, and various youth clubs did exist in the townships,

¹³ H. Pohlandt-McCormick, *'I saw a nightmare—': Doing Violence to Memory : the Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976* E-Book electronic edition (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 577-578.

¹⁴ Prior to being interviewed, interviewees were told that I was conducting research on the 'comrades' and COSAS members during the 1980s in Soweto. The author holds all transcripts of interviews.

¹⁵ Two female interviewees did not wish to have their names used in this research, and are referred to by pseudonyms here. Others are labelled by either their first name or preferred nickname, per their own wishes.

¹⁶ See Meghan Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women's Education* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2013).

although these are yet to be researched. Yet understanding how girls experienced apartheid rule and why some rebelled against it is essential to providing a more complete picture of African resistance and youth culture during this period.

Political Girlhood

To understand why female comrades became engaged in the struggle, one needs to first inquire into the societal positions they occupied before they became activists. Girlhood is a particularly neglected topic in South African history, and a specific lacuna remains in understanding the lives of African girls under the late-apartheid state.¹⁷ The images of girlhood that emerge from interview testimony, media reports, and memoirs suggest that life for African girls in Soweto in the 1970s and 1980s was marked by the ‘omnipresent spectre of violence’¹⁸ – whether domestic, sexual, or political; perpetrated in the home, the school, or the streets. Of these, sexual violence seems to have been the most pervasive. In her memoir about growing up in Orlando East in the late 1980s, Redi Tlhabi writes, ‘to be a girl meant to be powerless.’ She describes how violation of women and girls was commonplace during the 1980s. Speaking about the ‘Jackrollers’, a series of gangs infamous in Soweto for gang-raping schoolgirls, she writes, ‘I’d known it happen to girls and young women around me, and I lived with the suffocating fear that one day it would be my turn.’¹⁹ The rise of the comrades in the mid-1980s at times only made sexual violence more pervasive for girls. As militarised masculinities grew more pronounced amongst young men in the townships, violence against girls and women also increased.²⁰ Previous historians have demonstrated how some comrades fought with teachers and gangs for access to schoolgirls’ bodies, or felt entitled to demand sexual services from women in their communities.²¹

Media reports from the time also demonstrate growing societal concern over the township’s escalating rape rates. In 1981, *The Sowetan* reported that a woman was raped in the

¹⁷ For work on South African girlhoods prior to 1976 see D. Gaitskell, ‘“Christian Compounds for Girls”: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg, 1907-1970’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6, 1 (1979), p. 53; L. M. Thomas, ‘The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa’, *Journal of African History* 47, 3 (2006), pp. 461-490; Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own*.

¹⁸ R. Lee, *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in Urban South Africa* (London, IB Tauris, 2009), p. 56.

¹⁹ R. Tlhabi, *Endings and Beginnings: A Story of Healing* (Johannesburg, Jacana Press, 2012), p. 42; 40.

²⁰ S. Meintjes, ‘Political Violence and Gender: A Neglected Relation in South Africa’s Struggle for Democracy’, *Politikon* 25, 2 (1998), pp. 104.

²¹ I. Niehaus, ‘Towards a Dubious Liberation: Masculinity, Sexuality and Power in South African Lowveld Schools, 1953-1999’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, 3 (2000), pp. 387-407; Delius and Glaser, ‘Sexual Socialisation in South Africa’ p. 48.

township every eight hours, while another paper estimated that rapes were occurring every six hours, with 1400 cases reported in the previous year.²² In 1988, local papers again published a cluster of stories about rising sexual abuse perpetrated by gangsters against schoolgirls who were being 'dragged out of class and raped.'²³ While pervasive sexual violence has a long history in South Africa, rates of rape and domestic abuse increased in the 1980s and 1990s: 9365 cases of rape were reported to police in 1980, 19,368 cases in 1988, and 27,056 cases in 1993.²⁴ Although comparative rates of violence by township are unavailable, the dominant role played in Soweto by youth gangs, who subjected girls to 'astonishing levels' of sexual violence from the 1960s onwards, may have marked the urban community as an exceptional space when it came to young women's physical insecurity.²⁵

These high rates of violence against women, combined with the patriarchal nature of South African society, meant that township geographies were distinctly gendered – especially for children and youth. Outside of school, boys and girls were socialised in different spaces: whereas boys were free to play, meet, and discuss politics in Soweto's streets and soccer fields, girls were largely restricted to the home and excluded from street culture. The control over territory which was so central to male youth socialisation, as highlighted by Clive Glaser, is thus largely absent from girls' accounts of their childhoods, as 'female teenage culture was, to a large extent, fragmented into the household.'²⁶ This was due to girls' unequal burden of domestic work, as well as parents' stricter regulations over female children. The dangers township streets posed for girls, especially after dark, made them unsuitable places in many parents' eyes. As one woman interviewed in Soweto in the early 1990s recounted:

When you leave your child alone in the home she is not safe. And in the street, she is not safe. And in the school she is not safe. There is nowhere that she can walk and be safe. Girls are afraid somebody in a car will stop them and say 'get in'. When they

²² *The Sowetan*, 18 February 1981; *The Rand Daily Mail*, 19 February 1981.

