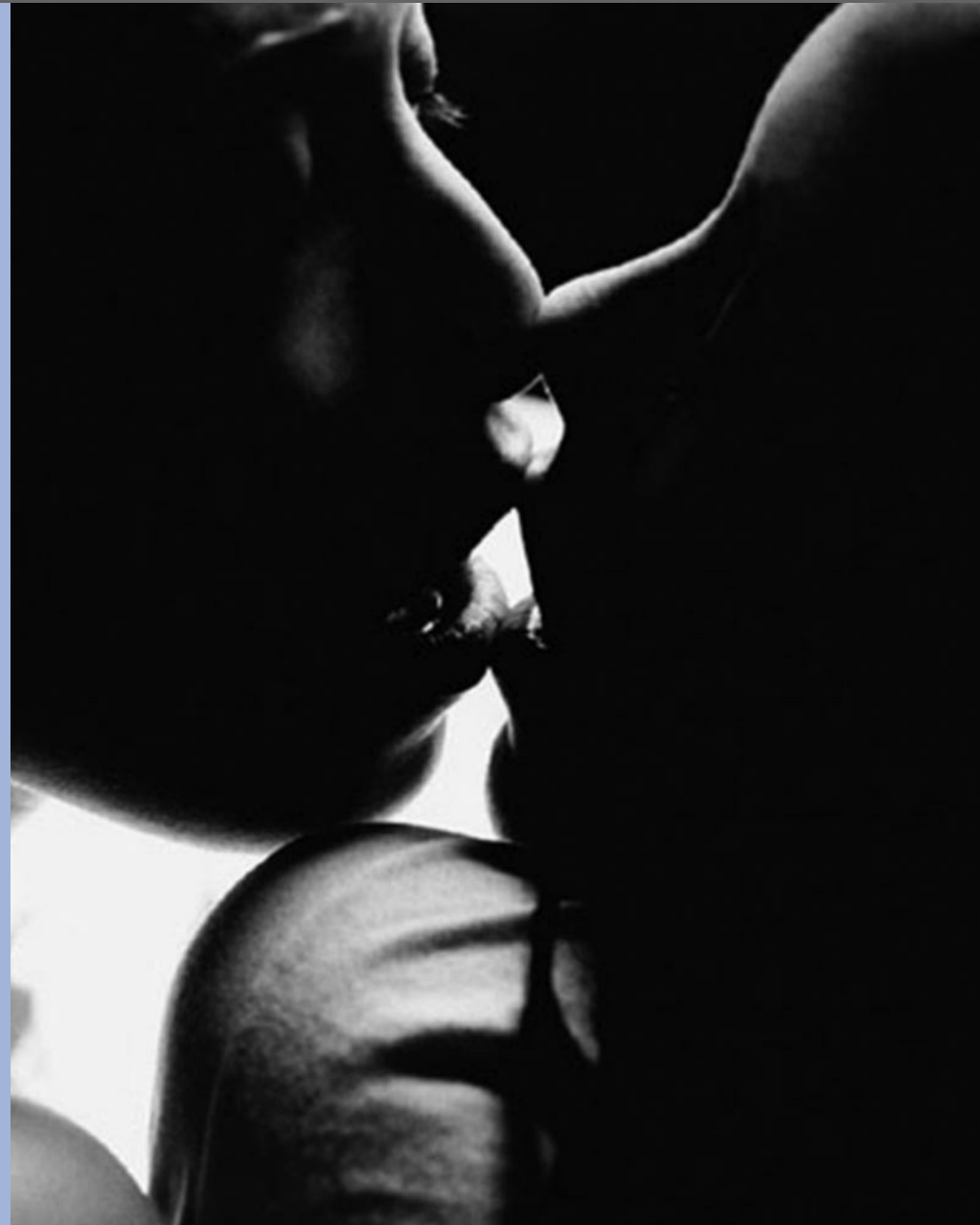# EXPERIENCES AND DIMENSIONS OF POWER:
DISCUSSIONS WITH LESBIAN WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian women are often a silent and invisible minority within the broader definition of marginalised sexuality. In addition, they hold the double minority status of being both lesbian and female in a patriarchal society still largely dominated by men.

In the past, white gay male culture has dominated the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in South Africa, a fact that often results in issues unique to lesbian women being lost among those faced by gay men. The gay rights movement in South Africa has long consisted largely of gay men and been divided along class and race lines (Cock, 2003).

To further add to the marginal status of lesbian women, identifiable lesbian iconography has been conspicuous in its absence and the little research that has been conducted among LGBT people has largely excluded lesbian women.

The Equality Clause in the South African Constitution (Section 9(3)) prohibits discrimination against women of all races, genders and sexual orientations and serves to ensure the equality, freedom and human dignity of all South Africans. Yet both anecdotal and research evidence suggests that many lesbian women in South Africa are not empowered or free from discrimination, victimisation and abuse.

Research is one way to monitor whether the positive impact of statutory and policy changes are felt in the everyday lives of gay and lesbian people. Little research has been conducted into LGBT issues in South Africa in the past and the few studies that have been conducted have tended to focus on white, middle class gay men. In response to this a collaboration of South African LGBT organisations and partners known as the Joint Working Group (JWG)[1] , set out to investigate levels of empowerment in a diverse sample of South African gay, lesbian and bisexual individual's lives. Lesbian women and gay men received equal focus in this research project.

