

Tradition or oppression? the role of cultural norms in sexual violence against Queer communities

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of cultural norms on sexual violence against queer individuals, focusing on African societies where traditional practices, heteronormativity, and patriarchy converge to marginalize non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. Drawing on intersectionality and queer affirmative theory, the research examines how cultural values shape perceptions of acceptable sexual behavior and reinforce systemic exclusion and violence. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, analyzing twenty peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2023 through thematic and descriptive analysis. Findings reveal that cultural practices such as initiation rites and rigid gender roles often exclude queer individuals, exposing them to psychological, physical, and emotional harm. Colonial legacies, religious ideologies, and a lack of inclusive policies further intensify the erasure of queer identities. The research underscores the critical need to challenge oppressive norms while respecting cultural identity, highlighting the role of social work in fostering inclusive, community-based interventions. Education, community engagement, and policy advocacy are essential for reforming traditions that perpetuate gender-based violence. Ultimately, the study calls for a transformation of cultural narratives to embrace diversity, protect human rights, and affirm queer identities in African societies.

Keywords: *African societies, Cultural norms, Intersectionality, Queer identities, Sexual violence.*

1. Introduction and Background

Sexual violence is defined differently by various scholars. It encompasses a range of behaviours and actions involving sexual contact or sexual acts without consent, whether coerced, forced or otherwise non-consensual [1-5]. According to Carradorini [2] it includes various forms of sexual assault, such as rape, sexual battery, and sexual coercion. Anyadike-Danes, et al. [1] argues that sexual violence is a manifestation of patriarchal culture and power dynamics that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. Similarly, Dowds [3] contends that it serves as a tool of oppression used to maintain dominance and control over marginalised groups. Kasa [4] describes sexual violence as a social ill that persists in African countries, causing harm and discrimination, particularly against Queer individuals.

For this study, the term "Queer" refers to individuals who identify as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender, acknowledging the diverse and complex range of sexual and gender identities within this community. Cultural norms often erase, marginalise, and stigmatise Queer identities and experiences, thereby perpetuating a culture of violence and reinforcing the need for radical cultural transformation Williams [6]. Kasa [4] posits that African culture sustains harmful stereotypes against Queer individuals through conservative and patriarchal initiation rites, which symbolise the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, these rites fail to accommodate Queer individuals, leading to their exclusion from societal gatherings and the erasure of their roles in society [4].

For example, a young Queer woman may face pressure to participate in the traditional reed dance ceremony, which emphasises femininity and eligibility for marriage [7]. However, her gender expression and sexuality may not align with these expectations. When she asserts her identity, her

family and community leaders may respond with resistance, using harmful language such as, "You are not a real woman if you do not participate," or "You are bringing shame to our family" [7]. Such reactions reinforce harmful stereotypes, silencing Queer identities and making self-expression difficult [7].

Kasa [4] argues that perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour vary across cultures and historical periods, highlighting the fluid nature of societal norms. However, Williams [6] contends that Queer individuals continue to be subjected to cultural norms that perpetuate violence and marginalisation due to a complex interplay of historical and systemic oppression. Deeply ingrained societal attitudes often shaped by colonial histories and religious influences contribute to the stigmatisation of Queer identities [8]. This ongoing marginalisation necessitates critical engagement with cultural traditions, challenging rigid interpretations that exclude Queer individuals while recognising the evolving nature of cultural practices in contemporary African societies [8]. As such, this study seeks to explore the role of cultural norms in sexual violence against Queer communities by questioning whether it is rooted in tradition or oppression.

Cultural norms such as heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which position straightness and cisgender identity as the default, further marginalise Queer identities and relationships [9]. Victim-blaming attitudes are also prevalent, shifting responsibility from the offender to the victim [10]. Furthermore, patriarchal ideals and toxic masculinity cultivate an aggressive and entitled culture [10]. African culture perpetuates harmful stereotypes against Queer individuals through conservative and patriarchal initiation rites, which symbolise the transition from childhood to adulthood [4].

These rites exclude Queer individuals from societal gatherings and ignore their roles in society [4]. For instance, a young Queer woman may face pressure to participate in traditional ceremonies that emphasise heteronormative values, leading to marginalisation and erasure of Queer identity. Cultural norms perpetuate violence and marginalisation against Queer individuals due to historical and systemic oppression [11]. Societal attitudes shaped by cultural norms marginalise and stigmatise Queer identities [11].

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of cultural norms on sexual violence against Queer individuals. The consequences of sexual violence against Queer individuals are severe and far-reaching and survivors may experience physical and emotional trauma, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder [11-15].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Culture, Cultural Norms and Sexual Violence

Culture is shared and learned through patterns of behaviour, values and symbolic expressions that characterise a group or society [16]. Culture encompasses the customs, traditions, languages and beliefs that define a collective identity and shape individual experiences [16]. According to Causadias [17] culture is dynamic, adaptive and transmitted through generations, influencing how people perceive, think and interact with others.

