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Published online: 15 Mar 2022.

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Realities beyond reporting: women environmental defenders in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Women environmental defenders continue to face marginalization despite their growing significance in ecological conflicts. The media's role in empowering or further rendering them invisible is unclear. This study thus examines depictions of South African women defenders in news articles. A feminist critical discourse analysis of 98 media reports about 48 conflicts suggests a typology of the conflicts and the women involved. I argue that media depictions of women defenders can sometimes enact discursive violence by imposing agendas and stereotypes that do not reflect their lived realities. This study identifies two tropes depicting women defenders as desperate mothers or underdogs, which empowers yet silences diverse women in diverse ways. The implications of such archetypes are that reporting may not only oversimplify the complexity of their experiences, but also contribute to pressures on women to be self-sacrificing and docile.

Introduction

Although women fighting at the frontlines of environmental justice movements are receiving increasing global coverage, additional media attention paradoxically may distort rather than amplify their voices. South African feminist writer Ronit Frenkel 2008 highlights this as part of a larger problem wherein gender relations "progress" fails to achieve real improvements for women's lived experiences: the nation has one of the largest percentages of women in parliament worldwide yet also one of the world's highest levels of rape and violence against women. Addressing these inconsistencies is important because we can only achieve genuine gender and environmental transformation after confronting oppressive hegemonies.

The aim of this study is thus to examine recurring tropes in media representation and how they empower and silence certain women defenders. I argue that in addition to feminine stereotypes downplaying women's environmental justice contributions, black women especially experience victimization as desperate mothers or underdogs. Such research not only shows how WEDs' struggles are rendered invisible, but also offers suggestions to better promote them. The study thus addresses these questions: 1) What are the narratives about diverse women defenders common among South African news

articles? 2) How do such depictions reflect the intersectionally gendered violence, silencing, and empowerment they experience in South Africa? The following section explains intersectionality as the theoretical framework. Next comes feminist critical discourse analysis as the methodology. The findings present patterns in WED depictions supporting or sometimes questioning those found in previous literature, which are brought in to back up the findings. The discussion then explains the gendered violence, silencing, and empowerment throughout the findings before concluding.

Background and literature review

Environmental defenders protect environmental and human rights typically threatened by government-backed multinational business projects (Philippe Le Billon and Päivi Lujala 2020; Arnim Scheidel, Arnim Scheidel, et al. 2020; Dalena Le Tran, Dalena Le Tran, et al. 2021). Extractive industries' search for profits and resources leads to ecological distribution conflicts (also EDCs or environmental conflicts), or confrontations against corporations over disproportionate burdens and benefits from industrial activities (J Martinez-Alier and M O'Connor 1996). Studies documenting South African protest movements such as Heidi Brooks 2019 and Peter Alexander 2010 note that a "rebellion of the poor" has increased protesting and resulting repression throughout the past decade. Moreover, Apartheid's legacy means that mobilizations may be legitimized or obscured because powerful white men often overwrite the histories of those such as women, working-class people, and non-whites (Mo. Hume 2009). There is a general academic consensus that women environmental defenders (WEDs) mobilize because they are typically relegated to gendered spaces and tasks exposing them to and making them aware of environmental consequences. Black women are especially affected owing to the lasting effects of the Apartheid regime's environmentally racist state planning policies dispossessing and forcefully relocating black South Africans to heavily polluted townships (Dianne Scott and Catherine Oelofse 2002; Yvonne Scorgie, Melanie Anne Kneen and Harold John Annegarn 2003). Moreover, women's responsibilities for community management and reproductive labor prevent them from being taken seriously in decision-making (Bina Agarwal 2001; Glenda Fick 2000; Scott et al. 2002). Subsequently, women are underrepresented in global and South African EDCs because they are subject to multiply intersecting vulnerabilities, while also being more affected by ecological degradation (Paul Nyulaku and Victor Ojakorotu 2018; Bobby Peek 2007).