The following research was implemented by OUT LGBT Well-being (referred to as OUT from here on)[2] .

In the community work conducted by OUT with lesbian women over the past 0 years, the issue of power has often come to the fore. As a result OUT conducted a further small qualitative study to explore lesbian women's experiences and understandings of power at both an individual and societal level. This report was aimed at documenting lesbian women's experiences of empowerment in South Africa at a micro and macro level.

The intention of the study was to increase the understanding of power experienced by lesbian women and to raise awareness, and to make overt lesbian women's experiences that have in the past been kept hidden.

Before discussing the methodology used in this research, it is important to note that issues affecting lesbian women do not occur in a vacuum. Therefore an outline of the South African context is provided which includes an overview of hate crimes and discrimination experienced by lesbian women in South Africa. A brief theoretical overview of power and gender identity then follows.

1 The JWG is an informal network of LGBT organisations and partners, working at a national level towards a coordinated approach to LGBTI matters. It currently includes these organisations: Behind the Mask, Durban Lesbian & Gay Community and Health Centre, Forum for the Empowerment of Women, Gay and Lesbian Archives, OUT LGBT Well-being, Triangle Project, UNISA Centre for Applied Psychology.
2 OUT works with LGBT health and mental health issues in the greater Tshwane area and is also a member of the JWG.

The anti-gay/lesbian laws that existed pre-996 in South Africa forced gay and lesbian people to hide their sexuality and denied them recourse to the law when they experienced criminal abuse (Retief, 993). Despite the repeal of these laws and a constitution that recognises and protects the rights of lesbian women, homophobic attitudes still pervade in South Africa resulting in the continued silence of many lesbian women.

This fact is highlighted in a recent study by Rule (cited in Potgieter, 2004, p. 87) on 'moral' issues in which results indicated that 78% of the sample (n=4980 adults) felt that sexual relationships between people of the same sex were always unacceptable. This percentage was highest in the poorest provinces of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape.

Further, South African society is characterised by a strong sense of patriarchy. Gender roles are clearly defined with men assumed to be dominant, powerful and superior (Kraak, 998). Masculinity is however fragile and constantly needs to be asserted, protected and maintained (Steinberg, Epstein & Johnson, cited in Kraak, 998). Where patriarchy is strongly maintained, homophobic violence may be rooted in the concept that effeminate gay men betray masculine superiority, and masculine lesbian women are a threat to this superiority.

The implications of patriarchy are particularly pertinent for black lesbian women, and black gay men, especially where traditional gender roles are not conformed to. Gender is not conformed to in situations such as the rigid role-playing of 'butch' (masculine) and 'femme' (feminine) lesbians.

The gender role assumed has implications for the individual's social acceptance, discrimination and/or experience of hate crimes (Amnesty International, cited in Dworkin & Yi, 2003). Some of these implications are clearly indicated in the JWG research, which shows that individuals who adopt opposite sex gender roles experience more discrimination than those who do not.

Hate Crimes

Little media attention is given to hate crimes against lesbian women in South Africa. These crimes are also seldom reported to the police, yet they are a recurring theme.

…you're always looking out for yourself, because anything could happen any time…you know, rape, being beaten up, just being treated like shit…but coming out as a lesbian is even harder as you are putting yourself in the firing line[3]

(Reid & Dirsuweit, 2000, p. 106)

Although verbal harassment/hate speech is the most common homophobic hate crime (D'Augelli, Harry, Levin & McDevitt, cited in Theron & Bezuidenhout, 995), the victimisation of lesbian women often takes the form of physical assault/abuse, sexual assault, rape and domestic violence. In the words of Phumi Mtetwa[4] :

Rape is quite common in the townships…the law may be instrumental in promising us equality, but we are dealing with grassroots level radicals who don't know or care about the law

(Exit 70, 1995 cited in Reid & Dirsuweit, 2000, p. 105)

The effects of hate crimes extend beyond the individual against whom the crime was committed. Hate crimes committed against lesbian women send a message to other lesbian women that they will be vulnerable if they become visible as lesbian women within that community (Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002).

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3 Words of Beverly Ditsie, first lesbian woman to publicly disclose her sexual orientation in Soweto.
4 Member of the then National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality which was instrumental in bringing about law reform for LGBT people in South Africa.

Discrimination against lesbian women

1. Discrimination by the police

The JWG study investigated lesbian women's experiences with the police when reporting incidents of hate crimes. These experiences are reported in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Experiences of the police when reporting hate crimes

The police were easy to talk to (disagreed)	52%
The police were supportive (disagreed)	49%
I was satisfied with the service (disagreed)	45%
The police were considerate (disagreed)	44%
The police were helpful (disagreed)	42%
The police were rude (agreed)	36%
The police were not interested (agreed)	33%
The police were polite (disagreed)	32%
The police listened to me (disagreed)	22%

These findings illustrate that many lesbian women experience difficulties in getting recourse from the law when their rights have been infringed upon. As a result many cases of hate crimes go unreported (Reid and Dirsuweit, 2002).

