

Youth Gangsters and Girlfriending: Intimate Relations in the Townships

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Abstract

This research adds to the scholarly argument that “work is still needed to provide a more complex picture of young women's involvement in gangs” (Sutton, 2017: 150). Focusing on Gugulethu (a black township in Cape Town, South Africa), this paper discusses selected aspects of intimate relations between female youth and men involved in gangsterism. It goes beyond describing these women as simple victims of these male gangsters’ ego by paying attention to cases where these “girls” are in control of their men. The conclusion suggests that masculinity expected in gangsterism and the South African township culture are among the outstanding causes behind the manipulations, abuses, and other forms of gender-based violence that women inflict upon their gangster men and which remain overlooked in research as well as in the community. The research found that there are cases where the gangsters’ girlfriends are not just the most benefitting socio-economically from the unlawful activities their men get involved in, but they are also the masterminds behind their men’s crimes which are often accompanied with violence and arrests. The paper draws on the ethnographic approach in the townships, observations, life stories, in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews in Gugulethu.

Keywords: Gugulethu, Gangsters, Gender Violence, Youth, Perpetrators

Introduction

South Africa is known for its history of violence rooted in racial discrimination that apartheid incarnated. This dark epoch’s legacy lives on remarkably as socioeconomic mobility is still very much linked to racialised spaces which explain the high crime rates in black and coloured townships in Cape Town. Gugulethu –where this research is conducted –is one of these black townships which are also (in) famous for its high rate of organised crimes. Hence, Gangsterism is an everyday concept in Cape Town, particularly, in its various townships such as Gugulthu. Youth are the most affected by gangsterism both as potential and prominent members and as victims. And though for long, “gender gap in offending has been the historical justification for focusing on male offending and victimization patterns” (O’Neal, Decker, Moule Jr, and Pyrooz, 2016), it is no news that “girls” are active members of many gangs with a considerable agency. In other words, women are not “sex objects or auxiliary members” as researchers

previously assumed (Sutton, 2017, p.1). But this fashion which is considered as “cool” by youth is not encouraged in township. Gang-related and other violent crimes are among those dealt with in “vigilante incidents” increasing in South African township since 2013 (Cilliers and Aucoin, 2016: 9). Hence, elders and other community leaders are very much committed to educating their youth against getting involved in networks of violence.

Naturally, women are the most to be warned against associating with male gangsters as this makes them vulnerable to gender-related violence including physical and emotional abuse. In addition, women are warned regarding their reputation which could be damaged with gang-related habits such as substance abuse or getting in conflict with the law. These and related dangers are cited to discourage “girls” from any kind of relationships with these gangs –including sharing gang membership and being romantically involved with them. However, this does not mean that the elders, especially women, are in agreement with the fact that everything about women associating with gangs is bad. Certainly many understand that gangsterism has served many as a way out of poverty and one acquiring a certain social status. Hence, while some elders might focus on educating against gangsterism, some others are advising on how to make it safe and maximize from all the goods it can bring.

This research adds to the works of scholars such as Sutton (2017: 150) who suggest that “work is still needed to provide a more complex picture of young women's involvement in gangs” and also that women in gangs “are typically characterized as becoming more like their male counterparts: wild, hedonistic, irrational, amoral and violent” (Laidler and Hunt, 2001: 657). Focusing on Gugulethu (a black township in Cape Town, South Africa), this paper discusses selected aspects of intimate relations between female youth and men involved in gangsterism to add to the debate on gangster’s women’s agency. In other words, the paper goes beyond describing these women as simple victims of these male gangsters’ ego by paying attention to cases where these “girls” are in control of their men. Thus, away from painting these “girls” as victims or simple auxiliaries in their involvement with the youth gangsters, this research rather looks at their choice in engaging in romance with these gangsters despite the well-known facts that there is nothing good that can result from it. The major question this work endeavours to answer is the following: How do gangsters’ “women” use both their feminine body and the predictable gangsters’ behaviour to ensure their socioeconomic gains when romantically involved with gangsters?

Methodology

This is a qualitative research. It draws on the ethnographic approach in Gugulethu (a township, observations, life stories, in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews. Participants included eleven men and thirteen women aged between 25 and 55. They

are all residents of Gugulethu. The age choice was ethically motivated. Minors were not included in the interviewees. However, much older men and women were needed especially former gangsters and community leaders to enrich the research with past testimonies (then and now) and the views of those dedicated to educate youths against organised crimes in the community. The number of interviews resulted from people being reluctant to participate in what many perceived as a “dangerous thing” given how gangs scrutinize the community especially the paranoia that people could “snitch” against them. This is common in research on people involved in activities “that are outside, or marginal to the law” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000: 19). Participants included community leaders and social workers, former gangsters, active gangsters, women who were and those who are still romantically involved with gangsters. The major question answered included what they think about the vulnerability of women who are intimately involved with gangsters. The second topic consisted of debating any possible ways in which these women exercise power on their gangster partners to get what they want. Other topics that emerged from responses to these questions were further debated in two focus group discussions. The major ones included why “girls” still chose gangsters as lovers despite the constant reminder (through media, police reports, community leaders, churches, and elders’ advises) about how badly these men treat women and the terrible consequences of both being a gangster’s lover and being a female gangster. Discussed was also what women who chose to engage in relationship with gangsters want and also how they get what they want and get away with it.