A growing number of studies include feminist perspectives on media coverage of gender-based violence and silencing across Africa. This is an important topic because, as Aida Opoku-Mensah 2001, Gerlinde Mautner 2008, and Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips 2012 write, the media reinforces what is "normal" versus "newsworthy." As such, media has an important role in constructing images of women and normalizing violence against them. Consequently, as Mark Nartey 2020 suggests, discursive violence sanctions gendered disparities in education, employment, socioeconomic status, moral values, and more. Various authors agree that in South Africa, media representation often reproduces patriarchal discourses undermining rather than transforming women's portrayals (e.g. Herman Wasserman, Wallace Chuma and Tanja Bosch 2018; Denise Buiten and Elaine Salo 2007; Pumla Dineo Gqola 2007). Janell Hobson 2008 adds that such discourses are also racialized, with blackness being coded as backwards and inferior and whiteness being

coded as advanced and civilized carrying over to contemporary and digital media. Stephanie Bonnes 2013 and Olawumi Oladimeji and Oluyinka Osunkunle 2020 provide South African examples of gendered and racialized stereotypes perpetuating rape myths depicting black women as hypersexualized, deserving victims and black men as primitive, violent, and out-of-control. As Jemima Asabea Anderson, Grace Diabah and Patience Afrakoma Hmensa 2011 as well as Mercy Ette 2017 state, the media furthermore tends to use language misrepresenting African women entering traditionally "masculine" political and public spheres in hostile ways. Charlotte Adcock 2010, and Oyewole Adekunle Oladapo 2019 provide examples of how African media overemphasizes "women" as a label, sidelining their perspectives as advocates. By often classifying women as the widows, wives, and mothers of male protagonists, reporting downplays their expertise. Media depictions of women as passive victims also obscures and hampers their environmental justice contributions. As Stefania Barca 2020 warns, mainstream narratives depicting WEDs as passive victims rather than as having environmental agency furthermore hides injustices as well as contributes to the idea that they are not contributing to societal change and development. This study thus contributes to existing feminist knowledge on representational violence by examining its manifestations in coverage on South African environmental conflicts.

Theoretical framework

This study contributes an intersectional view of discursively reproduced violence and silencing in news reports. Intersectionality is how race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, age, education, location (rural or urban), and other identifiers interact to create complex, overlapping experiences of structure, politics, and representation (Kimberle Crenshaw 2016). As central axes of difference, such identities create contextual, coexisting privileges and marginalizations within interlocking systems of power and oppression. Intersectionality is important because mainstream feminism often homogenizes diverse women's experiences. Women of color are especially subject to distinct forms of disempowerment. Authors such as Mayher Anne and David A. Mcdonald 2007 as well as Bertrand Leopeng and Malose Langa 2020 suggest in their qualitative reviews of South African media that white women are often highlighted as environmentalists, excluding intersectionally marginalized peoples such as black women. Even among black women, not all their experiences are the same. Moreover, assumed uniform vulnerability denies WEDs agency and obscures unequal power relations producing such marginality (Seema Arora-Jonsson 2011). Adopting such knowledge as a core premise, this study considers WEDs' intersectional identities beyond fragmented media representations in South African EDCs.

The study also considers WEDs' differently gendered and often racialized, classed strategic essentialism in media reporting. Strategic essentialism, coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988, is a tactic wherein an internally diverse group is homogenized to create a simpler, more unified public image that may increase broader support. According to Renée Sylvain 2014 systematic review of literature on strategic essentialism in South Africa, many scholars agree that it is helpful in securing resources by staying "on-brand" and simplifying representations of their causes. Yet, as Renée Sylvain elaborates, strategic essentialism is also widely contested. Gayatri Spivak herself warns that such universalization may contribute to

static views of certain identities as well as deepen marginalization. Renée Sylvain summarizes main arguments against strategic essentialism in explaining how subaltern groups seek empowerment through increasing their political visibility, but such public recognition is incompatible with submitting to the very stereotypes oppressing them to begin with. Moreover, Raymond Suttner 2012 writes that in post-Apartheid South Africa, strategic essentialism is no longer necessary or helpful because persisting essentialism in sociocultural discourse obscures and hinders South Africa's dynamic environment wherein social orders are transforming as marginalized groups continually deconstruct racially and other identifier-based oppression. Yet, as Elisabeth Eide 2010 observes, even if activists do not essentialize themselves, journalists, editors, researchers, politicians, corporations, and more often impose it to forward outside agendas. Such a concern thus informs the present study and its focus on how, even if well-intentioned, strategically essentialist outsider depictions of WEDs may reduce them to various stereotypes rather than increase visibility in empowering ways.