The JWG study explored the reasons why cases of homophobic victimisation are not reported to the police. The main reasons are cited in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Reasons for not reporting hate crimes to police

I felt the report would not be taken seriously	70%
I felt the police couldn't do anything	76%
I felt that the police would not understand	67%
A friend had previous poor experience with the police	55%
I had previous poor experience with the police	49%
I am afraid of being abused by the police	49%
I thought that the incident was no serious enough to report	49%
These incidents happen so often that I am used to them	30%

These findings suggest that most respondents are not confident they will get help from the police. In addition, 49% fear secondary victimisation at the hands of the police. It is also of concern that approximately half of those who did not report hate crime incidents to the police felt the incidents were not serious enough to report, and 30% that these incidents happened so often the victims had become inured to them.

The findings show that lesbian women do not perceive the criminal justice system as being able to assist them in realising their rights when these have been violated. A large proportion of respondents reported previous negative experiences with the police or stated that their friends had had negative experiences with the police.

2. Discrimination by religious authorities

Religious beliefs can create internal conflict for lesbian women who wish to maintain their faith, but are portrayed as 'evil' or 'sinful' because of their sexual orientation. This may be particularly pertinent for young lesbian women growing up in religious families. Such conflict can result in guilt and increase the risk of suicide (Gibson, 1989).

Discrimination at the hands of religious authorities is a reality for lesbian women in South Africa as is highlighted by the voices of two lesbian women in Gauteng:

I can pray by myself but sometimes I want to go to a church house…although sometimes they discriminate towards lesbians…they also believe that I am possessed by evil spirits and they believe that if they pray for me I will be released from those spirits
(Nunu, cited in Kheswa & Wieringa, 2005:205)

Other pastors think that being gay is a sickness or evil. They say one cannot serve God and be a homosexual at the same time…I meet pastors from other churches but I leave hurt and depressed.
(Nokuthula, pastor of the Hope and Unity Metropholitan Community Church (HUMCC), cited in Kheswa & Wieringa, 2005:209)

3. Discrimination in the health care sector

To compound their experiences of violence and abuse, lesbian women often face discrimination when accessing services in the health care sector. In terms of sexuality, many health care professionals do not ask questions pertaining to sexual orientation. Rather, they often ask questions that simply assume a person is heterosexual.

Sexual orientation may well impact on the health of the individual and therefore it necessitates specific enquiry within consultations (McNair, 2003). The negative attitudes of health care providers can affect those in need of health care because trust in the available care may be reduced. In some instances health care may even be denied.

Discrimination within the health-care sector may take the form of overt homophobia. For example:

- 4% of the JWG sample of lesbian women had been refused treatment because of their sexual orientation. This figure was found to be higher in Gauteng with 6% of lesbian women having been refused treatment because of their sexual orientation[5].

Another form of discrimination in the health care sector is heterosexism, which is much more subtle but has an equally negative impact. By asking questions that assume a woman is heterosexual, trust and the ability to reveal complex life issues that may be of relevance to the person's health are compromised. The JWG research indicated that almost half (49%) of the health care practitioners visited in the preceding two years asked heterosexist questions or assumed respondents were heterosexual (41%).

Of concern is the fact that 11% of the JWG sample of lesbian women delayed seeking treatment for fear of discrimination. Some women also live with physical disabilities or illnesses but did not seek help because they were afraid of their sexual orientation being discovered. Not seeking health care appears to be more prevalent in those under 25.
To ensure access and quality of health care for lesbian and bisexual women it is of the utmost importance that the health care system evolve to accept diversity and refuse to tolerate prejudice and discrimination.

5 Note these figures are for a - 2 year period: Gauteng (2002/3) and KZN (2004/5)

Lesbian women's health

Discrimination experienced in the health care sector can have a serious impact on health-care seeking behaviour and in turn the health and sexual health of lesbian women.

Traditionally lesbian woman were thought to be relatively risk free from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. The findings from the JWG research show that this is not the case for lesbian women in South Africa. Self-reported HIV rates from this study indicated that 8% of the women who had been tested for HIV were HIV positive[6].

Because lesbian women are not thought to be at risk, they are not targeted in HIV prevention campaigns. This perception could have an impact on testing practices as can be seen in the reasons cited for not testing in JWG research:

• "I have never been in a situation where I could have contracted HIV" reported by 57% of the women who had not been tested.
• "I do not think I am at risk of being HIV positive" reported by 53% of the women who had not been tested.
• "I am too scared to test" reported by almost 47% of the women who had not been tested.

The high rates of HIV amongst lesbian and bisexual women in South Africa can in part be attributed to rape, unsafe transactional sex with men, and sexual violence. More research needs to be conducted into the sexual health of lesbian and bisexual women to gain a clearer picture of risky sexual practices. Safe sex messages in South Africa should also be extended to include lesbian women.

6 Note: Only 55% of the sample tested for HIV, 9% did not collect their results thus, sample size too small to ensure reliability. In addition it is important to note that these are self-reported figures.

The concept of power is usually linked to notions of authority and domination, and can be seen to be a means of maintaining a social order. However, drawing from Foucalt (1978), power is not seen as a top-down commodity that is held by a privileged few. Rather power is relational and is circulated through social relationships that both restrict and produce certain forms of behaviours (Joyce, 2001).

Foucault's location of power and its concomitant resistance is important in that he presents power in such a way that we can locate it in less traditional spaces, such as within personal relationships, and to recognise that patriarchy can exist at a local level as well as within more formal structures. This has implications for this report as it recognises that lesbian women constitute their own identities and are not "passive" or "doomed to defeat" even though there are severe social constraints on these individuals.