In general, this paper is an intervention in the everyday debate in South Africa on gender and violence, and the common belief that gangsters are predisposed to abuse their female partners physically, psychologically and even morally. It is also an inquiry into gender violence and the fact that it still largely describes men as perpetrators and women as victims (Jewkes et al., 2002; Watts and Zimmerman, 2002). At the end, this research shows that the possibility of women being the perpetrator in domestic violence and among intimate partners has not received the needed attention in research in South Africa, let alone in gangsterism where the notion of masculinity is (or is believed) to be conservative.

Gugulethu and gangsterism

Gugulethu is one of those locations that were created for black South Africans in 1923 when the apartheid regime passed “The Native (Urban areas) Act”. Other black locations in Cape Town that emerged around the same time include Langa, Ndabeni, and Nyanga East. Gugulethu then was known as “Nyanga West” but its inhabitants renamed it “Gugulethu” which means “our pride”.¹ Today, it is one of the biggest black townships of Cape Town along with Kayelitsha, Nyanga, Kayamandi, Ndabeni, to name but a few. Like most townships, Gugulethu is known for its crowded population, high

rate of unemployment, poor service delivery leading to sanitation problems and high risks of diseases (Miraftab, 2004; Kalichamn et al., 2004).

In townships such as Gugulethu, poverty remains at the heart of the explanation why it also has the highest crime rates often with extreme violence. This is part of the apartheid legacy of forced removals which led to a formation of urban youth gangs known as *tsotsi* (Hurst, 2009). *Tsotsi* dwelt in South African early townships such as Sophia Town and Alexander in Johannesburg; and later in Soweto during the heydays of the apartheid (Hurst, 2009: 3). With time, the word *tsotsi* became synonymous to urban youth gangs. The famous ones then included the Berliners, the Americans, the Gestapo, and the Vultures.² Though it caught the attention of researchers a bit later, women have always been part of these gangs, sometimes as members of the gangs themselves or through their intimate partnerships with members of the gangs.

Research by Glaser (1990) on *tsotsi* in Witwatersrand (South Africa) which he conducted between 1935 and 1960, indicates that girls were part of the male gangs even though they were rarely referred to as *tsotsi*. This is because gender relations were to be strictly maintained by keeping in mind that *tsotsi* was a male name. These “female youths” were often between 13 and 21 years while the male were between 14 and 25 (Glaser, 1990: 7). Women involved with urban youth gangs such as *tsotsi* “tend to be rewards, the trophies for male successes”. In addition, they provided sexual and domestic services to men. Most interestingly, women were viewed as the “symbols of status to be won or lost in a male-exclusive sphere such as fighting” (Glaser, 1990: 164). From as early as the 1940s, gangs such as the Berliners were known to have a “women league”. The latter were known for their remarkable organisation. They trained alongside men to fight and even were also tattooed with the swastika, the well-known gang tattoo (Glaser, 1990; Vette, 2000). Other researchers as well go beyond viewing female gangsters as passive actors or simple helpers. Cureton, for example, argues that though female gangsters were “more likely to be auxiliaries in nature”, others were “independent or auxiliary female gangsters were just as deviant, criminal, and violent, often being drivers, weapon carriers, set-up girls, and assassins” (2009). He even took it too far by comparing female gangsters to women in liberation movement struggle such as the civil right and Black power movements (Cureton, 2009).

Gangs are still a disturbing reality in the post-apartheid South African, mostly in black and coloured townships such as Gugulethu and Manenberg. The members are of all ages, from youth teens to much older men and women. The most outstanding in Cape Town include the Vura, the Numbers (27s, 28s, and 26s) and the Vatos Locos (Steinberg, 2005; Pinock 2016). Some gangs, however, are subject to race and space –a well-known legacy of apartheid. Thus, gangs such as the Sexy boys, the Mongrels, the

Firm, who are known for their extreme defence of their territories and getting rid of any competition in their drug and other dealings operate in predominantly Coloured areas.³ All these gang groups work with women as their “babes” or the female members of the gangs⁴, or their lovers or partners whom they are romantically involved with and who, occasionally (or among other things) avail themselves to them in gang-related activities. Others are not gangsters but they are lovers and “baby mamas” who are not necessarily involved in their gangs heists, at least not openly. These women are the ones this research pays attention to and the dynamics of their “love businesses” with male gangsters.

By focusing on these women and how they handle their gangster men, this research zooms on how women “make it work” for themselves when romantically involved with male gangsters. In other words, this paper adds to the debate on the agency that women involved in gangsterism or with gangsterism have and which has occasionally been used to back “their lack of involvement in certain gang activities as a choice” (Sutton, 2017: 146). Research conversations and discussions on this topic has shown that even non-gangster women not only have choice in their love relations with dangerous men such as gang members, but that they can take control of them to the extent of subjugating their gangster partners to comply with all their requests by applying techniques that occasionally lead to a total control of their “tough” men. Arguments made in this paper also align with the work of Barber (2008) on domestic violence in which men are the victims and women the perpetrators. This is because it is common to hear male gangsters bragging about their capacity to kill or rape such as the one who told a researcher the following while asked if he has ever raped a woman: “We all rape girls if needs be. If our enemies have sisters or siblings, we target them; we use them as weapons against our enemy. I have raped three girls already...”.⁵ But gang veterans interacted with in this research confirms that gangsters would take pleasure lying about how dangerous they are while “we know, not all gangsters have been involved in fight, or killing, or rape. Some are sober and hate violence. Violence is not all to a gangster’s identity.”⁶ An elder woman who has been a lover of a gangster also added:

...remember, many men joined gangs just so they can be cool and loved by women...they either want to impress women or to commit crimes to have material goods to help them be the man that women like all the time, the man who provides financially...So you can imagine that even when such a man has already won that woman, he will want to keep doing all he can, including crimes and to keep her happy, to spoil her so she does not leave him...He will keep her happy for love and if not for love, for his self-esteem, he does not want other gang members or enemy gangs laugh at him for not being able to

dress up his woman or for another man taking his woman because he could give her more money and other goods...⁷

These and other similar views motivate this research to explore more into how gangsters as well as these women themselves perceive their position of power in these intimate relationships and which in one way or another make the gangster the victim.

The next section discusses gangsters and romance in township before exploring some reasons why “girlfriends” chose these “dangerous” men over “ordinary” men. Finally, the influence of the community leaders and elder women’s mentorship to “girls” in relation to being intimately linked to gangsters by discussing the contradicting and yet complementary advice on why women should stay away from gangsters or how to benefit the most from being a gangster’s lover. The conclusion holds the argument that in South Africa, there is a need for a profound study on the romantic relationship gangsters engage in with women, a study that moves beyond the victimhood of the female partner of a gang male. In other words, a qualitative approach on the gender-based violence in gangsterism that pays more attention to the agency of women involved with gangs, one that explores the cases in which the male gangster is “bullied”, victimised by his gangster or no-gangster “woman”.

Youth Gangsters and Romantic Relationships: Beyond Gender-Based Violence

As research by Firmin (2013) indicates, youth openly talk about their love life. Another research conducted on “materiality of love” among youth in Durban, argued that “love is produced by particular sets of economic and social circumstances through which gender inequalities are reproduced, and should be taken more seriously in working with young people to address gendered social environments and HIV risk” (Bahna and Pattman, 2011). It is even more interesting to learn about love in gangstersim. In Gugulethu, youth gangsters were open about their love relations and what it means to them. They believe having a “babe” adds to their manhood as they spoke out about the ways in which being a gangster identity makes them “more men” in streets and schools. And just like being a gangster is challenged by almost everyone in their community, schools, work places (for those who have jobs), their love life goes through the same. Parents and community leaders discourage their daughters to befriend or date gangsters. In schools, teachers scrutinise them, and warn “girls” against hanging with “dangerous boys” by reminding them of risks such as “...he could rape you, rob you, drug you, ...”, said a former Italian gang member.⁸ The emphasis on physical abuse gangsters inflict on (their) women has been very discouraging for male gangsters who wish to engage in serious love relation especially with a non-gangster woman. Women also restrain mostly because of the discourses on ways in which women involved with gangsters are victimised (Sutton, 2016: 147).

Conversations with community leaders of Gugulethu who are involved in fighting youth gangsterism have made it clear that though “there is nothing good that comes from a gangster’s romantic relationship with a woman”, it remains a challenge to convince “young women of schooling age to stay away from these boys”.⁹ But for a former gangster, people know “the bad” that can come from dating a gangster but no one considers the challenges a gangster can face in finding “true” love. In fact, this research found that gangsters themselves are vulnerable when it comes to women. Those interviewed mentioned the high risk of rejection compared to non-gangster men because everyone in their community knows the consequences of “associating with delinquent friends” (O’Neil, Decker, Mouler Jr and Pyrooz, 2016: 45). A gangster, therefore, may use his identity, power, violence, and networks to get what they want but when it comes to “true love”, that is not very much of help.

Rejection

A former gangster confirms that the majority of women do not stand them. Many fear them or found them “useless” and “infamous”, they are ashamed to even being greeted by a man known to be part of a gang. And while many people assume that gangsters are feared, a young woman from Gugulethu explained how she slapped a *vatos locos* gang member as he was making love proposal to her on her way back from school. A former Italian gang member also confirmed that he had been humiliated in front of his gang brothers more than once for approaching a “beautiful and good girl”. Such stories reveal that gangsters are treated like any other man when making love proposals. This means a gangster can expect any reaction/ response, but often he gets the harshest compared to a non-gang man.

The question then becomes: what do gangsters do to get women they want to be with? The answer to this question also tackles the issues related to the “kind” of women who get in romantic relationships with youth gangsters. This was largely debated in a focus group discussion attended by young gangsters, former gangsters, and women who have been romantically involved with gangsters. A distinction was made between “real women” and “babes”, the former being women who are not part of gangs, have never associated with gangs, and are viewed as responsible, “serious” women but who have fallen in love with gangsters. The “babes” are described as “bad girls”, female members of the gangs, work for them, are part of the “women’s league” of gang groups, in other words, they are themselves gangsters and occasionally attending to gang brothers’ sexual needs. These are easy to “date”, said the former Italian gang member, but they are not often what they want. However, the challenges associated with a gangster finding real love lays in the fact that they are often rejected by “real women”. A man who has been in jail for eight years and who has been member of the “27s” explained why he is 52 years old and “never married”:

...I fell in love with her when I was only 21 years old. She was in school. Her mother and my mother attended the same church. She was always next to her mother in the church. I followed her one day as she was from school. I told her I would like us to be friends. She stopped as if she was listening, then she slapped me in front of the 'boys'¹⁰ and that was all. I decided to try again. I wrote a love letter to her. She saw me, I thought she wanted to say something nice about my romantic letter, but it was 'stay away from me...you thug!' I decided to keep trying. Months went on, years went on...She went to university. I was still in the gang after finishing high school. I still try my chances and get humiliated. All my 'brothers' knew and my enemies knew how she was humiliating me for years. Her mother came to us once, and in front of my mother she told me: 'you must stop harassing my daughter...you must stick to the street women, she is not your type and you must have known that after all these years'. And so I was with women, made children with different girlfriends, but she remained the love of my life. So I decided I will never marry. But I was ready to marry her, to leave the gang if she had asked me to. I even went to church every Sunday and sat where she could see me but she despised me...at least she greets me now but she is married with children. I am now with GAC.¹¹ May be that is why she now smiles at me...But she remains the reason why I did not find love...

The above suggests that a gangster in love can face brutal rejections from "good" women. It also shows that not all gangsters use violence to make women accept them for two major reasons. The first is that love is not easy to get for a gangster today. But elders in the group insisted that time and the current socio-political conditions of the country have greatly shaped the ways in which gangsters are viewed by women nowadays. Decades back, gangsters were not so much despised by women. A Gugulethu community leader and military veteran reveals that nowadays, gangsters are not respected by their communities especially in black South African townships because "they are just criminals", unlike in the apartheid times when they were "heroes who protected their communities against aggression and other abuses by people working for the apartheid".¹² Scholars such as Jakki and Aucoin confirm that during apartheid time, "the police and criminal justice system were primarily used to oppress black South Africans rather than address crime" because of this, the community had their trust in their vigilante –a system from "gang related violence has its roots in this complicated local expressions of territorial control" (2016: 10). In townships such as Sophia town and Alexandra in Johannesburg, gangsters such as The Americans "were known by many as the 'African Robin Hoods' because they robbed goods from the rich white men and sold them in their locations at very low prices."¹³ Those were men who attracted responsible women because their gangsterism was also viewed as bravery. These were among the gangsters whose violence were

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“reoriented towards a noble cause”, explained a former freedom fighter, during the 1970s and 1980s when they joined the MK (the army wing of the African National Congress- ANC) and other youth known for violently sabotaging the apartheid regime (Grunebaum-Ralph, 2001). Today, gangsters prey on their own communities and this is not attractive to any one, definitely, not those they describe as “responsible” women.

The second reason raised in the discussion concerned the challenges gangsters face in finding love is the dangers gangsters risk in their love life. Researchers know the socio-economic conditions leading to some women associating romantically with gangsters (Sutton, 2016; Bahna and Pattman, 2011). There is certainly a reproduction of women’s victimhood in most of these relationships. Perhaps it comes from the ways in which these women portray themselves to the social workers and other agencies that pay attention to their stories and which work to improve their socio-economic conditions. Here is an illustration from Centre for Social Justice: “listening to girls’ stories. We have heard, amongst other things, about the toll gang life is taking on their education, and their families, friends and communities; the horror of sexual exploitation; and of an increase in criminal activity”.

Such statement does not take into consideration the fact that male gangsters can also endanger their lives through the kind of woman they get romantically involved with. This is because after the “good girls” refuse to hang with gangsters, mainly youths, they are only left with those who are as dangerous as they are or who are after something such as protection, financial support, or an opportunity to enter gangsterism. It is true that often men will physically dominate the women, but there are also cases in which the man feels extremely used and abused by their female lovers. If their needs are not attended to, they would turn to their enemies and work together to “bring the man down”, said the former Italian gang member.¹⁴ Hence, the relationship of a gangster is not merely something the man controls and dominates. These relations therefore are marked by deceptions and abuse from both sides. But this paper chooses to pose on the male gangster’s victimhood in these relationships, in other words, the “deceptions” and “dangers” their romantic relationships expose them to. This is because former gangsters interacted with also insisted that being with “these” women is just like other obligations related to their gangster identity, something they must do or have as gangsters.

“They use us, spy on us, and control us”: women with gangsters above agency

According to Kelly (2015: 83), women who date gangsters also seem to not mind the fact that they have multiple partners, “another woman they are dating.” In South African black townships such as Gugulethu, gangs do the same with women. It is just that a little is stressed as to why these women seem to not mind “polygamy” in their romantic relations with gangsters. Love and status alone cannot explain why they stay

despite all. Scholars such as Fleisher who researched on “women’s gangs as social capital” (Fleisher, 2001: 16) found a lot that can speak more to the agency of gangsters’ lovers than their victimhood. For the case of Gugulethu, this research found that in some cases, women go after gangsters to “ask them out”. This implies that these women took time to plan and calculate in advance not just how dating a gangster can benefit them but also how to make it work to their advantage. This research found that indeed many women—some out of poverty, others because they want financial autonomy—have made it their ambition to find away to the gangsters either by joining one as members, or by intimately befriending one to get access to their economic networks which among other things involve drug dealings, prostitution, and many other crime businesses and which can lead to accumulation of wealthy and occasionally, to one expanding her networks of powerful and relatively wealthy men.