²³ *The Sowetan*, 26 January 1988.

²⁴ This escalation reflects an increase in reporting and in actual instances of sexual violence. Accurate statistics of gender-based violence are notoriously difficult to establish since assault and rape are under-reported. These statistics are drawn from Human Rights Watch, 'South Africa: The State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape', (November 1995); See also L. Vogelmann and G. Eagle, 'Overcoming Endemic Violence against Women in South Africa', *Social Justice* 18, 1 (1991), p. 210.

²⁵ C. Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000), p. 11.

²⁶ C. Glaser, 'Swines, Hazels and the Dirty Dozen: Masculinity, Territoriality and the Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1960-1976', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, 4 (1998), p. 723; see also Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, pp. 105-107.

walk in the street they are raped by men with guns. Sexual abuse happens so much that some students stop going to school.²⁷

Because of such parental concern, girls were raised 'in a cocoon', as one female interviewee described: 'what I've noticed from our communities, they don't care what boys do, only girl children, they will need to know where you're going. At times I don't even go to buy bread from the shops.'²⁸ Yet restrictions on girls' mobility were also due to dominant notions of respectability. Catherine Campbell describes how township streets were 'clearly demarcated as the social territory of young men only,' and thus any woman who participated in street politics was 'invariably looked down on and regarded as sexually promiscuous.'²⁹

Soweto's gendered geographies made it difficult for girls to join the struggle in two key ways. First, they were largely excluded from street corners and soccer fields which served as the main sites of political discussion and mobilisation for young men. With more freedom of movement and less domestic responsibilities boys were 'having things easy,' as one female comrade described:

They don't have chores that much, they've got all the time to themselves...that's why most of the time you'd find boys hanging around on the corner. So it's easy for them to communicate. We used to say *Umrabulo* [a political discussion or debate]. It was easy for them to have *Umrabulo*, to make understand or make one politically aware. So it was easy because one guy would go chat, they'd start smoking, passing it, and chatting about whatever.³⁰

Simultaneously, girls' confinement to the private sphere and exclusion from political discussions contributed to what many interviewees described as an 'inferiority complex' that hindered their political participation. In a document explaining why women were less involved in youth politics, the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) wrote that while boys were encouraged to play outside, girls were 'taught household chores and lectured a lot on how vulnerable [they are] to the outside world.' As SAYCO highlighted this meant that while boys learned to develop and defend their own political views, girls took longer to develop self-assertiveness and confidence in political organisations.³¹ As Steve Mokwena highlights, Soweto girls' feelings of marginalisation and inferiority were further entrenched by their susceptibility to sexual violence

²⁷ S. Mokwena, 'The Era of the Jackrollers: Contextualising the rise of youth gangs in Soweto', Paper presented at the Centre of the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, (1991).

²⁸ Interview with Thabisile, Johannesburg, 25 May 2015.

²⁹ C. Campbell, 'Identity and Gender in a Changing Society: The Social Identity of South African Township Youth' (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 1992), pp. 125-126.

³⁰ Interview with Florence, Diepkloof, 8 May 2014.

³¹ South African History Archive (SAHA), South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) Collection, AL2425: K1, 'Organising Women', Youth Focus, July 1989.

in the township's streets and schools, creating a cyclical relationship between girls' vulnerability, victimisation, confinement to the home, and feelings of inferiority.³²

'I Want a Better Life'³³: Why Girls Joined

In the existing historiography, girls' household duties and the disparaging attitudes of young men are cited as primary factors for their apparent non-involvement in township politics during the 1980s.³⁴ Yet for Soweto's female comrades, the gendered and generational injustices they faced were central motivations in their decisions to join the student movement. Almost all female comrades interviewed were mobilised at school – even those who had prior knowledge of or connections to the struggle through their families or friends – and for most their official entry into politics began with their election to Student Representative Councils (SRCs).³⁵ The centrality of schools to mobilisation may not seem surprising given that COSAS was a student organisation with sub-branches organised at school-level. However, female comrades' mobilisation contrasts with that of males, who were more often recruited in Soweto's more public, masculine spaces. For girls, schools were the primary space in which they could safely and acceptably gain exposure to struggle ideologies and organisations because they were the one space outside the home, and perhaps the church, where girls were collectively present in large numbers alongside boys.³⁶ By the mid-1980s, girls' access to secondary schooling had increased dramatically: in 1960 they constituted only twenty-seven percent of African students in higher secondary education, but by 1985 outnumbered boys at 54.5 percent of the total.³⁷

This in part explains why girls were more prominent in student organisations such as COSAS and SOSCO than youth organisations such as SAYCO. Additionally, male interviewees explained that it was easier to maintain discipline in student organisations when it came to respecting female members, as schools themselves acted as sub-branches within larger regional COSAS or SOSCO structures.³⁸ If a female comrade was abused or threatened, student leaders

³² Mokwena, 'The Era of the Jackrollers'.