A further dimension is that there are "political" ramifications as well, as can be seen in the resistance to heterosexism and heterocentric discourse demonstrated by organisations such as OUT.

Sawicki (1991) proposes that the practical implication for Foucault's model of power "is that resistance must be carried out in local struggles against the many forms of power exercised at the everyday level of social relations." (Sawicki, 1991, p. 23).

The notion of the "local struggle" is germane to the narrative discussions in this document: Not only is there an understanding of a broader political agenda within some of the narratives - generally in relation to the discussions on power - but there is also resistance within the narratives to the ways in which the narrators themselves have been categorised by dominant discourses.

The resistance to classification points to an understanding of identity which "views personal identity as constituted by the myriad of social relationships and practices in which the individual is engaged ..." (Sawicki, 1991, p. 41). These relationships are sometimes contradictory and unstable, resulting in the identity that emerges often being fragmented and dynamic. For example, in a society that subscribes to racist and homophobic attitudes, a black lesbian woman may experience inconsistent aspects of her identity in terms of conflicts over loyalties and interests relative to the black and lesbian communities.

The relationship between the subject and society is thus not seen as being determined by passive socialisation and adherence to cultural norms, but rather by actively engaging with one's identity formation through narrative and life choices.

The understanding of gender identity espoused in this report is that it is socially constructed and not essential.

We take the view that we are not passively socialised into our gender roles. Rather we acknowledge that gender identity is actively constructed and that there are "complex and contradictory ways in which we are continually constituting and reconstituting ourselves and the social world through the various discourses in which we participate". (Davies, 1989, p. 6).

This view distances itself from the notion of biological determinism and distinguishes from the notion of sex which is considered the biological marker differentiating 'man' from 'woman'.

Arguably, the narratives discussed in this report provide a locus of expression which incorporates a measure of agency. Rather than be found in the binaries of femininity and masculinity, gender identity exists in a matrix in which categories such as sexuality, race and class intersect. This does not preclude the discursive limits placed on women and their sexuality. Rather "an understanding of women's agency will have to contend with what cultures make of their bodies" (Naranjana, 2004 p. 150)

Furthermore, in the context of this report, it is important to maintain a critical awareness that one should not universalise women's identities as western and heterosexual. Butler maintains that, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and … gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and religious modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 3).

The theoretical understandings presented in this section form the underlying context of the discussion of the narratives which follows. These theoretical understandings are not explicitly reflected in that discussion as it was decided that a thorough narrative analysis would be conducted at a later point.

The research presented in this report is drawn from three separate studies conducted between 2003 and 2005 which employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Each will be described below.

1. Quantitative: Level of empowerment of LGBT people in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN)

This study was initially conducted in metropolitan Gauteng in 2003 by OUT under the auspices of the JWG to begin to address the dearth of quantitative data on LGBT experiences in South Africa.

The research aimed to develop expertise as well as to inform programme design for LGBT people, and to lobby for the right of LGBT people to access appropriate and non-discriminatory services. The scope of this research project was vast, including both macro and micro issues to serve as indicators of empowerment. The research was informed both by theory and the needs outlined by key LGBT organisations in South Africa.

The original Gauteng study was replicated in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in 2005 by OUT, in collaboration with the Durban Lesbian and Gay Health and Community Centre, and under the auspices of the Joint Working Group. A few minor changes were made to the questionnaire based on analysis and feedback from the Gauteng study. Although gay/bisexual men were included in these studies, they did not form part of the analysis in this report given its specific focus on the experiences of lesbian women. The findings pertaining to gay/bisexual men in the study are also omitted in the present instance.

Sample
In order to make the sample as representative as possible, a purposive quota sampling technique was employed which identified clusters across age, race and gender (refer to Table 3).

Table 3: Identified Cluters along sex. race and age

Sampled in Gauteng and KZN		Sampled in KZN only
Females Black 16-24 years	Females White 16-24 years	Females Indian 16-24 years
Females Black 25-14 years	Females White 25-40 years	Females Indian 25-40 years

Respondents were sampled through LGBT organisations and university organisations, support groups, counselling centres, friendship networks (snowball sampling), gay and lesbian websites, LGBT churches and the annual pride parade. Both resourced and under-resourced communities were sampled[7].

Participants
The combined sample consisted of 398 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women living in Gauteng (56%) and KZN (44%) of which 73% were black, 4% were Indian and 23% were white women aged between 16 and 46 years. The mean age of the respondents was 26 (SD = 5.7).[8] Most respondents had a minimum of a high school education and half had a tertiary qualification. Most were either employed or studying, but 17% were unemployed.

7 Although a crude distinction, township areas were classified as being under-resourced areas as there are very little or no resources in these areas for gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Other metropolitan areas were classified as resourced areas as there are more resources in these areas for gay, lesbian and bisexual people.
8 The number of black respondents sampled is higher as they include individuals from both resourced and under-resourced areas whereas the white respondents all came from resourced areas.

Instrument
A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from September - December 2003 in Gauteng, and from April - August 2005 in KZN.

The questionnaire was available in English only, with most questions being closed-ended.
Data on a vast range of issues were collected. Included were socio-demographic variables, questions around social lifestyle (including levels of outness), victimisation, health service satisfaction, health status, alcohol and substance use, well-being, religious and political interests.