Discussed deeply in this regards was the gangsters’ “baby mamas” –women who have children with gangsters (Kelly 2015). What people often see and judge is the fact that gangsters make babies and abandon them. Likewise, they have different children with different women who are raised by their mother’s family. Examples of teenagers being impregnated by youth gangsters and even much older ones were given. Two interesting points were raised in this regards: the first is parents seeming powerless towards opening cases against the grown up men impregnating their daughters; the second is that in case both the man and the woman are below 18 years old, their families would engage in fights because each want to be the one to raise the child. At this point, it became clear that there is more to having a child with a gangster. Perhaps these pregnancies are not mere accidents as one would assume, nor emerging out of love between two young people. This became obvious as cases of parents of the young parents engaging in fight over raising the child despite their poverty.

The fact that abortion is legal in South Africa, and contraception can be accessed for free from any state’s healthcare; and given that there are many costs challenges associated with raising a child for poor families, one wonders why parents seem to not want to do anything to help their children not to have children both at early ages and with gangsters whom they portray as irresponsible and unfit fathers. Gugulethu community leaders interacted with had a straight answer: “because they benefit from the social grants of the children, it is that money they want. The more children from a minor from a low or no income home, the more money they get from the tax payers”.¹⁵ According to Jakkie and Aucoin (2016), in 2015 the number of South African receiving social grants has raised to 16.9 million while two decades ago (1994), only 4 million benefitted from these grants. These scholars argue that “such grants have alleviated deep-seated poverty” in a post-apartheid South Africa haunted by unemployment (Jakkie and Aucoin, 2016: 9-10). In this research, participants mentioned that a parent has to prove that the grandparents can prove that the baby’s

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parents are young and irresponsible and unable to financially take care of his child, they can qualify to be the ones to collect the child's grant. And so, while many would associate these young (and sometimes mature) women falling pregnant from sleeping with irresponsible criminals such as gangsters with risk behaviour and sexual irresponsibility, this situation, however, is complex.

Therefore blaming everything on the gangster's obsession for "masculinity" and rape, does not totally cover all the possibilities under which the baby came or even why some gangsters, especially when they are not wealthy, have children they do not know about. For example, the former Italian gang member talked about women tricking gangsters into unprotected sex especially when they are "high" (on substance such as alcohol, weeds, and other drugs). Some women would lie about being on contraceptives, others will say they have never menstruated or they are in "safe period". Other women will sleep with other men, often much older ones but when asked about the man responsible for their pregnancy, they would pick on a young gangster to protect whoever made them pregnant. Hence, babies are among those things male gangsters barely have control over but which women have ways of getting whenever they want either to benefit from the social grants or from the child fare that the gangster father will be paying, or both.

Protecting, providing, and re-conquering every day

A gangster is also known to attract women because they believe he can provide protection, material goods, and romance. Men are said to do all these to keep their women happy, obedient and envied by other men. For former gangs, this is neither easy task nor something they enjoy all the time. Those interacted with spoke of protecting a woman for gangster as a very demanding and risky task. The protection is not just against the gang enemy members, but also the enemies of the woman who can be her exes or other she may have generated through her own gang-related activities such as snitching, gossiping, stealing, or women of other men he had slept with. Often a gangster will engage in a fight to protect her lover even when he is not aware of the reasons she is being attacked. A man belonging to the Vatos Locas gang was "almost shot" to protect one of her "babes" just to find out the man has been wanting him dead "so he can have my girl all for himself", he said. This means she has been seeing another man belonging to an enemy gang behind his back. "The brothers decided she is no longer one of us, she must now stay with the Vuras (the name of the gang) and keep out of our territory". Surprisingly, they did not do any physical harm to the woman.

Another equally challenging task is to provide for the girlfriend as "love" in this case is often "inseparable from the idealisation of men who provide" (Bhana and Pattman, 2011). Fancy outfits, often distinguished brands (adidas, nike, gold chains, quality

weaves, perfumes), food, drinks, and feeding her addictions (alcohol/ liquor, cigarettes, drugs, etc), phones, airtime, and data are often among the many things a gangster do to keep his woman happy. In case she is in trouble with the law, he must “work hard” to get a lawyer and bail money. Most of these are obtained through gang-related means such as mugging, shoplifting, armed robbery, and fraud. This happens to be among the reasons why many youth fail to quit their criminal activities even when they wish to. Being a man enough who also consists of materially spoiling one’s woman often put the gangster’s life in danger. It can be dangerous of being arrested or killed by a mob justice or more criminal records which largely impact on one’s chance of getting a proper and decent job one day. Beside, women are not as exposed to danger of being arrested as men are despite that at time; they are involved in same kind of crimes (Sutton, 2016). It is true that some women were arrested for being caught up in “gang missions” ordered by their boyfriends, especially those who occupy a leadership position within the gang. But male gangs think that people are carelessly with the fact that material demands of their girlfriends are often the reason why they are behind bar. The former Italian gang lamented:

...at the end of the day, these women are the ones we work for. We barely remember our mothers and family when we hit ‘the jackpot’. When she knows you have money, she will make demands such as new jewellerys, a new cell phone, new weaves...and she will remind you how looking nice for her is good for you and the entire gang, almost as if she was blackmailing you...she will trick you into parting with that money, you will end up forgetting that your baby needs nappies, your family needs grocery, or your young brother needs stationary...when the money is finished and you are sober, you now think of the real problems that money could have solved...that is when you want to/ hit her and then people would say a gangster abuses a woman. But these women abuse us more...¹⁶