³³ Interview with Thobile, Diepkloof, 12 April 2014.

³⁴ J. Beall, S. Hassim, and A. Todes, "'A Bit on the Side'?: Gender Struggles in the Politics of Transformation in South Africa', *Feminist Review* 33 (1989), pp. 44-45; Seekings, 'Gender Ideology and Township Politics'.

³⁵ C. Glaser, 'Learning Amidst the Turmoil: Secondary Schooling in Soweto 1977-1990', *South African Historical Journal* 68, 3 (2016), pp. 415-436.

³⁶ Glaser, 'Swines, Hazels, and the Dirty Dozens,' p. 724.

³⁷ E. Unterhalter, 'The Impact of Apartheid on Women's Education in South Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 17, 48 (1990), pp. 70-71.

³⁸ Interviews with Max, Pimville, 17 May 2015; Musa, Diepkloof, 13 June 2015; Makgane, Illovo, 3 July 2015.

likely knew the young man responsible because he would have attended a local school. In youth organisations, however, it was more difficult to keep track of membership; a *com-tsotsi* might not be known to leadership and thus be more difficult to hold accountable. While the line between student and youth activist was not always clear – with many young people belonging to both groups simultaneously – it is important to acknowledge these potential differences in why the student movement was more appealing to girls and young women than youth organisations.

Female comrades cited several reasons for joining the struggle, including vague and idealistic goals of creating a better future, and the excitement of singing and *toy-toying* in the streets. Such explanations did not differ much from those of male comrades interviewed. Yet they also expressed distinctly gendered motivations for joining, as the struggle offered Soweto's female students new opportunities for breaking gender taboos and restrictions on their behaviour, and contributing to the political events unfolding around them. Despite COSAS being an organisation dominated by men and at times characterised by its discrimination against young women, it nevertheless provided Soweto's female comrades a space within which they could assert themselves and take on public roles which were uncommon for young women in townships at the time.

Some interviewees were aware of the patriarchal nature of township life, and saw the struggle as a means through which they could gain greater equality with men. Beatrice, a COSAS activist from Pimville, explained, 'You could see every woman will always [be told], your work is in the kitchen...So we were fighting that we should be equal with men, because we only differ with parts. But basically whatever they can do, we can do it.'³⁹ Similarly, a Diepkloof activist stated, 'Women are the most oppressed people in this country...If you are a woman, even if you are a school child, at home they expect you to do the house chores. And when you didn't do those things you'd get punished.'⁴⁰ Such discrimination was also commonplace at school. Speaking about what motivated her to join her school's SRC, one female comrade described how if a classroom was dirty, only female students would be *sjambokked*. She protested, 'We don't clean the class with our breasts. Because everybody is making the class dirty, we should all clean. He was not beating the boys...The only difference between boys and girls is the breasts, otherwise we all have hands, we all have feet. Why can't they clean?'⁴¹ Despite COSAS' tenuous commitment to gender equality, its female members nevertheless gained a sense of self-importance and agency through their involvement in the student movement at a time when girls

³⁹ Interview with Beatrice, Pimville, 23 May 2015.

⁴⁰ Nonkululeko, in group interview with female comrades from Diepkloof, 27 June 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with Amahle, Jabavu, 10 June 2015.

had little influence in township society. As Florence from Diepkloof recollected, ‘with COSAS, I felt I had a voice, as a human being, as a South African, and as a woman.’⁴²

Female Comrades, Collective Action, and Political Violence

From mid-1984, as growing political unrest was met with increased state repression, African students and youth increasingly became the shock troops of township uprisings. While the comrades’ strategies drew on older forms of non-violent protest, such as boycotts, stay-a-ways, and leafleting, they simultaneously developed new forms of violent confrontation in response to the state’s coercive and violent tactics.⁴³ In interviews, female comrades spoke of their numerous activities as SRC representatives or COSAS members: their attempts to mobilise more students into the struggle; to campaign against the injustices of Bantu Education; and to demand the release of detained students.⁴⁴ Yet most interviewees soon transitioned from speaking about such non-violent forms of activism to more militant, and often violent, methods of collective action and protest, ranging from throwing stones at police vehicles, to petrol bombing councillor’s houses, to punishing suspected informers and gangsters. When popular violence against state agents began in the Vaal Triangle in September 1984, Soweto initially remained relatively dormant. Yet due to the township’s volatile history, the state treated Soweto as if it were a key site of rebellion. The declaration of a State of Emergency on 21 July 1985 gave the police and army virtually unlimited powers to search homes, arrest and interrogate community members. As Philip Bonner and Lauren Segal highlight, the Emergency ‘radically altered the life of Sowetans’ as the army moved in to the township in what many residents perceived as a declaration of civil war.⁴⁵

Soweto’s female comrades posit their militarisation as a justified and necessary response to the state’s occupation of the township. As Lucy, a COSAS activist from Diepkloof, commented, ‘You’ll find that you are sitting in the class, the police are shooting – they used to shoot even the

⁴² Interview with Florence, Diepkloof, 8 May 2014.