Materials and methods

This study unpacks how mainstream news articles covering South African environmental conflicts depict women defenders. To collect news articles, cases of environmental conflicts were first identified through the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), an online inventory of EDCs, with over 3,500 in total and 60 for South Africa as of January 2022 (Scheidel et al. 2020; Leah Temper, Daniela Del Bene and Joan Martinez-Alier 2015). Upon using the EJAtlas to identify South African EDCs, only 98 media articles out of over 250 covering each case mentioned women. These 98 reports mentioned 97 different women or women-represented organizations. Included articles were any original news reports listed in the first five pages of Google regardless of news agency, popularity, or stance. The scope excludes publications written by the involved WEDs and their organizations as the study concerns media and not self-representation. Search terms were the name of the involved company and the location of the conflict.

A person was considered a WED if the article mentioned any involvement in a community's struggle against an industrial project. This includes interviewees, experts, and NGO representatives even if their involvement was not explicitly stated. Women were excluded if they were company representatives or from a governmental body supporting the company. Organizations with WED members were only included when a woman spoke on their behalf. Each report was coded line by line in NVivo for the language describing WEDs. First, cases were created for each woman or group. Next, attributes were assigned with values recording demographics only for those women whom the reports explicitly described using labels for race, occupation, and so on. The racial categories considered in this study are "white," "black," "coloured," and "Indian" as defined in the national census. Although such terminology is objectionable, the terms reflect the legacy of the Apartheid regime's classification of people into hierarchical racial categories (Zander S. Venter, Zander S. Venter, et al. 2020). Such labels continue to deeply impact South Africans' uneven lived experiences and are thus a necessary component of analyzing the effects of such subject positions on WEDs and their media representations. These demographic attributes

were then run through a matrix query. The articles were then coded for types of violence and themes of motherhood, community, expertise/leadership, emotionality/ irrationality, and victimization.

Data analysis follows feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Michelle M. Lazar 2014, Michelle M. Lazar 2007). Discourse analysis examines syntax such as by scrutinizing active or passive tense or downplaying or blaming certain parties (Anne et al. 2007). FCDA contributes feminist perspectives by interrogating discourses (re)producing ideologies constructing gendered othering. A feminist lens exposes uneven power distribution, recognizing the need to compare rather than universalize women's "complexly constructed social identities" (Michelle M. Lazar 2007, 149). FDCA incorporates intersectionality in uncovering oppression and privilege shaped by material, political, and social conditions. This explains women's different experiences of violence and silencing, especially in South African contexts featuring disparities in education, employment, status, resources, and more (Nartey 2020). This study applies FCDA by investigating how word choice unevenly privileges or silences WEDs.

In undertaking FCDA, I recognize that my own positionality may unduly influence the research process and make a point not to overstate the objectivity of this study. Most notably, I am not South African myself and cannot claim any expertise or situated knowledge about its complicated, dynamic contextual specificities. However, as Paul Baker and Erez Levon 2015 suggest, those with pre-existing knowledge of the society in which texts come from may also overlook certain findings. For instance, as an outsider, I did not have preconceived notions about certain news outlets and thus took every news article equally seriously, allowing me to read their contents at face value without anticipating any particular voice these outlets might be known for.

Findings

Demographic information about the 97 women is distinctly patterned. Reports describing WEDs by race identified 46 as black, none as coloured, 4 as Indian, and 35 as white. There were racialized class divisions, as among the 58 women with information listed about their jobs, all 20 white women and 2 Indian women were white-collar professionals such as scientific, medical, and legal experts or NGO executives. In contrast, 8 of black WEDs were peasant farmers, 5 were informal workers (unlicensed miners or housekeepers), 7 were blue-collar workers (street market sellers, shop employees, licensed miners, or park rangers), 11 were white-collar workers, and 6 were unemployed. Violence was also uneven. Of the 17 attacks, only one was against a white woman. 4 black WEDs reported death threats, compared to the 2 white WEDs. 7 black WEDs were arrested compared to 1 white WED However, 4 whites were smeared compared to 2 black women. One black WED was murdered.

