

Trans-Inclusive Feminist Praxis: Shifting Religious and Familial Gendered Violence Towards Transgender Acceptance—A USA Case Study

[B R I E F I N G]

Building on the analysis of gender-based violence (GBV) within the lives of black trans women in South Africa, as explored by Shabalala, Boonzaier, and Chirape (2023) in *Challenging Ciscentric Feminist Margins*, this briefing extends the conversation to the themes of ciscentric oppression, structural violence, and intersectionality in the context of a pilot study I conducted (Lockhart, 2024). The work of Shabalala et al. (2023) calls for intersectional frameworks that challenge cisnormativity, patriarchal violence, and gender performativity—central concepts in understanding the marginalization of trans individuals. Their work powerfully illuminates the ways in which cisgendered and patriarchal norms systematically marginalise trans individuals, particularly trans women of color, through both overt and subtle forms of violence.

In a similar vein, my case study of a biracial family in Louisiana, USA, and their 17-year-old trans son, explores how ciscentric gender norms, compounded by religious, racial, and socio-cultural factors, shape the family's experience of gendered violence and hinder the adolescent's agency and autonomy, complicating his transition to legal adulthood and his pursuit of self-determination.

Key Themes and Issues

Structural Gender-Based Violence and Ciscentric Norms in the USA

In my case study, a biracial family (Black father, White mother) in a small town in Louisiana is grappling with the

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intersection of race, religious conservatism, and their 17-year-old son's gender identity. The adolescent, assigned female at birth but identifying as a young man, experiences significant fear of rejection and potential violence from both his family and his community due to his gender identity. His struggles reflect the structural nature of GBV that Shabalala et al. (2023) describe, wherein ciscentric norms—held not only by society but also within families—reinforce patriarchal and binary gender expectations. These dynamics parallels their argument that cisedgendered power structures systematically limit the freedom and self-determination of trans individuals.

The intersection of the family's religious conservatism and their son's gender identity creates an environment where GBV is deeply embedded, both at the interpersonal (e.g., family) and institutional (e.g., religious) levels. Shabalala et al. (2023) argue that the privileging of cisedgender identities over trans identities contributes to violence that is both overt and subtle, including emotional harm, rejection, and the silencing of trans experiences. In my case study, this religious conservatism marginalises the adolescent's identity, forcing him to conceal his true self to avoid rejection and violence. His concealed identity mirrors the silencing of trans voices identified by Shabalala et al. (2023) as a key element of ciscentric oppression.

School-Based Violence and Transphobic Marginalization

In addition to familial rejection, the adolescent faces transphobia in his school environment. He is bullied, socially excluded, and harassed by peers, as well as neglected by teachers. This bullying includes being ignored by male peers, actively bullied by female peers, and experiencing sexually aggressive behavior from some male students. The mistreatment at school further highlights how GBV manifests in educational settings, as trans individuals are marginalised, mistreated, and dehumanised. These experiences of bullying and exclusion are reflective of the systemic marginalization that Shabalala et al. (2023) document in their study of black trans women in South Africa, where societal institutions like schools become sites for the enforcement of gender norms that result in violence.

Shabalala et al.'s (2023) focus on the structural and institutional violence faced by black trans women in South Africa resonates with these USA-based experiences of bullying and social exclusion, which are analogous to the forms of violence and erasure that trans individuals face in various societal institutions around the world. The adolescent's school environment becomes a site of GBV, where the rigid enforcement of gender norms results in social isolation and psychological harm. While bullying and exclusion in educational settings are pervasive forms of violence, the impact of intersecting identities—race, religion, and gender—further complicates the adolescent's ability to assert his gender identity in broader societal contexts governed by cisedgendered power structures.

Intersectionality of Race, Religion, and Gender Identity

Shabalala et al. (2023) emphasise how the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality significantly shapes the experiences of violence faced by black trans women, and this framework applies to my study as well. The adolescent experience of compounded marginalization arises from the intersection of his racial and religious identity with his gender identity. The family's conservative Baptist beliefs uphold binary gender norms that invalidate their son's gender identity, creating conflict and distress.

This intersectionality of identity forms a compounded and unique oppression for the adolescent. Just as Shabalala et al. (2023) illustrate how cisnormative and heteronormative discourses undermine trans identities, my case study shows how the family's rigid beliefs regarding gender roles and religious teachings marginalise their son, forcing him to hide his authentic self. The racialised and religious components of his identity amplify the rejection he faces, especially within a deeply conservative, faith-based community. As Shabalala et al. (2023) point out, these intersecting identities create a compounded form of oppression that intensifies the structural violence trans individuals face.

Trans-Inclusive Feminist Praxis and Family Therapy Intervention

In alignment with Shabalala et al. (2023), who advocate for a trans-inclusive feminist praxis to challenge ciscentric norms, my pilot study underscores the necessity of incorporating trans-inclusive frameworks into therapeutic interventions for families navigating the ideological governance, socio-cultural regulation, and institutional policing of gender identity. These dynamics, shaped by factors like religious dogma, conservative gender norms, racial dynamics, and systemic transphobia, present significant barriers to transgender acceptance within families.