⁴³ J. Cherry, ‘The Intersection of Violent and Non-Violent Strategies in the South African Liberation Struggle’, in H. Sapire and C. Saunders (eds), *Southern African Liberation Struggles: New Local, Regional and Global Perspectives* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2012), p. 156. The more detailed dynamics of township violence will not be discussed here. See Rueedi, ‘Siyayinyova’; Simpson, ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe, We are Waiting for You’; and M. Marks, *Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ These less confrontational forms of student activism are discussed in greater detail in Emily Bridger, ‘South Africa’s Female Comrades: Gender, Identity, and Student Resistance to Apartheid in Soweto, 1984-1994,’ (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2016), chapters 1 and 3.

⁴⁵ P. Bonner and L. Segal, *Soweto: A History* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1998), p. 115-116.

kids that are walking around... Who's going to fight for those students or the kids?'⁴⁶ Students such as Lucy saw few options other than defending themselves against state violence. She recalled how she would walk around the township with her jacket 'full of stones' to use against police because 'if they shoot at us, to run away, obviously they are still going to shoot at you...You'd better do something just to protect us.'⁴⁷ More effective than stones were petrol bombs – which were easy to make with ingredients readily available in the townships.⁴⁸ Female comrades enthusiastically recalled their use of such weapons. As Ntsiki, an activist from Diepkloof, loudly recounted while laughing, 'We will burn! We will target the cars of the state, we will burn!...Anything that belongs to the state we will just destroy...Petrol bombs, you must make sure, it is hot, you must throw it so that is mustn't burn your hands.'⁴⁹ Much like their male comrades, female activists saw such actions as contributing directly to the struggle in accordance with instructions from the ANC in exile. As another female comrade recounted,

I think it was 1986 where...Oliver Tambo said, the Young Lions, they must roar. So it's where we started to roar. We have to burn the schools! We have to boycott the classes. We didn't write our exams. So, we have to make the world shake!⁵⁰

In addition to such militant actions taken against police, councillors, and symbols of white capital, female comrades also targeted members of their own communities who transgressed the townships' new moral boundaries. These initiatives were in many respects a continuation of earlier forms of community discipline that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet comrades' efforts in the 1980s to punish criminals and informers were framed under ANC calls for 'people's power', and thus had a significant, new political dimension.⁵¹ To comrades, gangsters, criminals, and other social deviants were equal impediments to liberation as police or councillors, and were thus deemed to be legitimate targets of political violence. Female comrades attested to being particularly involved in enforcing a consumer boycott launched in 1985. When township residents were caught with groceries bought 'in town,' both male and female comrades would interrogate them, destroy their purchases, and even employ more severe methods of policing. As a female comrade from Diepkloof explained, 'And if you've got that plastic bags, ah, we are going to deal with you!...We are going to take the plastics and break the things that is inside ...Sometimes we take the *sjambok* [whip] and (claps) *sjambok* you.'⁵² Soweto's female comrades also engaged in more severe punishments meted out against gangsters and suspected state

⁴⁶ Lucy, in group Interview with female comrades from Diepkloof, 27 June 2015.

⁴⁷ Interview with Lucy, Fleurhof, 7 April 2014.

⁴⁸ Rueedi, 'Siyayinyova', p. 405.

⁴⁹ Interview with Ntsiki, Diepkloof, 5 April 2015.

⁵⁰ Interview with Nomsa, Diepkloof Extension, 19 April 2014.

⁵¹ L. Buur and S. Jensen, 'Introduction: Vigilantism and the Policing of Everyday Life in South Africa', *African Studies* 63, 2 (2004), p. 142.

⁵² Interview with Thobile, Diepkloof, 12 April 2014.

informers. They attested to *sjambokking*, and even executing through the infamous 'necklace' those deviants deemed to be particular impediments to liberation. A few women spoke of how they would not be at the forefront of necklacings, but rather would be part of the crowd, singing and supporting those leading such actions.⁵³ Nevertheless, most female interviewees supported or actively participated in such instances of violence.

Despite stereotypical assumptions about women's predisposition to peaceful behaviour, and the dearth of research on female comrades in other South African communities, young women's militarism was neither new in South Africa nor unique to Soweto during the 1980s. Previous historians have detailed women's violent confrontations with police and community residents throughout the twentieth century.⁵⁴ In his research on young activists in Alexandra, Carter writes of a female COSAS activist 'DP' who participated in the township's 1986 rebellion and attested, 'we were all the stone throwers, men and women.'⁵⁵ Janet Cherry too writes of young women engaged in militant action in the Eastern Cape, who recounted throwing stones and petrol bombs at vehicles and *sjambokking* those who used public transport during a boycott.⁵⁶ In her psychological study of children and the township uprisings, Gill Straker writes of a teenage girl named 'Sisi' who was 'in favour of the use of violence' as a purposeful strategy, and was involved (along with 23 other girls) in the burning of a councillor's home.⁵⁷

'You have to be a comrade without your gender'

Yet women's militarism in South Africa violates the norms of female behaviour, and has thus often required women to adopt male identities, behaviour, and dress to fit societal notions of

⁵³ Bridger, 'South Africa's Female Comrades', chapter 3.