There is a notable lack of representation of coloured or Indian WEDs. Although it is likely that there were more of such WEDs, reports excluded this information despite finding it relevant to depict race when the WED was either black or white. Christina Murray and Richard Simeon 2007 suggest that such disproportionate representational emphasis may be owing to the legacy of liberation struggles against Apartheid being largely cast as a black majority seeking justice against white oppressors. Although coloured and Indian populations have also been very present in activist leadership, having

limited recognition and rights created political separation between them and the majority black movement, leading to marginalization and the media's overwhelming focus on divisions between black and white to the neglect of other minorities. The focus of the findings and discussion will thus center on disproportionate violence between mainstream narratives about black and white WEDs given the lack of data available for other categories.

The motherhood narrative and its images of desperate (Black) mothers

WEDs are depicted in ways highlighting gendered supportive roles such as mothers and grandmothers, and wives (Frenkel 2008). Of the 98 media articles, 43 identified women as mothers, wives/widows, or caretakers 73 times. Women mobilize in response to increased vulnerability and burdens from environmental consequences, such as health concerns caused by coal pollution in the case of WED Mbali Mathebula. As she explains, "it affects me directly because [pollution asthma] attacks [my children] literally every night and I have no means to take them to the hospital" (Yolisa Njamela 2019). Various scholars such as Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Yvonne A. Braun 2010, Joyce M. Barry 2008, and Augustine Ikelegbe 2005 concur that women defenders often project motherly identity because pressure to prioritize caretaking leads WEDs to justify activism with concern for the environment and community as an extension of maternal duty. By performing hegemonic femininity, they transform norms to suit their mobilizations. Scott et al. (2002) add that they are often framed as emotional, desperate mothers driven to protect or mourn families.

Victimizing poor black mothers

In nearly all 73 references of mothers and wives, their descriptions as having secondary roles and emotional reactions victimize poor black mothers to elicit sympathy for someone else's agenda. As Sarah Chiumbu 2016 also found, news articles referred to women generically such as residents rather than explaining their involvement, such as organization member or protestor. Instead, WEDs frequently are called the mother, wife, or other side role supporting or grieving a male protagonist rather than as an activist (Sarah Bradshaw, Brian Linneker and Lisa Overton 2017). For instance, in reporting on a conflict against Sefateng Chrome Mine (Zoe Mahopo 2017):

> The mother of a Limpopo man who was allegedly shot dead by police wants justice. Lekgake Manthatha blamed police for her son's death. "Our children were sitting there peacefully when they started shooting at them. Now they have killed my only son. They have killed him as if he were a dog," Lekgake said. "Whoever did this must lose his job so that his mother can also suffer and go hungry, just like me."

Manthatha's protesting was overshadowed by her role supporting her son, another activist. Her portrayal as a bereaved mother also made her seem vindictive. Motherhood was depicted as her dominant identity, as is the case for many African women, whereas fatherhood is a rarely mentioned background detail for men (Devin K. Joshi, Meseret F. Hailu and Lauren J. Reising 2020). Peter J. Kareithi 2014 systematic review shows how, across Africa, women are 3–4 times more likely to be identified by family status. Implications such depictions have for WED silencing are discussed next.

