

'They even excel from the girls'

Vulnerability and opportunity in gay femininity

Do black gays experience widespread rejection in South Africa despite constitutional rights? **Graeme Reid** believes this is not the case and further argues that in their everyday lives, gays use feminine identities to their advantage while also suffering from the vulnerability that women generally experience in society.

Sunday Times Lifestyle journalists reporting on the Miss Gay Disco Queen beauty pageant held in Bonteheuwel remarked that: "No matter that these gorgeous glamour pussies are really local, mostly unemployed, cross-dressing boys. There seems to be a complete acceptance of their femininity, a rejoicing in it even, by their families and by their tough community."

This article tells a story of acceptance, and indeed celebration, of men performing a highly stylised

form of femininity. Gay beauty pageants, similar to the one in Bonteheuwel, have grown in the last ten years. Many of these pageants take place in small towns such as Queenstown in the Eastern Cape or in the townships of Sakhile (Standerton) and Wesselton (Ermelo), Mpumalanga. A feature of these events is that the audiences are from local communities and are, by and large, heterosexual. The organisers of the Mpumalanga pageants see them as part of a broader project of gay emancipation, ushered in by the Bill of Rights in South Africa's Constitution. The pageants serve both as a celebration of identity and as a way of educating the broader public about gay life.

These are public performances of gay identity in which the charge of widespread homophobia, particularly in socially conservative small-town communities, would be incorrect. They stand in sharp contrast to other recent reports of violence and hate crimes directed at gay men and lesbians (perhaps the most shocking was the brutal murder of a 19 year old lesbian, Zoliswa Nkonyana outside her home in Khayelitsha in February).

A survey on public attitudes conducted by the Human Science Research Council in 2006 found, unsurprisingly, that there was a significant difference between the ideals enshrined in the Constitution and the moral values of ordinary citizens. This disparity was



Dumiso in curls outside his hair studio in Wesselton township

particularly apparent in attitudes towards the death penalty, abortion and same-sex relationships - three key 'moral barometers' used to gauge levels of moral discomfort. Recent public hearings on same-sex marriage hosted by the National Council of Traditional Leaders in five provinces saw homosexuality condemned as un-African and un-Christian. Yet given these moral qualms, there is also strong evidence of high levels of acceptance, integration and as the above quote on the Bonteheuwel gay beauty pageant suggests, even celebration of overt and flamboyant forms of gay cultural expression.

A recent investigation into hate crimes by gay and lesbian organisations in Gauteng showed that verbal, physical and sexual abuse are experienced by a significant number of gays and lesbians, although these incidents remain largely underreported.



Nathi, popular stylist at the Professional Hair Salon in Ermelo

Protection against discrimination, guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, has helped to create a climate in which gays and lesbians are more visible in public and, ironically, also more vulnerable to attacks.

In a report summarising the findings of research on homophobic attacks the authors cite the crossing of gender boundaries as a significant factor in hate crimes, particularly when attacks involve rape. This compares with other research on hate crimes and homophobic violence in South Africa. Reid and Dirisuweit show how the subversion of gender norms makes both men and women more vulnerable to violence: "... lesbians who adopt masculine signifiers in dress and manner are actively targeted and punished for this subversion through sexual violence. This violence is intended to 'teach' them what it is to be a woman and thus is a reassertion of masculine power... Men who are effeminate in dress and speech are viewed as women and are relegated to an inferior position... They are de facto women and are not exempt from violence against women."

However, while an openly

feminine identity can make gay men vulnerable to violence, it can also be the basis for social integration. This is shown in my research with black gay men living in townships on the outskirts of small towns in Mpumalanga.

My research shows that local gender norms are indeed fundamental to the ways in which gay identities are expressed and performed in public. And gender norms also provide the framework for acceptable and transgressive forms of gay identity. Yet we cannot understand the use of an overtly feminine identity by gay men simply in terms of imitating heterosexuals, or perpetuating gender stereotypes. Rather gays in my research use femininity in strategic and often highly advantageous ways. Certainly, for gay men a feminine identity can be an invitation to assault and even rape, but it can equally be a source of economic security, social status and sexual allure.

A story drawn from the life experiences of Dumiso and Nathi who are both well-known and highly respected hairstylists from Wesselton township, Ermelo, shows both the vulnerabilities and opportunities that arise from a stylised femininity.

On a Wednesday morning in April 2004 Dumiso arrived at the provincial hospital to visit his friend Nathi who, like him, worked as a hairstylist. Nathi had been walking home alone at night the previous Thursday when he was attacked by a group of young men, stabbed and robbed of his cell phone. He was convalescing in a private ward of the hospital where the staff accommodated him, according to his wishes, in a women's ward. The hospital administrator had understood that the Constitution made provision for gay rights and

Nathi concurred telling me: "It is my rights, as a gay."