⁵⁴ H. Bradford, "'We are now the men": Women's Beer Protests in the Natal Countryside, 1929," in B. Bozzoli (ed), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 312; A. Mager and G. Minkley, 'Reaping the Whirlwind: The East London Riots of 1952', in P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds) *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935-1962* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1994), pp. 229-251; E. Bridger, 'From "Mother of the Nation" to "Lady Macbeth": Winnie Mandela and Perceptions of Female Violence in South Africa, 1985-91,' *Gender & History* 27, 2 (2015), pp. 446-464.

⁵⁵ C. Carter, 'Comrades and Community: Politics and the Construction of Hegemony in Alexandra Township, South Africa, 1984-1987' (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1991), pp. 269-270.

⁵⁶ J. Cherry, "'We Were Not Afraid": The Role of Women in the 1980s Township Uprising in the Eastern Cape', in N. Gasa (ed), *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), pp. 292, 297.

⁵⁷ G. Straker, *Faces in the Revolution: The Psychological Effects of Violence on Township Youth in South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1992), pp. 28-31.

political or militant actors.⁵⁸ To conform to male-dominated comrade culture, Soweto's young female activists erased their femininity, and denied the influence of their sex or gender on their political capabilities. As one woman stated, 'you have to be a comrade without your gender.'⁵⁹ Many employed the terms 'comrade' or 'soldier' in a gender-neutral way, such as Penelope, a female comrade from Jabavu, who stated,

We were like soldiers, there was no special treatment per se...It's once in a while that they [male comrades] would remember that amongst them there is a female comrade. Because then they look at you as a fellow comrade. If they are throwing stones, you must also throw a stone.⁶⁰

However, the characteristics perceived by interviewees as gender-neutral were predominantly masculine, their gendered nature obscured by the normalisation of male experience within township politics. Despite stating earlier that to be a comrade you had to be without your gender, Lucy later explained, 'You know, we were like, all of us, we are males.'⁶¹ In his work on the 1970s, Daniel Magaziner states that it was important for female activists in Black Consciousness organisations to demonstrate their rejection of feminine norms and behaviour to prove that their political involvement was not limited by their gender.⁶² For female comrades in the 1980s, this process was equally important. In interviews, women repeatedly distinguish themselves from other female youth in the township by emphasising their possession of characteristics typically seen as masculine, such as bravery and a willingness to use force, while negating any emotions that could be taken as feminine. As a comrade from Pimville stated, 'Most of the women were scared, but I was not (laughs)...I was not even scared of the gun. I would hold it; it was easy for me.' In stating that even holding arms was 'easy' for her, she posits militarisation as natural, and not inherently contradictory to her gender. She continued, 'Because most of the time, [male comrades] know ladies, they are scared. They can't perform certain tasks. But with me, believe me, I could perform *any* task.'⁶³ Male comrades too acknowledged the necessity of girls rejecting feminine norms. One man described how when addressing students in an assembly, 'you can't just come and want to be *Sisi*...you can't just address the students being *Sisi*. Ai, you must be militant, you must be heard.'⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Bradford, 'We are now the men', p. 311-312.

⁵⁹ Interview with Lucy, Fleurhof, 7 April 2014.

⁶⁰ Interview with Penelope, Jabavu, 12 June 2015.

⁶¹ Interview with Lucy, Fleurhof, 7 April 2014.

⁶² D. Magaziner, "'Pieces of a (Wo)man": Feminism, Gender and Adulthood in Black Consciousness, 1968-1977', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, 1 (2011), p. 56.

⁶³ Interview with Beatrice, Pimville, 23 May 2015.

⁶⁴ Interview with 'Takazov', Diepkloof, 2 May 2015.

Female comrades also rejected feminine norms and girls' subordinate identities by adopting masculine physical and aesthetic traits. As women from Diepkloof recalled in a group interview:

Lucy: But as ladies, you know, our male comrades didn't take us as inferior. They used to treat us like males. Even what we wear – we used to wear *takkies* and jeans and all that.

Nonkululeko: Now and then! We wear trousers, we are like that. We only wear skirts when we go to church (laughs).