Culture is not static, it evolves and is influenced by historical, economic, and social factors Giavazzi, et al. [18]. Cislighi and Heise [19] cultural norms refer to shared values, beliefs, and practices accepted within a culture or society and these norms influence individual behaviour, shape social interactions, and define acceptable behaviour. Sexual violence refers to forced, coerced, or non-consensual sexual activity [20]. It can include physical, verbal, or psychological abuse, with severe physical and emotional consequences for survivors [21].

2.2. Relationship Between Cultural Norms and Sexual Violence

The relationship between cultural norms and sexual violence against Queer individuals is a complex and multifaceted issue that exists globally, internationally and locally [22]. On the other hand, cultural norms perpetuate and enable sexual violence against Queer individuals, particularly in societies where heteronormativity and cisnormativity are deeply ingrained [23]. However, some argue that cultural

norms can also provide a framework for understanding and addressing sexual violence against Queer individuals to combat stigma [24].

Globally, the relationship between cultural norms and sexual violence against Queer individuals is shaped by intersecting factors such as colonialism, racism and patriarchy [23]. For example, in some African cultures, male-on-male rape is seen to cure men of their homosexuality, reflecting the intersection of patriarchy and homophobia [23]. However, others argue that this perspective overlooks the resilience of Queer individuals and communities who have fought and challenged these oppressive cultural norms [25].

Internationally, some organisations have recognised the importance of addressing cultural norms and values in preventing sexual violence against Queer individuals [26, 27]. For instance, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals include targets for reducing sexual violence and promoting inclusive societies [27]. On the other hand, Ongsupankul [28] argues that these efforts are often limited by the lack of understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural norms and their relationship to sexual violence against Queer individuals.

In the South African context, the relationship between cultural norms and sexual violence against Queer individuals is shaped by the country's complex history of patriarchy [23]. Despite progressive laws and policies, cultural norms and values continue to perpetuate violence and discrimination against Queer individuals, particularly in rural areas [29]. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between cultural norms and sexual violence against Queer individuals, and sexual violence can have a significant impact on the health and well-being of survivors.

2.3. Gender Roles

Traditionally, cultural norms surrounding men and women have been clearly defined, with men expected to be the providers while women are confined to nurturing, caregiving and domestic duties [30]. Men are seen as leaders and decision-makers. In contrast, women are expected to be submissive, dependent and emotionally expressive with limited roles at home [31]. However, these expectations erase non-binary individuals and Queer relationships. Various scholars believe modern perspectives have challenged these traditional expectations, emphasising equal partnership, shared responsibilities, emotional intelligence and mutual respect [30, 32-35] these perspectives overlook systemic barriers faced by trans women. However, identifying roles and identity changes are causing a shift from harmful stereotypes and biases Gui [32]. Tweedy [36] contends that this shift requires acknowledging Queer individual's historical, emotional labour. Men are increasingly encouraged to express emotions and take on nurturing roles, while women are empowered to pursue careers and assert their independence [35].

2.4. Culture on Queer Individuals

The cultural views on Queer individuals have undergone significant transformations [37]. Traditionally, Queer people face stigmatisation, with many societies viewing homosexuality as a mental illness or disorder Bhugra, et al. [38]; de Wit, et al. [39]; Drescher [40] and Lane [41]. Bhugra, et al. [38] posits that this historical trauma has lasting impacts on Queer mental health, but modern perspectives have moved beyond pathologisation. However, Danckers, et al. [42] contends that this overlooks ongoing invisibility and limited access to healthcare and social services, and the modern cultural perspectives have shifted towards acceptance, inclusivity and diversification. According to Baines, et al. [43] this shift to the Queer movement and legal protection. However, Lane [41] added that this may cause neglect in rural and marginalised communities as they are not well informed about these policies as some are based in rural settlements. Fenaughty [44] suggested that educational awareness campaigns can be crucial in challenging homophobia, transphobia and intersectional discrimination.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by both intersectionality and Queer theories. This was based on the notion that intersectionality examined how multiple forms of oppression intersected and compounded, leading to unique experiences of discrimination and marginalisation for individuals with multiple identities [45]. On the other hand, Queer Affirmative Theory emphasises centring Queer voices and experiences, challenging dominant cultural norms and promoting inclusive attitudes to prevent sexual violence and promote well-being [46]. Both theories were crucial in understanding the impact of cultural norms on sexual violence against Queer individuals, particularly those with multiple identities [47]. They intersected by centring marginalised voices, challenging dominant norms, addressing intersectional oppression and promoting inclusive attitudes [48]. By combining these theories, the study developed a nuanced understanding of how cultural norms contributed to sexual violence against Queer individuals and worked towards creating a more inclusive environment [48].

4. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data. The qualitative approach explored non-numerical data, while the quantitative approach focused on experiments and statistical analysis to assess the extent of occurrences. This combination allowed for the identification of patterns and themes among Queer survivors and the exploration of the relationships between cultural norms and sexual violence, capturing complexities that a single-method approach might have missed.

The study employed both descriptive and explanatory analyses. The quantitative design used descriptive analysis to examine prevalence rates, demographic characteristics, and interventions. In contrast, the qualitative design explored how cultural norms and societal factors contributed to sexual violence, offering more profound insights into Queer individuals' lived experiences.