2. Qualitative: Exploring aspects of power among lesbian women in Gauteng

In the community work conducted by OUT with lesbian women during the past 10 years, the issue of power has often come to the fore and has been found to have an impact on the delivery of services.

Power issues also often create difficulties in implementing and sustaining interventions for lesbian women. Thus, as part of the lesbian programme, it was decided to explore lesbian women's perceptions and experiences of power in more depth to enhance the understanding of this concept and for use in programmes and messaging aimed at lesbian women.

The narratives discussed in this report are included as an essential component of the project. Not only is the report concerned with quantitative research, its intention is also to juxtapose the research with fragmented, "smaller" narratives which are representative of the narrators and allow them self-determination. The inclusion of narratives in this report gives a voice to marginalised lesbian experiences. These have the potential to provide more resistant, diffuse and less unified versions of gendered identities than those representing dominant heterosexist discourse. The narratives display certain continuities: there is an acknowledgement of the enabling contribution of friends as well as numerous allusions to social constraints, such as marginalization and the tyranny of the homophobic family. The narratives make reference to social contexts such as class, and demonstrate an awareness of power relations and unequal distribution of resources. There is, thus, an "interface" between the personal and the social.

Sampling & Participants

A convenience sampling strategy was employed to select a diverse group of lesbian women. Participants were identified along lines of race, age, socio-economic standing and gender identity (refer to Table 4).

Women involved with the organisation on both a formal and informal basis were selected. The women were briefed about the purpose of the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. It was made clear to participants beforehand that the information could be used to inform the development of materials for lesbian women. Participants were asked whether it was permissible to use direct quotes in the resulting materials, and consent was given. Eleven lesbian women aged between 19 and 53 participated in the study.

Table 4: Profile of research participants

Participant[9]	Age
Lefentswe	26
Tumi	19
Lerato	24
Karabo	19
Palesa	25
Rozanne	32
Nazeen	24
Marie	43
Marelise	38
Elizabeth	47
Barbara	53

9 Note: the real names of participants have not been used to ensure confidentiality.

Collection of Data

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews held with participants. Three staff members from OUT conducted the interviews. Questions included:

- What are the good things about being a lesbian woman?
- How do you, as a lesbian woman, understand the notion of power?
- What are the positive and negative things related to power – what makes you powerful/powerless?
- What is the impact or influence of power in your life?
- How do you show the world that you are lesbian?

In all but one, the interviews were conducted on an individual basis. In the exceptional case, an interview was conducted with two women (Marie and Marelise) who were long-time partners. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

This report includes many verbatim quotes which is in line with the aim of making lesbian women's voices heard. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, their names have been changed.

A conceptual framework was developed from themes identified in the narratives.

The framework highlights experiences of power that derive from the self, and experiences of power that derive from and are manifested by external social contexts (refer to Figure). In this framework there is a constant tension between the internal and external sources of power, with the social context impacting on the experiences of power internal to the self, and in turn power internal to the self informing experiences within the social environment.

This dynamic between 'power-self' and 'power-social' informs the experience of the individual's identity as a lesbian woman. The components of power in this model emerged as salient features in the present research and should therefore not be seen as either wholly representative or exhaustive. The thematic discussion of the narratives that follows will be supplemented at a later stage by a more thorough narrative analysis.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
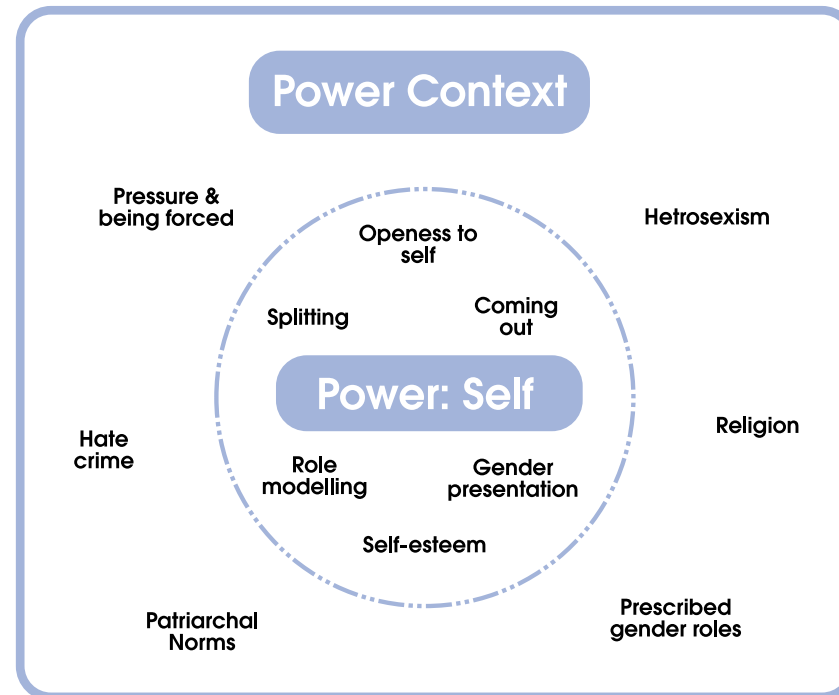
1. Power: Self

Most women felt empowered by being able to be authentic in themselves as lesbian women, by understanding who they were, and by being reconciled with their sexual orientation.