Lucy: Ya, they were even saying we are tomboys or something...Because anything can happen – the police can chase us any time, we have to run away. So you can't run away with heels or those shoes. You must always [be] in *takkies* and all that. So it was a great experience for us.⁶⁵

Demonstrating her rejection of feminine clothing, an activist from Pimville stated, 'I mean, you'd never hit a target wearing a skirt and not knowing how to run. When we jump those fences, if you are a sophisticated woman you won't be safe. You'd rather stay at home.'⁶⁶ Again, this trend was not limited to Soweto. In Alexandra, 'DP' also commonly wore trousers, which, as Bozzoli notes, was uncommon for girls in those times.⁶⁷ While DP joined every confrontation in Alexandra's Six-Day War in 1986, 'the girls in skirts...would get caught jumping over fences.'⁶⁸

Other bodily markers were also important to Soweto's female comrades' gender performance. Phumzile, an activist from Diepkloof, spoke of a comrade named Diana who she looked up to, and described her as an ideal female comrade – someone who exhibited masculine traits and who could not only hold her own amongst men but also stand up to or challenge them. 'She was like a big man, she has these muscles,' Phumzile described. 'She'd [forget] that she's talking to a man. And she can beat that man very, very, very bad.'⁶⁹ For female comrades, being physically strong was necessary to perform certain actions or run away from police. Yet young male activists often doubted girls' physical capabilities. As one of Campbell's male informants from Natal explained, 'Well, what I know is that girls have not got the strength to run.'⁷⁰ By emphasising their strength, female comrades from Soweto not only adopted traits of struggle masculinity, but also countered common conceptions that girls lacked the physical strength required for comrade membership.

⁶⁵ Group interview with female comrades from Diepkloof, 27 June 2015.

⁶⁶ Interview with Khosi, Orlando East, 1 May 2014.

⁶⁷ Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle*, p. 105.

⁶⁸ Carter, 'Comrades and Community', pp. 269-270.

⁶⁹ Interview with Phumzile, Johannesburg, 17 April 2015.

⁷⁰ Campbell, 'Identity and Gender in a Changing Society', p. 323.

‘What they’ve done, they’ve done to the females’: Gendering political violence

Despite their attempts to negate their gender or become like men, female comrades’ gendered experiences of childhood and adolescence could not easily be erased. Although they shared many motivations, and engaged in similar actions, as their male counterparts, their gender nevertheless shaped what forms of collective action they engaged in, and how they remember their time as activists. In understanding this, it is helpful to return to the story of the all-female ‘hit-squad’ presented in the opening of this article, who took it upon themselves to seek retribution for sexual violence committed in Soweto. When one takes this story and reads it alongside interviews with female comrades, and in light of the gendered insecurity that marked the lives of African girls, it no longer seems so uncharacteristic. Rather, most interviewees – both male and female – attested that when a man was accused of rape in the township, it was often female comrades who would mete out ‘justice’ against this rapist.

Instances of rape were often reported to the comrades, who adopted the roles of moral defenders of the townships. In such cases, the perpetrator was usually beaten in public on the township’s streets with *sjamboks*, stones, fists and feet. The intent was rarely to kill the perpetrator, but to use violence as a means of disciplining him in the hopes that he would also join the struggle. Explaining how such punishment was gendered, a female comrade from Diepkloof described, ‘They [male comrades] used to put us as female comrades to go and hunt those rapists. We are the ones who are going to deal with them because what they’ve done, they’ve done to the females.’ When asked how these rapists were dealt with, she laughed loudly and responded ‘Yoh, it depends sometimes with the situation...but we used to beat them, give them a hiding.’⁷¹ Even female comrades who were rarely engaged in other forms of political violence were involved in the punishing of rapists. A woman who stated that she was afraid of police, not very brave, and rarely involved in militant activity, spoke of her engagement in this type of community policing: ‘The gangsters were raping women, yes, we used to – because they will be saying, the boys will be saying, you should be in the forefront here because we are not raped, it’s you who are raped. And so we’ll be put in the forefront.’⁷²

Such cases were not limited to Diepkloof and Orlando East, but seem to have occurred throughout Soweto, as comrades from Jabavu, Naledi, and Dlamini attested to similar instances. It is difficult to assess to what extent these cases of female-led retribution were particular to Soweto, given the lack of research done in other areas. But, as Glaser demonstrates, Soweto had a long history of conflict between students and gangs, particularly over issues of sexual assault against schoolgirls. Since the 1960s, students had organised anti-gang reprisals, with schoolboys

⁷¹ Interview with Lucy, Fleurhof, 7 April 2014.

⁷² Interview with Thabisile, Johannesburg, 25 May 2015.

attacking suspected rapists.⁷³ These struggles continued into the 1980s and early 1990s with the emergence of new gangs, first the Ma-Kabasa and later the 'Jackrollers', both of which were involved in deadly battles with the comrades. These struggles were particularly concentrated in Diepkloof, and centred around Fidelitas, Bopa Senalta, Namedi, and Madibane high schools – where most interviewees cited here attended.⁷⁴

At times, male comrades downplayed women's involvement in the struggle, or at least granted less agency to women than they granted to themselves in their narratives of the past. Yet many male comrades spoke of times when young women 'hunted' suspected rapists. As one stated, 'I think one of the missions that women were key, it was a question of when women were raped, sometimes you find women leading the programme themselves to, to want to see who are those people who are doing that...They were doing the punishment.'⁷⁵ Explaining why female comrades were at the forefront of such punishment, another male activist explained, 'Because these rapes were happening to them...we felt, collectively, that they should be part of this. And these rapists, they must see that women are tired of being raped.'⁷⁶ Despite male comrades encouraging young women to take the lead in these instances of punishment, it is important to acknowledge that many male comrades were deeply misogynistic, and that COSAS only ever made tenuous attempts to promote or protect women's rights. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that sexual abuse was common within organisations such as COSAS – although the female comrades interviewed for this study refuted such notions, and suggested that their special status as 'comrades' rather than 'girls' largely protected them from the 'womanising' of young male activists. However, young men's support for female comrades' punishing of rapists complicates prevailing ideas about the homogeneity of male comrades' hyper-masculine identities and disparaging attitudes towards politically active young women during these years.