This information was confirmed from a “bad girl”, not a gang herself but involved romantically with them:

People think we are naïve or stupid because we hang with gangsters. But we live from it, they take care of us. For me, they are better than ‘sugar daddies’, they give you things and protection. They take care of you, they would do anything for you, they are real men...and they are not secretive about the relationship even when they have other ‘babes’. A woman just needs to know how to play her game to get what she wants. ¹⁷

In a research conducted by Moore and Hagedorn (2001: 3), male gangs’ responses confirmed that their female gang members are respected and treated like family. The

scholars also emphasise the ways in which female gang members are distinguished from the “girlfriends”. Quoting Valdez and Cepeda (1998), Moore and Hagedorn explained that “‘hoodrats’—females involved in ‘frequent partying, drug using, participation in illegal activities and multiple sexual encounters’—are not deemed worthy of respect” in gangsterism (Moore and Hagedorn, 2001, pp. 3-4). In Gugulethu, the same applies with regards to how gangsters judge different women they associate with. However, this research found that “motivations” behind these female joining the gangs or becoming romantically involved with them are still largely understudied at least for the case of Gugulethu. Part of the reason includes that most of research on gender and gangsterism in South Africa is largely informed by media and the social workers. According to Moore and Hagedorn, these two sources are sensationalist and tend to put more focus on gangs’ “personal problems”, respectively (2002: 2). However, female gang members might be less materially exploiting of their gang brothers even when they are romantically involved. But non-gangster lovers are not to be underestimated or to be limited to the description of victim or sexual objects of their gangster boyfriends. Although that still exists in South Africa, men interacted with in this research that also included former gangsters and community leaders; think that the world “gold diggers” is what should be used “to describe women who are the major reason why gangsters will be gangsters”. Fortunately the community is using elder women to educate female youth in township regarding relationships with gangsters. The advice they receive, however, is very complex and often problematic.

Staying away from a gangster or maximizing from being with him? Elder women and ex-gangsters’ “women” advise young women on getting romantically involved with a gangster

Conversations with community leaders and social workers ensured that in Gugulethu, the community is very involved in educating youths against crime and to raising awareness against gender based violence from early age, especially among teenagers. Encouraging boys to keep away from networks of violence is part of their struggle. And while schools are viewed as their only way out of the poverty, the same space is where they learn about the “coolness” of being a gangster. Parents interacted with showed their worries regarding schools being the major space where their children get introduced to delinquency including experimenting in drugs, sex, alcohol, and even violence. A middle-aged man parent and business man explained:

...my son started hanging with those boys just because he wanted to be cool. I understand why other kids are gangsters, I understand the financial difficulties they have, their families cannot provide for them and so they have to steal and other crimes to survive. But my son had it all. I have a big house, he dresses well, he eats well, I have a big house with running water and electricity, I drop him at school and fetch him myself. During holidays, he works for me for his

money and I pay him fairly. But his school principal one day summoned me to inform me that my boy is in this gang group. I could not believe it. When I confronted my good son, he did not deny it. He explained that he had to join the Vatos (the gang name) because at school, other boys, especially girls, did not find him cool that was the reason he gave me...¹⁸

Indeed “reasons for any juvenile joining a gang are complex personal” (Moore and Hegedorn, 2001: 2). This is why both relatively rich and poor parents are concerned for their teens and adolescent and are highly committed to educating their youth about the consequences of being a gang which mainly include endangering one’s life, arrests and criminal records, substance abuses, and high risks of aids and HIV from multiple sex partners (Walsh and Mitchell, 2006). Youths including those already in gangs are told about the dangers of prison in case of arrest as well as the long lasting effects of a criminal record on one’s socioeconomic mobility. But the community can also be dangerous to gangsters in case it gets fed up with their crimes involving robberies, drug dealings, and murders. Community in townships such as Gugulethu and Nyanga are known to take justice in their own hands. This, according to Munaghan (2008: 85), is rooted in “the legacy of political resistance, often violent, deployed to make the townships ungovernable during apartheid, has created a culture tolerant of citizens taking the law into their own hands”. Rapists are among those doing mob justice in township. And given that gangsters are often prejudiced as rapists, elders and community leaders, mostly women, are involved in educating young women not just on rape as one of the many forms of violence they can be subjected to if involved with gangsters, but also the risk of being jailed, dropping school, getting pregnant, catching aids and HIV, and being stuck in poverty.

Elder women involved in educating female youth on intimate relations with gangsters, however, differ in their opinions on what being a gangster’s girlfriend can bring to a woman’s life. Not all emphasise the violent side of it. Some elders, mostly those who have been romantically involved with gangsters in their past or youth (and some who are still) and those who were part of the gangsters themselves –are believed to be a bit positive about the gangsters in the sense that “not all are bad to women... not all are abusive ...some are really kind to women and very sweet and romantic...”, explained a business woman from Gugulethu who have been in relationship with a gangster with whom she had her two sons. “Both our children are married. Their father took care of them; he paid their studies in a good school, then he put them at Boland College for three years. One of my sons works at Sanlam; the other has his own security company. It was their father who gave them that chance through paying for their education”.¹⁹ This positive view on gangsters and women was also supported by three *shebeen* (a place where beer and food is sold) and club owners –the favourite dwelling places for gangsters and their women. These often business women with positive views on how

gangsters treat women would want to encourage young women to get involved with gangsters because these activities boost their businesses and they know that these young women dream to be like them one day, owning their own businesses, and socio-economic independence. Hence, they talk to these women by emphasising the materialistic side of being a gangster's lover.