Of the 46 depictions of women as mothers, wives, or widows, 21 did not explicitly explain their involvement even if their presence presumably connected them to the mobilization and other (male) protestors were clearly referred to as such. Not only does this repress WED contributions, but it also appropriates the women's experiences for agendas that are not their own. Their inclusion in media coverage uses descriptors such as struggling, broken-hearted, emotional, fearful, very worried, crying, suffering, devastated, sick, torn apart, deeply hurt, horrified, filled with dread, angry, outraged, desperate, provoked, filled with unbearable sorrow, shocked, left with nothing, and more to render them as subjects of pity. Rebecca Ndlela, for example, was described in coverage of a conflict against Sappi and Mondi (Bongekile Macupe 2015) with:

> Eight months ago, Rebecca Ndlela watched helplessly as about 100 men wearing red overalls demolished her home. All she could do was cry as she witnessed the house that her husband had built for their children four years ago disappear in front of her eyes.

South African media analyses by Peter J. Kareithi (2014) and Chiumbu (2016) indicate that women are overrepresented as victims in poverty and crime stories. These retellings downplay WED's involvement to suit their agenda, whether it is to reduce them to "poverty porn" or sensationalize them as irrational mothers rather than as having legitimate subjectivities. Depictions of WEDs homogenize their advocacy and struggles as interchangeable and equally oppressed.

White savior mothers are not exactly wretched

White women are susceptible to hegemonic motherhood differently. Given South Africa's context leading to class differences and social/geographical distancing from the worst impacts of EDCs, white women experience environmental injustices on another scale, for example in having less reported direct violence in Table 1. Subsequently, media reports depict white WEDs as concerned citizens rather than as desperate mothers. Owing to their relatively less dire or personal reasons, although white women's advocacy still adhered to feminine stereotypes of community focus, only Federation for a Sustainable Environment president Mariette Liefferink was accredited as a mother, and in a more nuanced way.

Table 1. Matrix query of women defenders.

	Black	Coloured	Indian	White
Total	46	0	4	35
Occupation	*in the 98 reports, only 58 listed job information			
Peasant farmer	7	0	0	0
Blue collar informal	5	0	0	0
Blue collar formal	7	0	0	0
White collar	9	0	2	20
Unemployed	5	0	0	0
Violence				
Murders	1	0	0	0
Attacks	14	0	0	1
Death threats	4	0	0	2
Arrests	7	0	0	1
Smear campaigns	2	0	0	4

Reports describe her as not just a devoted mother trying to incite people to "think about your children," but also as someone "armed with a strong spirit of social justice" owing to many other experiences (John Vidal 2011).

Instead of reductive tropes, her motherhood is combined with her missionary work and social justice legal background to explain her agenda. Although media reports added details such as her "buying a dozen sickly sweet drinks" for mining-affected people or even bringing chicken to them on Christmas implied that she treated them as an extension of family, these same articles develop her character as a woman who intentionally subverts narratives, describing her mannerisms as bold and atypical (Laura Wright 2008). Although white women are also subject to monolithic tropes of racialized femininity, in these cases, there may be a power difference in how strongly these tropes are associated with white WEDs. As Wright (2008) explains, white South African feminists often find themselves in self-negating narratives between being subjected as women while also being colonial aggressors. Liefferink and the other white WEDs in the study thus did not entirely avoid hegemonic femininity. Their depictions support Dianne Scott and Catherine Oelofse's (2002) observations of white women living further from pollution mainly advocating from the outside lodging complaints individually in a savior-like narrative.

The underdog narrative and (black) women as self-sacrificing superheroes

The predominant narrative of black WEDs depicts them as underdogs, "a person or group of people with less power, money, etc. than the rest of society" one roots for to succeed despite being "considered to be the weakest and the least likely to win" (Cambridge English Dictionary n.d.). I refer to the underdog narrative as recurring characterizations of WEDs as tenacious despite violence, harassment, or unequal and increasing burdens. Although favorable to their image, such narratives may also homogenize black women especially. Among all 97 mentioned WEDs, 30 were described as underdogs 79 times. Specific words used include survivors, resolute, determined, bold, leaders, warriors, fighters, brave, tireless, not scared of being arrested, defiantly patient, will not give up/betray/stop fighting, saving lives/the environment/wildlife and more. One example is Fikile Ntshangase, an assassinated community leader mobilizing against Tendele's Somkhele coal mine. Described as an "incredibly outspoken" "courageous activist" and "grandmother" who "did not compromise her ethics," she is often quoted saying, "I cannot sell out my people and if need be, I will die for my people" in her "firm opposition" despite "threats of violence and intimidation" (Khaya Koko 2020; Jarryd Neves 2020; Minoshni Pillay 2020). Another well-known case in KwaZulu-Natal is that of still living Nonhle Mbuthuma, who along with fellow WEDs "asserted their rights" against Xolobeni dune mining despite being on a hit list and "things getting worse" after the murder of a male comrade. Like Ntshangase, she is "prepared to die for the land" and is "not going anywhere" (Sheree Bega 2019; "We Will Die for Our Land" 2016). Although their stories are distinct and complex (one against coal mining, the other against sand mining), reporting follows commonly understood, simplistic cultural hero scripts, making these different events seem alike. This trope is