The punishing of rapists by female comrades may seemingly have little to do with distinctly 'political' violence and the comrades' broader goal of liberating South Africa. However, actions carried out on the ground during the township uprisings were often more related to local or private issues and subjectivities than to the principal ideological cause of the liberation struggle.⁷⁷ For female comrades, gender inequalities intersected with broader class, racial, and generational societal cleavages and the wider goals of the anti-apartheid struggle to motivate

⁷³ Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Mokwena, 'The Era of the Jackrollers'; 'The Conflict between the AZAPO and the UDF: Popular Violence in the 1980s and 1990s', *South African History Online*, September 2012.

⁷⁵ Interview with Patrick, Diepkloof, 12 May 2014.

⁷⁶ Interview with Paul, Diepkloof, 14 February 2016.

⁷⁷ B. Bozzoli, 'Why were the 1980s "millenarian"? Style, repertoires, space and authority in South Africa's black cities', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, 1 (2000), p. 79.

their involvement in township confrontations. Their punishing of rapists represents how despite the masculine culture of the liberation movement, there was still room for girls and young women to use the wider political struggle to settle their own grievances and address their own agendas. The empowering effects of girls' involvement in the struggle may have even had an immediate effect on their susceptibility to sexual violence. Writing in 1989, SAYCO's national organiser for women stated that politicised female youths were rarely victims of rape, 'because the *tsotsis* or thugs are often scared of anything associated to or called a comrade...To my knowledge, no rape of a comrade has ever been reported – I don't say comrades haven't been raped, I'm merely emphasising the rarity of this occurrence.'⁷⁸ As this woman acknowledges, it is difficult to know if or how many female comrades were actually raped during these years given the silences surrounding such topics. However, given the exceptionally high rates of rape in Soweto in the 1980s, this statement, if accurate, would have been particularly telling, and at the least demonstrates female comrades' feelings of empowerment against sexual violence.

It is also important to note the enthusiasm with which women conveyed these stories of punishing perpetrators of sexual violence, which they narrated more openly and vivaciously, and in more specific detail, than other memories. One woman explicitly described her involvement in beating rapists as 'fun'.⁷⁹ During a group interview with Diepkloof-based female comrades, two women laughed loudly and grew audibly excited when recalling this story:

Lucy: You know...there was a guy, one of the good days, who raped a lady in zone 3 [Diepkloof]. We combine as females, and decided that, we don't want males to be involved. We are the ones who are going to deal with that man. We went there, and we caught that guy (laughs). We gave him a hiding!

Thobile: We used *sjamboks*, umbrellas!

Lucy: Umbrellas!

Thobile: We beat him hard!

Lucy: So some of the problems, we wanted to solve it ourselves, not involving the males.⁸⁰

These verbal displays of excitement suggest that first, punishing rapists was a particularly important way in which young women engaged in the struggle, and second, that female comrades continue to valorise such experiences. Furthermore, Lucy's reference to 'one of the good days' implies that she remains nostalgic for her time as a comrade – a sentiment expressed by several female interviewees. Research with former Self-Defence Unit members active in townships in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates how these young men too remain nostalgic for

⁷⁸ SAHA, SAYCO Collection, AL2425: K1, 'Organising Women', Youth Focus, July 1989.

⁷⁹ Interview with Amahle, Jabavu, 10 June 2015.

⁸⁰ Group interview with female comrades from Diepkloof, 27 June 2015.

the struggle, continue to valorise their military identities, and are particularly excitable in interviews. Malose Langa and Gillian Eagle argue that this nostalgia is so strong because of how 'immensely seductive' it would have been to adopt and perform the militarised masculinity associated with the struggle, and to have greater authority in their communities.⁸¹ Yet in this research, Soweto's female comrades were more enthusiastic and nostalgic in interviews than male comrades, demonstrating the intractability of their militarised, oppositional femininities. By defying gender norms and adopting more assertive femininities, female comrades broadened their horizons, increased their authority in the community, gained greater agency in their relationships with men and their parents, and were granted a greater role in the public sphere.