> … to be in touch with who you are and to feel free to be that.
>
> *Elizabeth*

Although this was found to be a source of power, there existed a constant tension between being true to themselves and disclosing their sexual orientation or 'coming out' to other people.

'Coming out' is more than the process of revealing something that has been kept hidden, it also involves constructing the self - a lesbian identity that did not exist before coming out (Phelan, 1993). For some participants 'coming out' and 'being out' in different settings was seen as an empowering experience.

Boling (1996) suggests that 'coming out' enables lesbian women to acknowledge their identity and challenge the social stigma surrounding being a lesbian woman in a heterosexist society. Further, he argues that it enables identification with other lesbian women, thus creating a Context within which to create a positive social identity that offers an alternative to prescribed heterosexual identity.

> … it is empowering if you are out … giving yourself permission, as it were, to be in the world as you are…
>
> *Rozanne*

The experience of 'coming out' however was not always perceived as empowering. It was acknowledged that 'coming out' at a young age, when one has less control over one's life may make one vulnerable to negative reactions, such as being thrown out of home, homophobic attacks and so on. For others, the fear of 'coming out' and other people reacting in a negative manner, made them feel powerless.

> … I kept my relationship secret for three years … I didn't tell anyone … my partner and I didn't tell anyone (pause) at all. In terms of power that was a huge thing …
>
> *Nazreen*

This sentiment was particularly pertinent when participants spoke of 'coming out' in the workplace.

> … I have the tendency to not be open or 'out' in terms of who I am … eh … in my job. Because if I am, then I can be certain that I'll have less work to do …
>
> *Elizabeth*

The JWG research investigated levels of 'coming out' to family, friends, work colleagues and the community. Table 5 confirms that people are least open to work colleagues.

Table 5: Levels of 'outness'

	Family	Friends	Work Colleagues	Community
None	23	7	31	18
Some	30	23	24	37
Most	16	25	18	24
All	31	45	28	21

It should be noted however, that these levels may be elevated due to the sampling strategy used, which necessitated that most participants were 'out' to some degree in order to be identified for the survey. When one looks at the frequencies of the above rates, less than half of the sample is 'out' to 'most' or 'all' of their family, work colleagues and the community.

For many lesbian women, the experience of loving someone is mediated by the need to hide their sexual orientation or their relationships. Relationships can become the site of the greatest experience of powerlessness, because they are a concrete manifestation of one's sexual orientation in the world.

> *It makes me feel powerless, when I walk in the street and I want to take your hand, and I want to show the world that you are my wife, but I can't because I'm afraid what will the people do to you.*
>
> *Marie*

The conscious construction of self-identity is an on-going project of which choice and lifestyle are central components. The desire to 'be oneself' is often at odds with categories such as family, marriage and heterosexuality, and consequently these categories can become destabilized. This destabilization can result in new life and moral choices. Hence there is a complex interplay between one's social condition and one's inner narrative. The sense of not being able to show one's whole self in certain settings - to 'split' oneself - was experienced by some of the participants.

> *… there is a part of me that I always need to put to the side and separate from that. It's almost like a necessity to split, to split part of me, in certain situations.*
>
> *Elizabeth*

This was highlighted in the JWG study by an item on the self-esteem scale: 'I feel like I have to live two lives'. 24% of respondents agreed to this statement and 11% were unsure. Splitting oneself results in a loss of agency and impacts negatively on the mental well being of lesbian women:

> *… it's stressful … I would maybe avoid that circumstance … I avoid contact with people that are not gay-friendly … which is restrictive for me …*
>
> *Elizabeth*

Self esteem can be defined as a belief in and self-respect for oneself. This definition can extend to include self-confidence and pride.

> *… the fact that I understand myself … I do not owe anyone any explanation of what I am … the pride in me makes me feel more powerful … makes people respect me and take me for what I am …*
>
> *Lefentswe*

Pride in oneself was not strongly felt by the women in the JWG sample, with only 13% agreeing with the statement "I feel like I have a lot to be proud of". A significant relationship was found between pride within oneself and getting drunk – individuals with a lower sense of pride within themselves reported an increased frequency of getting drunk. In addition, a lack of pride was also associated with increased thoughts of suicide. These findings highlight the impact that a negative sense of self has on the mental well-being of lesbian women.

The impact of race, age and gender presentation on levels of self-esteem was investigated. Results indicated that older individuals reported higher levels of self-esteem. Race and gender presentation were not found to impact significantly on self-esteem.

Theorists have noted that one of the problems with the construction of lesbian identity is that it takes place within the terms of the dominant discourse which views heterosexuality as the natural expression of human sexuality (Goodloe, 1999).

Within this framework, all other expressions of sexuality are considered deviant. Lesbian women are often invisible in the public sphere and when they are visible, they are often highly stigmatised. An example would be the South African singer, Brenda Fassie, who was highly visible but whose lifestyle, which included drug use and multiple partners, was highly stigmatised. One of the results of this is that lesbian women, particularly if they are not out to other lesbians, cannot imagine 'how to be' and this affects identity formation. Many of the women interviewed found it empowering to act as role models for other young lesbian women within their environments.

> *… I know I have encouraged some other young people …*
>
> *Karabo*

Women who come out with a positive social identity in their community could encourage that community to value them as lesbian women.