Data was collected through searches of databases like Scopus, Google Scholar, and Queer journals, with a focus on articles published in English between 2018 and 2023. A systematic random sampling method was used to ensure validity, resulting in 20 articles meeting inclusion criteria. These articles were analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cultural norms on sexual violence against Queer individuals.

The research instrument employed was the PRISMA chart, which helped systematically identify and synthesise the relevant research for this study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis according to the search strategy and eligibility criteria. The search strategy consisted of two stages. First, the study identified systematic reviews of risk factors related to cultural norms among Queer individuals. Second, it searched for potentially overlooked studies, focusing on publications from 2018 to 2023. Searches were conducted through Google Scholar, Scopus, and Queer journals on Scopus. Moreover, the study screened articles, journals, and abstracts, assessing full-text articles for eligibility. Studies on Queer health and well-being, specifically those focusing on risk factors for mental health issues, were also included. The study excluded studies that did not meet the criteria, including those that solely focused on cultural norms without recommendations or policies to combat sexual violence.

5. Discussions

Firstly, the proportion of studies that have reported the sexual and gender identity of their participants is low. This means that queer individuals in some countries are marginalised and voiceless, and even the policies in place for them are not compelling enough to provide a society of safety and freedom. Their existence is often met with shame and stigma, which leads to sexual violence and its perpetuation. Australia, one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, has a significant proportion of its population identifying as queer. However, only a few Australian studies have included queer people, focusing on the interventions by traditional leaders and how they can combat sexual

violence and its perpetuation against them. Most studies have focused on gay men and lesbian women, with an absence of bisexual, transgender, and non-binary individuals.

The lack of adequate reporting and selection when making comparisons based on gender identity is another key finding from our results. Another significant finding is the need to adjust policies and cultural beliefs to ensure that queer individuals are also considered. This should involve looking at demographic variables such as age and sex to analyse which groups are most affected by cultural norms. Rather than focusing solely on the effects of sexual violence, which draws attention to various mental health outcomes, it is important to identify the underlying determinants that can help generate the evidence needed to address the root causes of such violence.

6. Conclusions and Implications for Social Work

The findings of the study affirm that African traditional practices in the Eastern Cape remain deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms that significantly shape the lives of women and girls. These cultural systems, while providing a sense of identity and continuity, often reinforce gender hierarchies and restrict women's autonomy. Within the context of the studied communities, women are expected to conform to established norms of obedience, subservience, and silence, which are perceived as virtuous traits. This normalisation and internalisation of gender inequality perpetuates a cycle where oppression is sustained not only by men but also by women who have absorbed these ideologies over generations.

The research highlights a complex tension between the preservation of culture and the protection of human rights. While traditional leaders and community members often emphasise the importance of upholding cultural values, this insistence frequently comes at the expense of women's freedoms and well-being. The intersection of cultural tradition with socio-economic challenges such as poverty, low levels of education, and geographic isolation further exacerbates the marginalisation of women in rural areas. These layered forms of oppression reduce the capacity of women to challenge harmful practices and assert their rights.

However, the study also reveals spaces of resistance and subtle forms of agency women exercise. Despite the rigid societal expectations, some women are beginning to question and challenge traditional norms. Their acts of defiance, though often muted, signal a gradual shift in consciousness and a desire for change. This resistance underscores the potential for transformation within these communities, provided the proper support mechanisms are in place.

For social work, these findings have significant implications. Social workers within culturally complex contexts must adopt a culturally sensitive yet critically engaged approach. They must respect cultural identities while advocating for all individuals' rights and dignity, particularly women and girls. Social work practice should, therefore, be grounded in cultural competence, enabling practitioners to navigate the delicate balance between tradition and human rights.

Education emerges as a critical tool for empowerment. Through educational interventions that raise awareness about gender equality, legal rights, and social justice, social workers can support individuals and communities in re-evaluating and transforming oppressive norms. Moreover, policy advocacy becomes a crucial dimension of practice, as social workers must influence legislation and public discourse to ensure that cultural practices are aligned with constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Community engagement is essential. Effective change must involve working with traditional leaders, elders, men, and youth to promote gender-equitable values. Such engagements should not seek to erase cultural identity but to reform and reframe practices that uphold human dignity. The incorporation of an intersectional perspective is also necessary, recognising that other social factors, including class, location, and access to resources compound gender oppression.

Furthermore, promoting the active involvement of men and boys in conversations about gender roles and power relations can foster positive masculinity and dismantle the structures that sustain patriarchy. Lastly, there is a pressing need for continued research and scholarly engagement within social work. By documenting lived experiences and producing context-specific knowledge, social

workers can contribute to developing informed and effective practice models that are both culturally appropriate and socially just.

In sum, while tradition can be a source of identity and cohesion, it must not be used to justify oppression. Social work is pivotal in transforming oppressive cultural practices and promoting gender equality through advocacy, empowerment, and inclusive community-based interventions.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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