In my pilot study, I employed Haley's Model for Effective Family Therapy (Haley, 1963, 1986/2007), which was adapted to the family's unique cultural and religious context. While not explicitly feminist, Haley's model offers a directive, structural approach that allows therapists to intervene strategically in family systems, disrupting cisnormative gender roles and promoting an environment conducive to gender inclusivity and autonomy. The goal was to improve coping strategies and promote family cohesion, ultimately fostering greater acceptance of the adolescent's gender identity.

Haley's model aligns with feminist objectives by emphasizing power dynamics, hierarchical structures, and behavioral reconditioning, which are crucial when working with families toward transgender acceptance. This approach helps therapists challenge the entrenched norms and power imbalances that hinder gender inclusivity. In contrast to traditional feminist critiques of patriarchal structures, which often lack actionable methodologies, Haley's model offers a practical interventionist framework that supports

gender inclusivity and self-determination within family systems (Fine & Torre, 2019; Fine, Torre, Oswald, & Avory, 2021).

Haley's model offers a flexible, culturally responsive approach that enables therapists to tailor interventions based on specific familial contexts, addressing intersectional challenges like religious dogma, racial discrimination, and cisnormativity. By focusing on the psychosocial causes of family resistance, Haley's model goes beyond symptom management, challenging the structural violence within family systems that perpetuate GBV. This approach fosters an environment conducive to autonomy, agency, and gender inclusivity, particularly when working with families moving toward transgender acceptance. The model's emphasis on reshaping power dynamics and family structures allows therapists to address entrenched gender roles, promote gender fluidity, and support self-determination, which aligns with feminist goals of empowerment (Haley, 1986/2007).

In contrast to feminist theory, which often critiques patriarchal norms without providing concrete, strategic interventions, Haley's approach offers an actionable, interventionist framework for disrupting oppressive family systems. While feminist theory excels at deconstructing gendered power structures, it sometimes lacks prescriptive methodologies for enacting social change in real-world familial contexts (Chodorow, 1978; hooks, 2000). As Fine et al. (2019, 2021) emphasise, feminist theory must move beyond critique to actively engage in practices that foster real-world transformation. Haley's directive, structural approach addresses this gap by operationalizing feminist values—such as emancipation, autonomy, and gender inclusivity—within family systems. Through behavioral reconditioning and strategic interventions, therapists are empowered to challenge and reconfigure oppressive structures, shifting from critique to actionable change.

In my study, the therapeutic process focused on addressing the root causes of family resistance to their son's transgender identity, which aligned with systemic approaches that seek to dismantle structural violence within family systems. Rather than merely alleviating symptoms, the therapy facilitated a symbolic reordering of family roles, promoting gender inclusivity and self-determination for the adolescent. Shabalala et al. (2023) emphasise the inclusion of trans voices within feminist frameworks, not as assimilation but as a recognition of shared emancipatory goals. My findings align with this perspective, as the therapeutic process ultimately helped the family embrace a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of their son's gender identity, despite their initial resistance. This outcome reflects the need to dismantle patriarchal and cisgendered frameworks that restrict the lived experiences of trans individuals, as argued by Shabalala et al. (2023).

Conclusion

Expanding Trans-Inclusive Feminist Praxis in Global Contexts

In conclusion, my research supports and extends the findings of Shabalala et al. (2023), demonstrating how the structural violence embedded in ciscentric gender norms operates across diverse global contexts—both in the South Africa and the USA—and shapes the lived realities of trans individuals. While Shabalala et al. (2023) examined the experiences of black trans women in sociogeographically-diverse South African provinces, my study on a transgender adolescent in Louisiana highlights the persistence of GBV in family, religious, and school environments, underscoring the widespread and pervasive nature of ciscentric oppression.

Shabalala et al. (2023) provide a critical framework for understanding the violence trans individuals face, especially in racially and culturally marginalised contexts. However, feminist theory often lacks concrete, action-oriented interventions to transform these dynamics in real-world settings (Fine & Torre, 2019; Fine et al., 2021). My study fills in this gap and introduces Haley's Model for Effective Family Therapy as an essential praxis that can bridge the divide between feminist critique and actionable change. By restructuring family power dynamics, Haley's model empowers therapists to directly challenge cisnormative and patriarchal systems, moving feminist theory from critique to transformative action.

Both studies highlight the critical need for trans-inclusive, intersectional feminist frameworks that prioritise the autonomy and self-determination of trans individuals. Incorporating practical, interventionist strategies such as Haley's model enables feminist praxis to more effectively challenge entrenched gender norms and create environments that foster the liberation and agency of trans people. Continued development of trans-inclusive feminist frameworks and emancipatory practices is essential to supporting the diverse experiences of trans individuals worldwide.

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