Among other things, young women are told that "gangsters are men like any other man", which is explained in words such as "any 'tricks' that works on an 'ordinary' man can also work on a gangster," said an ex of a gangster. Some women agreed with this by also mentioning that abuse from a man happens all the time, even from non-gangster men. The point they were conveying is that one has to first find what makes a man violent toward her woman "because everyone wants to talk about women being beaten up, shot at, morally and psychologically abused by their men, but you people (the researchers and social workers) are not interested in knowing what the woman did to deserve that and when you know, you do not want to talk about it or to address it in your counselling...no woman gets beaten by a man for doing nothing..."²⁰ The interesting fact about that statement is that it comes from a woman and it is addressed to those defending women against men's abuse. Not only it defends male gangsters' violence toward woman but it also refuses to isolate it in relation to other abuses committed by non-gangster men towards women in marriage, affairs, or other forms of intimate partnerships. Such statement also suggests that gangster's violence can be contained and avoided since it only happens if something triggers it, something the woman did. It does however underestimate the violence that can be triggered by substance abuse (Schroeder et al., 2007; see also Abrahams et al., 2006; Loeber et al., 2005). But these ideas also imply that woman's behaviour towards his male gangster partner can impact positively or negatively on the ways he treats her. Hence elder women who have time to chat with girls involved with youth gangsters can guide them on how to keep their men in good mood, even how to keep them "gentlemen". But this remains problematic for researchers and professionals working in the field of gender violence as one feeling responsible for the ways in which he or she (mostly she) is abused in relationship has been discussed among the factors leading to many restraining from reporting or freeing themselves from being abused (Landenburger, 1989; Carlson, 1997).

Others advised on how to make a "bad boy" "submissive". This advice is quite revolutionary as it consisted of training these women in milking the gangster by preying on his weaknesses which include substance abuse, violent behaviour, criminal activities such as dealings in illegal goods such as drugs and weapons, and those dangerous fights they often engage in with enemy gangs. Among other things, girlfriends are encouraged to provoke the dangerous boyfriend, often drunk or "high", get him to fight and use that when he is sober by threatening to report it to the police

“unless you give me this or do that for me...” explained the former gangster’s woman. A former gangster supported this claim by mentioning the problems with how most rape cases are reported and investigated. Himself, he was once a victim of it and nearly got arrested but the woman’s family withdrew the case after “I paid the money they were asking,” he said. One of his girlfriends he has been seeing for two years reported him to the police that he raped her. He explained:

I was surprised and shocked because I have been sleeping with that girl since the first day I met her in the club. She was 19 years old when I met her. Her own father has been a gangster. All women in her family date dangerous men...when I saw police at my door saying they are arresting me for raping ‘X’, I was not surprised because her mother and herself have warned me that they will send me behind bars should I not give them half of the money I got from selling ‘a certain’ (a stolen) car. They wanted a R5000, the half of all the money to help her mother buy a new car. And I needed all that money to finish building my grandmother’s house in Eastern Cape...So it was the mother who told the police I had raped her child a day before. But I have been sleeping with that woman in her mother’s house all the time, I would bring in beers, cigarettes and groceries and would spend weekend there with her entire family, including her parents. They let us share her room...this is to tell you that they all knew I was sleeping with her...but yet they decided it was time to create rape so to intimidate me...So given that I was on parole, I did not want to risk another such accusation, I decided to pay them. The next morning I heard the case was dropped that ‘it was a misunderstanding’, that is what her mother explained to the social workers and the police.²¹

This statement was complimented by other participants who told stories of women drugging their gangster men to make them aggressive or distract them so they can steal whatever they wanted in the house. Other women, after they have accumulated wealth from their gangster boyfriends, they would “sell them out” to their enemy gangs. This can lead to violent confrontations with serious assaults or deaths which lead to imprisonment or attacks by mob justice which often leads to severe assaults or death without questioning the reason behind what the person did. And if there is what these women know and understand better, it is the fact that gangsters always take maximum, often unfair sentence for their crimes. So their malicious girlfriends can manipulate that when it suits them.

Finally, the richest gangsters are often the most troubled with women. Former gangsters interacted with on this subject have confirmed that often gangsters go after “bad girls” with the motive that they could be useful in “gang missions”, and also that they will understand their behaviour, and that they will be less troubled by these

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women's families as there is a great possibility that they would not care about them hanging with "bad boys". Prostitutes, substance addicts, and "other women from fucked up families" as the former Italian gang member put it²² to mean poor and broken families—are the kind of women gangsters like to pick on to "save and use" ... But sometimes, "these women are the ones picking us by making themselves available for us to ask them out", he added.

