

“Make sure you give a person what is theirs”: An exploration of sexual violence in the intimate relationships of black married women in South Africa

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Few empirical studies have explored how black married women in South Africa interpret and rationalise the ongoing sexual coercion (‘forced sex’) they experience in their intimate relationships. While some studies have examined gender-based violence, particularly in the form of physical abuse or intimate partner violence, no previous work has simply asked black married women how they make sense of coercive sexual experiences and even rape, nor enquired why they continue to tolerate these experiences despite their rights and dignity being guaranteed by the South African Constitution. Additionally, the payment of ilobolo (bride wealth) completes the marriage process in black communities and with this, a new set of expectations regarding sexuality for married women emerge. It is within these new expectations in marriage that this study seeks to explore sexual violence, such as marital rape, and women’s agency.

By analysing qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with black married South African women between the ages of 40 and 62 from rural and township areas, we examine how these women interpret experiences of rape and sexual coercion in their own intimate relationships with their husbands. These discussions illuminated that these black married women saw their bodies, and by extension their sexuality, as belonging to their husbands, especially because ilobolo was paid for them when they got married. A significant finding of this study is that very few women see sexual coercion as a problem that needs to be remedied and this is encouraged by their families. Instead, the black women in this study make sense of sexual violence within marriage in various ways. These include beliefs about womanhood how to behave as a woman in marriage, notions of self-sacrifice for the family’s stability, and for some, outright refusal when they are not interested in sex.

Key words: Gender, marriage, sexual violence, ilobolo, agency