

Title: Deconstructing the experiences of sexual violence using poetry among female survivors in Gauteng.

Abstract

Background and Objectives: In South Africa, gender-based violence (GBV) has risen exponentially to the extent that the government has declared GBV a pandemic. Among the many forms of GBV is sexual violence. In South Africa, five women are reportedly raped per hour. The high rates of sexual violence, coupled with limited mental healthcare services, predispose survivors to ongoing mental and physical health conditions. This study adopted a decolonial feminist epistemology to deconstruct the experiences of sexual violence using poetry among female survivors in Gauteng, South Africa. **Methods:** A purposive and snowballing approach was used to identify a diverse group of participants. A total of six women participated in two online poetry workshops. Using a participatory action research design, the women wrote poems in response to prompts (mind, heart, stomach) which explored the cognitive, emotional and somatic manifestations of trauma. The closing workshop was used to reflect on their experiences as participants in the research process. Data was generated from individual poems, group poems and post-workshop reflections. Thematic analysis and poetic inquiry were used to make meaning from the data. **Results:** From the combined poems, two themes emerged. First theme: Reclaiming Power Through Rules And Regulation, and second Theme: Embodied Regeneration Amid Ongoing Anguish. The findings revealed how the poetry workshop facilitated a restored sense of self, empowered the formation of a community and provided a safe space to articulate unexpressed emotions of pain from sexual violence. **Conclusion :** This study contributes to decolonial feminist representation and scholarship. Group poetry workshops represented a contextually relevant response to the elevated rate of gender-based violence in Gauteng, South Africa. This study recommends the use of expressive art-based modalities such as poetry within community mental health interventions in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: deconstructing, poetry, sexual violence, survivors, decolonial feminism, gender-based violence.