Also, the stereotype that a gangster is predisposed to have multiple girlfriends was challenged by citing the fact that these women are the ones sleeping around with different men and could be the ones exposing their gangster men to sexually transmitted diseases and "unplanned babies". Some men participants also mentioned that at time, women physically abuse their gangster boyfriends to make them comply with their requests. Out of all the four women attending the discussion on this topic, two agreed to this. Of the four men, three agreed that indeed some women can physically take on their gangster boyfriends. As I myself showed doubt on this, the former 27s gang member asked to all of us: "do you know what happens when a man calls the police that his wife is beating him?" All the men agreed: "they will not come, the police do not take that seriously...or they do not kill if a woman kills her man." They all claim to have known a few men who have experienced such abuse from their female partners. Another man added: "But police will come running faster for a woman calling to say her husband is trying to rape her...just because she is not in the mood for sex and the husband is insisting..." Another man added: "why do you think gangsters kill their women by shooting them? May be they are not all strong enough to use their hands as the woman could win that kind of fight". This still implies that gender violence in South Africa remains widely believed to be a man to woman violence, not the other way around. Hence, elder women can teach the younger ones involved romantically with gangsters how to make either the love works or to manipulate the gangsterism to benefit them. But this depends on what she wants from the relationship with a gangster.

This also shows that it is challenging for young girls to stay away from "bad boys" or to not join the women's league of their gangster lovers when they see other women making the best out of it, especially those from poor families and those with other issues discussed above. And if their families are themselves pro-gangsterists, and if they choose to learn from the gangsters' girlfriend veterans, it is hard to follow the advice of the anti-gang parents and community leaders working against gangs who also include the Gugulethu's GAC (Gangsters against gangsters).²³

Conclusion

A research into romantic relationships between male gangsters and woman in Gugulethu has shed more light into gangsterism, masculinity and gender-based

violence. This paper focused on why women –both gangsters but mostly non-gangsters –engage in love romance with gangsters despite the well-known facts that abuses and a “bad-girl” reputation are what they lead to. Looking at Gugulethu Township, it is certain that the space is still haunted by poverty and many other challenges in achieving a positive socio-economic mobility. Thus, gang-related activities and how they were viewed back then as needed to set order and reduce the economic chaos in the township –has changed. Today gangs are perceived as a mere nuisance. Hence, the popularity they once enjoyed as “heroes” in the apartheid time is no longer the case. Their crimes in South Africa, among many others, involved gender-based violence they often inflict on women they get romantically involved with. Rather than repeating the major arguments of researchers who constantly reproduce vulnerability of these women, however, this research focused on the rare cases in which gangsters are the ones mercilessly exploited, manipulated, and abused by their girlfriends and other female associates. Its argument, therefore, goes beyond what male gangsters get through these relationships to feed their masculine and gangsters’ egos by paying attention to the agency of these women and ways in which they set and reset the ego of these men to serve their own.

This research found that dating gangsters for these women goes beyond being simple sex objects and hence being used for their dirty works, carrying their weapons, luring their enemies, spying, and other well-known tasks a gangster’s woman is prejudicially associated with. Reproducing that, however, leads to continuing underestimating the power of women in gangsterism. In other words, it does not so much help in unpacking the dynamics behind the agency of the “gangsters’ women” especially those whom scholars have described as premeditated entering these relationships in order to access socioeconomic capital related to gangsterism. The paper therefore argues that in many cases, relationships between “bad boys” and “(bad) girls” can also be based on mutual and fair exchanges. They can also be an unfair trade and highly exploitative, in which the notorious gangster is the victim or the “loser”. However, this is not to argue against women being the most affected by gender-based violence as previous research works and statistics keep confirming. What this paper generally stresses is more research into gender-based violence that looks at men’s abuse by women. On the case of youth gangsters, this research recommends for a deeper investigation into the roles of the “girlfriends” in men not just continuously joining gangsterism and the kind of crimes they commit, but also the challenges in quitting gangsterism.

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Notes

1. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/place/gugulethu-township>, accessed on 13.2. 2018.
2. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/gangsterism>, accessed on 13. 2. 2018.
3. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-05-26-the-capes-youth-gangs-bigger-deeper-more-dangerous/#.WolyCXyxWM8>, accessed on 13.2. 2018.
4. <https://www.ranker.com/list/worst-gangs-in-south-africa/harrison-tenpas>, accessed on 13.2. 2015.
5. https://www.groundup.org.za/article/rise-female-township-gangs_2258/, accessed on 13.2. 2018.
6. Quoted in https://www.groundup.org.za/article/young-high-and-dangerous-youth-gangs-and-violence-khavelitsha_1823/.
7. Interview with a former gangster, 8.2. 2018.
8. Interview with unnamed, a former gangster's girlfriend, 9.2. 2018.
9. Interview with a former Italian gang member, 9.2. 2018.
10. Interview with unnamed, 6.2. 2018.
11. His fellow gangsters
12. Gang Against Crime, a group of former gangsters who have served jail and who are mediators between different enemy gangs . See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPT238dz0fY>, accessed on 8.2. 2018.
13. Interview with unnamed, Gugulethu community leader and former freedom fighter, 6.2. 2016.
14. Gangsterism in Sophiatown, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/gangsterism>, accessed on 9.2. 2018.
15. Interview with the former Italian gang member, 9.2. 2018.
16. Interview with unnamed, Gugulethu community leader and former freedom fighter, 6.2. 2016.
17. Interview, 6.2. 2018.
18. Interview with unnamed, a woman involved in love affairs with gangster, 9.2. 2018.
19. Interview with unnamed, 8.2. 2018.
20. Interview with unnamed, a former gangster's lover, 10.2. 2018.
21. Interview with unnamed, 8.2. 2018.
22. Interview, 9.2. 2018.
23. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPT238dz0fY>, 14.2. 2018.

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