Since the end of the liberation struggle, Soweto's female comrades have striven to make these feelings of empowerment lasting rather than transitory. This has not been easy, given the stigma some of these women continue to face within their communities for their previous breach of gender norms. Many feel that they remain the subject of community gossip, and two thirds of female interviewees are not married today, citing their involvement in the struggle as the primary reason for this. Those who hoped their involvement in the struggle might bring them political or economic opportunities have largely been disappointed, as most today are unemployed or work in the informal sector. However, female comrades simultaneously report that they feel changed for the better by their experiences, especially when compared to women who did not join the struggle. They claim that they are stronger, more assertive, and confident now, and can hold their own amongst men – both in their personal relationships and in their continued political participation in the post-apartheid state. Several interviewees spoke of the long-lasting effects of their involvement in the struggle, particularly in terms of their own empowerment against sexual violence. As a comrade from Diepkloof, stated, 'No man can touch me here on the street again. I know my rights...being in the struggle made me know my rights.'⁸²

When women today recall their time as comrades as the 'good days', this should thus be interpreted as 'neither trivial nostalgia nor popular romanticism,' as Sean Field argues.⁸³ Rather, their idealisation of empowering moments allows them to preserve their comrade identity and the feelings of potency and agency that came with it. Simultaneously, nostalgia helps female comrades deny or forget moments in the struggle when they did not feel empowered, but rather disrespected or abused – either by the state or their own male comrades. By presenting

⁸¹ M. Langa and G. Eagle, 'The Intractability of Militarised Masculinity: A Case Study of Former Self-Defence Unit Members in the Kathorus Area, South Africa', *South African Journal of Psychology* 38, 1 (2008), p. 166. For more on post-struggle masculinity see Xaba, 'Masculinity and its Malcontents'.

⁸² Interview with Ntebaleng, Diepkloof, 15 April 2014.

⁸³ S. Field, *Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 53-54.

celebratory narratives of their past and downplaying any discord within student organisations, and highlighting memories in which they fought against rather than experienced abuse or derision, these women emphasise their belonging to the comrade movement and insert themselves into a male-dominated historical narrative from which they have been excluded. When talking about themselves in the present, these women's primary identity is still that of being a 'comrade' – rather than a mother or wife, or in relation to their current economic role. They may therefore be reluctant to present memories that challenge this identity – one which relies on their narrative of 'being one of the boys' and being taken as equals rather than as lesser, female participants in the student movement. This helps to explain why their emphasis in interviews is on their empowerment against sexual violence, rather than on any abuse or violence that occurred within student activists' ranks. Given the ambiguous futures many female comrades face – as so many of them are unemployed, not married, and experience financial hardship – clinging on to their past identities as comrades is an important means of coping with insecurity, and with their return to 'normal' gender roles in the wake of the struggle.

Conclusion

Previous studies of student and youth activists involved in South Africa's township uprisings have portrayed the comrades as uniformly male. Where girls have featured in these studies, little analysis has been done to understand their motivations, actions, and subjectivities in comparison to those of young men. Moreover, a wider gap in research on female youth culture in the townships means we have little understanding of how girls coped with and defended themselves from increasing rates of sexual harassment in the latter twentieth century. This article demonstrates that despite assumptions about girls' predisposition to victimhood and peaceful or compliant behaviour, female students and youth were involved in the township uprisings. This involvement was not limited to supportive roles traditionally associated with women, but included a variety of militant actions, ranging from destroying groceries, to petrol bombing houses, to participating in the 'necklacing' of suspected informers.

In his analysis of the township uprisings, Seekings argues that 'direct action and confrontation...provided spaces for a range of people to seek social affirmation, and even to enjoy themselves through collective action.' Yet such motivations only applied to young men as 'young women, by contrast, were largely marginalised.'⁸⁴ But by interviewing former female comrades and listening to a greater multiplicity of perspective on the township uprisings, it becomes clear that participation in the student movement, despite being an arena dominated by men, could also provide girls with a sense of accomplishment and empowerment that was difficult to achieve elsewhere. Just as the struggle offered young men a means of asserting their

⁸⁴ Seekings, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 97.

masculinity and becoming a man, so too did it offer certain young women something to gain in terms of their gender identity and sense of self. By contravening traditional gender norms through their engagement in the public sphere and employment of political violence, female comrades constructed alternative gender identities that countered societal expectations and limitations of girlhood. Furthermore, their use of violence – particularly against men – provided them with a sense of control over themselves and over others, and was a clear departure from relations of subservience and victimisation they otherwise experienced as girls. In the aftermath of the struggle, and considering the current inequalities or insecurities they face, former female comrades cling to these memories of acting against perpetrators of sexual violence to make the empowerment they gained from the struggle more lasting than transitory, and to forget or deny less empowering memories from their time as activists.

Acknowledgements

Earlier drafts of this article were presented at the North Eastern Workshop on Southern Africa, Burlington, Vermont, 2016; Oxford's South African Discussion Group, 2015; and the NRF History Workshop seminar series at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2015. I benefitted from the helpful comments and questions at all of these events. I would like to thank Stacey Hynd, Gary Kynoch, Clive Glaser, and Rebekah Lee for their comments and questions on earlier versions of this research.