2. Power: context

The social and political realities of any given society dictate the dominant or subordinate status of its members. Lesbian women's experiences of power are determined largely by the prevailing hegemony surrounding issues of gender and heterosexism.

The narratives of the women above suggest that many lesbian women feel empowered within themselves on a personal level, however they also imply that little power is derived within social contexts.

> ... I am empowered in my self as a person ... but in terms of the social aspects of being a lesbian, I do believe that for me that is more negative in terms of not having power.
>
> *Elizabeth*

Participants' social environment formed the basis of their sense of powerlessness. There was a sense of being restricted and constrained, of not having a voice or a space in a heterosexist world.

These restrictions or constraints sometimes manifest in concrete way, such as the 'correctional rape' of lesbian women or hate speech utterances, or in less concrete ways, such as in the silencing effect of heterosexism.

> ...like when interacting with other people, you do not get to express yourself as you want to because they think you want to dominate or you want ... (to change) ... yourself from being a woman to a man and so they think you want to overpower them or take whatever belongs to them, so they use force or power ... to dominate
>
> *Lefentswe*

Hate speech is the most prevalent form of abuse against lesbian women and is experienced by 39% of the JWG sample. Because no physical injury is caused, this abuse is largely tolerated by society, and this tolerance maintains the notion that same-sex relationships are unacceptable (Reddy, 2002). Hate speech has the effect of lowering self-esteem for the victim and increases the risk of depression and suicide.

The JWG research findings show that 8% of respondents reported having been sexually abused/raped in the preceding two years. When looking at lifetime prevalence, these figures are likely to be much higher.

Lesbian women living in townships seem to have almost double the risk of abuse compared to those living in other areas. Part of the reason for this is the prevalence of 'corrective rape' in which lesbian women are raped to 'change them' to be heterosexual.

> ... the influence (of being raped) I would say … I sometimes want to kill myself, sometimes want to commit suicide …
>
> *Karabo*

One of the results of hate crimes is that fear is often felt by the community to which the survivor of the crime belongs (Reid & Dirsuweit, 2000). More than half the sample of lesbian women in the JWG research[10] was found to be afraid of verbal abuse, physical assault and domestic violence, and as many as 72% feared sexual abuse or rape because of their sexual orientation.

These figures were significantly higher in KwaZulu-Natal. The high levels of fear reported by respondents from this province could indicate that homophobia is more prevalent there than in Gauteng.

Fear can have a debilitating impact on the personal freedom of these women. It can make them afraid to go out, for example, or to act in certain ways and wear certain clothing.

[10] This figure refers to a combined rate for KZN and Gauteng

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It makes me feel powerless, when I walk in the street, and I want to take your hand, and I want to show the world that you are my wife, but I can't because I'm afraid what will the people do to you

Marie

Thirty-two percent of participants in the JWG sample experienced conflict within themselves regarding their religion and sexual orientation. In addition discrimination by religious authorities was reported by 37% of the JWG sample, and 13% stated that they were actually asked to leave the institution of their faith because of their sexual orientation.

… the stereotype that being gay, or the message that being gay is bad, has, in people's lives ... and I know that it had in my life. Ehm … being raised very strongly Catholic ... the effect of that power has been incredibly destructive in my life … I lived with a lot of guilt and a lot of anger, and a lot of abandonment … feeling like God had obviously abandoned me. Ja, that power was incredibly negative, incredibly destructive.

Nazreen

I felt like this thing (rape) it happened because God does not want me to be a lesbian ... I was actually blaming myself …

Tumi

South Africans are raised in a heterosexist society that has little recognition of lesbian women. This can be seen in the media, where heterosexual romance and families serve to reinforce the notion that heterosexuality is a universal ideal.

By contrast, lesbian women are portrayed as an 'other' to this heterosexual norm, thus maintaining the social status of a socially marginalised and devalued group. Heterosexism extends to religion, legal discourses, education and health care.

… one gets to feel quite powerless in social settings that's dominated by straight people and therefore will tend to avoid them ... they will not allow you to be who you are ... its a constraint ... its restrictive because after a while you get dirty looks.

Rozanne

Heterosexist societies tend to manifest homophobia through, for example, avoiding gay men and lesbian women, telling negative jokes about gay men and lesbian women, harassment (verbal and physical), and violence (gay-bashing, rapes, destruction of private property and murder).

Griffin and Harro (cited in Richardson, 2004, p. 150), claim that "homophobia plays an important role in maintaining boundaries around what our society considers normal. When people violate gender and sexuality "norms", homophobia is one of the primary tools used to let people know they are out-of-bounds".

Heterosexism was found to have a profound effect on the participants' sense of agency:

… what makes me feel powerless is like when it comes to gathering with straight friends ... I become so quiet, It's like I'm not there you know.

Tumi

Narratives can provide a counterpoint to more powerful discourses which often silence and marginalize countervailing voices. They can encourage the writer/speaker to engage in the production of knowledge rather than allowing their narratives to remain subordinate to dominant discourses.

This report presents examples of pluralistic and diffuse identities which circumvent the notions of a fixed, over-determined identity. The categories of 'butch' and 'femme', for example, can become destabilized in the light of these narratives as they provide far more complex, contradictory and deconstructive accounts of these binaries.