Dumiso had just been in court, once again, where he was laying charges of rape, in which one of the accused was his cousin, a young man, still attending high school. The case had been postponed and Dumiso was hoping for a settlement. The pressure was on the two accused. The accused had taken the unusual step of appointing attorneys to represent them, claiming that Dumiso had propositioned one of the accused. "They were too clever, those guys," Nathi told me later.

At the side of the hospital bed, Dumiso explained to Nathi, the nursing staff and the group of women visiting (including Nathi's mother), that he had agreed to drop charges in return for a payment of R1 000 per rapist, amounting to R2 000. This was a conversation in which women could empathise with Dumiso and the traumatic, humiliating and violent attack that he had suffered at the hands of the two young men. The women all expressed sympathy and concern as well as indignation against the rapists.

Later that same day, after Nathi was discharged and I drove him and his mother home from the hospital, together with Dumiso, they told me the full story. Nathi pointed out the place where Dumiso had been abducted and the cemetery where the young men had taken him, sexually assaulted him, and left him naked to find his way home. Dumiso explained that he was willing to drop the charges and accept a cash payment only because one of them was a relative. Other family members were shocked at the violent behaviour of the young man, "I don't know what is happening with that boy," exclaimed a despairing aunt.

Dumiso, like several other gay hairstylists in the region, has minor celebrity status in Wesselton township. He has also experienced incidents of violence and sexual assault. Both his celebrity status and his vulnerability to violence are best understood in terms of an overtly feminine form of self-styling.

Dumiso was one of three youths who had 'come out' while at school in 1994. They declared their sexuality in a daring way by arriving at school in girls' uniforms and wearing make-up. Dumiso, along with his two friends went on to become hairstylists. All of them became well known and popular in the area. Certainly Dumiso's skills as a hairstylist secured him employment at the N.M.B. Hair Saloon which he regards as being a 'family'. His experience is not unique. Gays are regarded as especially skilled hairstylists, able to produce the latest fashion trends and are popular amongst clients and owners alike. In a highly competitive informal industry gays tend to do well.

Gays also tend to flaunt their success in very visible ways, particularly through dress and such items as jewellery and trendy cell phones. Aside from his sexual assault, Dumiso was mugged in the same year, as were hairstylists Augustine and Nathi. All had clothes, money or cellphones stolen.

Were these homophobic attacks? With the exception of the attack on Dumiso, the muggings appeared to be just robberies rather than 'hate crimes'. It seems that the muggers see gays as relatively affluent, helped along by a flamboyant display of the material trappings of success, such as designer label clothing and good quality cell-phones. Gays are seen as easy pickings and vulnerable targets.

Nathi concurred: "It was not because I am gay. They saw me and they know that gays are having money."

In the wake of his traumatic assault Nathi was given particular attention in the women's ward of the hospital. The affectionate and caring attention he received from both male and female staff was clearly apparent.

Dumiso has an easy going rapport with women in his family, social and work environment. One of his aunts had intervened when his father expressed outrage that Dumiso, his son, was gay claiming there must be some mistake because he did not produce 'gays'. His aunts also sympathised with Dumiso after his sexual assault.

The owner of the N.M.B. Hair Saloon had planned her business enterprise around Dumiso recognising that gay stylists tend to draw customers. Dumiso proved popular with the many women clients who used his services. Similarly he had a close relationship with the women at the Apostolic Faith Mission church that he attended from time to time. Nathi also participated actively and regularly in Zionist church activities, leading the choir and wearing the skirt, blouse and headscarf of the women's uniform.

Dumiso and Nathi are at the extreme end of a cultural expression where femininity is synonymous with being gay. In the world of *jolly talk*, a local gay slang, the world is divided into 'ladies' and 'gents'. Ladies are gay, gents are straight. And gents are also potential sexual partners for ladies. Both Nathi and Dumiso regard their boyfriends as heterosexual men and it is the case that their boyfriends tend to be either married or have girlfriends. In this context sexual identity is defined not in terms of sexual

object choice. Rather sexual identity is defined in terms of gender norms – both socially and sexually. In other words the very definition of 'gay' is tied to a feminine gender identity.

A feminine identity is a ticket to social integration, even in quite conservative environments such as church communities. Gays are treated as women, for better or worse. But while gays are accepted as feminine, they occupy an intermediate gender position. They are accepted as women but known to be men. It is this ambiguity that enables gays to become celebrities, excelling in beauty pageants and in traditionally feminine work, such as hairstyling. It is this ambiguity that leads the owner of the N.M.B. Hair Saloon, Nozipho Yende, commenting on the effectiveness of gay hairstylists, to remark that "they even excel from the girls". She also organised a beauty pageant that pitted gays against women in order to determine "who is the most stylish".

Gays can use being effeminate to their strategic advantage as well as being a point of vulnerability and an incitement to violence. The prospect of acceptance, integration and even veneration is not only limited to highly visible public performances, such as beauty pageants. In their day to day lives, gays are able to use feminine identities in highly productive and advantageous ways while simultaneously being subjected to the vulnerabilities that their feminine gender identities subject them.

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Graeme Reid is a research fellow at Wiser. The research is funded by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).