Although Giddens does not explicitly discuss theories of gender and sexuality in Modernity and Self Identity (1991), his theory is useful in relation to the formation of identity and is broadly in alignment with theories that propose that identity is fluid, and, despite contextual constraints, self-reflective.

Giddens (1991), challenges the notion of the fixed, essentialised self by presenting the self as a "project" which "has to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life on a global and local scale" (1991,53).

The adoption of rigid gender-role stereotypes serves to restrict behaviour, including sexual behavior, for those who adhere to them.

Wilson (cited in Goodloe, 1999) argues that because 'butch-femme' identities are built on popular cultural stereotypes of male and female behaviour, they tend to reinforce an inequality of power inherent in this dichotomy.

These prescribed gender roles and associated behaviors are fixed in a social hierarchy that determines the relative level of social power a person may exercise. In a patriarchal society the superiority of males is assumed with masculinity being valued over femininity.

Identification with a masculine gender role is common for lesbian women in South Africa. This may be because lesbian women lack alternative lesbian role models and are thus forced into the position where they must choose to adopt either a masculine or feminine role model.

In some cases gender roles extend into lesbian relationships where roles are prescribed and involve a male-identified and a female-identified partner.

The need to assert, protect and maintain the masculine identity, particularly in the face of a biological femaleness, in some cases leads to a hyper-masculinity, which can manifest in the abuse of alcohol and even domestic violence (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005). Being able to challenge these stereotypes is seen as powerful by many of the interviewees.

> *… the myth of the whole butch-femme division. Ehm… I call it a myth because I don't particularly ascribe to it. I know that a lot of people are more comfortable with it … it gives the relationship more structure etcetera … but for me it's a big fat myth which then again limits a woman's power in a relationship.*
>
> *Nazreen*

Some theorists propose that the dominant ideologies have a vested interest in making the butch-femme roles appear to be a replica of heterosexuality: Anything that is a replica is merely an imitation, and therefore inferior to the 'real' thing. In this way the threat to male dominance by women approximating masculine traits is lessened.

However, other theorists suggest that lesbian role playing, in terms of the butch-femme dichotomy, is not merely an imitation of heterosexual roles, but rather a powerful challenge to heterosexuality in that it exposes gender roles (masculine and feminine in relation to biological sex) as mere constructs that are not stable or 'real' (Goodloe, 1999). This challenge to male dominance and the system of patriarchy may result in violence (sexual and homophobic) as a means of regaining control and reasserting power.

> *There are men who constantly remind us that a man is a man and a woman is a woman, you understand? When they approach us they use it (power) in a wrong way, they become violent in a way, it is either they hit you, rape you or call you names.*
>
> *Palesa*

Although most women in the JWG study adopted a feminine gender identity (44%), 35% stated that their preferred gender role was masculine and 21% had no preference.

> *I will not have myself defined by other people … about how I should be looking if I am gay. Because somehow it makes it more acceptable for the straight world if you at least look the part.*
>
> *Rozanne*

... in relationships, the power is being held by the person of more masculine ... kind of ... characteristic and that bugs me a lot because it is almost perpetuated from the stereotypes of the heterosexual relationship.

Nazreen

There was a division in perception as regards the freedom and fluidity of gender roles among participants. For some, being a lesbian woman meant that one did not have to subscribe to any given role, but rather one could move between what was perceived as 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

... the freedom to fulfill a variety of roles ... it almost feels like there is fluidity in terms of roles ...

Elizabeth

For others, the notion of 'butch-femme' lesbians was strong, and there was an adherence to these identities, for example in the way these women dressed. The identification with a masculine gender role seemed to be stronger amongst the young black participants.

CONCLUSIONS

Lesbian women's experience of the world is profoundly impacted upon by power in its various guises. As noted above there is a tension between power: self and power: social, but it appears that power in the social context tends to impact negatively on lesbian women's sense of internal power.

Lesbian women's identity is formed not by passive socialisation and adherence to cultural norms, but by a process of active engagement with identity formation through narrative and life choices. It is clear however, that the forms of social power prevalent in South African society have a profound impact and often a negative influence. This is more likely to be the case for lesbian women than for gay men, since they are doubly stigmatised, both as women and as lesbians.

As noted above, gender identity is forged in a matrix in which the categories of race, class and sexuality intersect, rather than being found in the binaries of femininity and masculinity. It is clear that many of the narratives reported above problematise these binary categories, and instead argue for more fluid understandings of gender.

Many questions remain. Among them: What does it mean for lesbian identities that social power is such an important negative factor? Lesbian identities are inherently identities formed in opposition to a heterosexist and homophobic social context, but what does this mean for the constitution of identity? Do lesbian identities tend to explicitly negate the need for support from the social context? What are the differences in life experience and choices which determine how lesbian women choose to engage with the category of gender – either accepting the butch-femme binary or negating it? These questions and others will require further research to elucidate answers.

A more exhaustive analysis of the narratives presented here, will go some way to answering these questions. As noted, little research has been conducted into the experiences of South African lesbian women, and therefore this report highlights the many issues that South African lesbian women face including discrimination and victimisation, sexual health concerns and problems accessing mainstream service providers, the stigma still associated with 'coming out' and the gender roles that one assumes as a lesbian woman within a largely patriarchal and heterosexist society. These areas require further, more in depth investigation to enhance our understanding of lesbian women's experiences in contemporary South Africa.

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