gendered in focusing on sacrifice and community following the patriarchal fantasy of women as morally upright, dedicated to family/community, and self-sacrificing (Barbara Sutton 2010).

Pushing past barriers with a smile

Underdog narratives may also pressure WEDs to follow gendered expectations even when trying to expand possibilities for women's advocacy. Reports praise WEDs such as the Black Mambas, an all-female ranger group, for changing a "traditionally male environment" and having "proved them wrong" despite how "people in the community and all over the world didn't believe" in women. Moreover, their story asserts "women can hold meaningful work outside of the home" with not just their conservation, but also their outreach teaching children (Julia Gunther 2015; Cristina Goyanes 2017; Jeffrey Barbee 2015). This echoes Elizabeth Ndlovu mobilizing women to clean Isipingo river pollution, as "the mother of two feels that South African women need to stand up" and "go out into the community and look at how [they] can help" (Kemantha Govender 2010). As groundbreaking as their work is, apolitical reporting sanitizes stories, with little attention brought to injustices necessitating their involvement. Furthermore, their depiction as smiling peacemakers aligns with gendered pressures not to be bold lest they become delegitimized.

By holding women to higher moral standards, the underdog narrative may discredit WEDs as violent and irrational. As Elizabeth Le Roux 2002 explains, the press often polarizes women as good or evil because mainstream discourses leave little room for women to legitimately express frustrations. For example, during a peaceful protest, police arrested Colette Solomons, co-founder of Women on Farms. Coverage repeats "charges of public violence," using indirect wording avoiding implicating anyone for accusing her yet using wording blaming her group for having "blocked the road" to suggest "police took action" rightfully against her. Even positive or neutral reports had negative wording such as "activist arrested" or that Solomons "accuses," "alleges," "demands," and more without explaining why she mobilized, not allowing her to legitimately voice her arguments (Sune Payne and Noah Tobias 2019; Sune Payne 2020). This is consistent with 11 other incidences of women defenders depicted as alarmists, not having credentials, terrorists, robbers, suspicious, making defamatory accusations, and more. Although every WED in the study was peaceful, her advocacy was interpreted as threatening. Such delegitimization was uneven across demographics.

White experts are not exactly underdogs

Although all women are subject to gendered narratives, white WEDs had more space for recognition than did their black counterparts. A matrix query of participants' race and role in an EDC revealed that of the 35 white women, 17 were referred to as experts, 9 were leaders, and 8 were protestors aside from one interviewee without a clear role. Meanwhile, of the 62 black women, only 2 were called experts, 16 were leaders, 25 were protestors, and 19 had undefined participation. Beyond reflecting a disparity in

employment and participation opportunities granted to women of varying race and status, these unequal proportions may also indicate media reports' differing validation of WED's experiences and contributions depending on positionality.

A discourse analysis of white defenders' roles shows they were often introduced according to their job titles with attention to their specialties. Examples include "Carika van Zyl, chairperson of the West Coast Environmental Protection Association (WCEPA), which opposes the mine"("Mining for Water in Saldanha" 2017) and "Robyn Hugo, an attorney and head of the Cape Town-based Centre for Environmental Rights Pollution & Climate Change Programme" (Paul Burkhardt 2020). For protestors, specific terms such as "Melita Steele, senior Greenpeace Africa's Climate and Energy campaigner" and "climate change expert" contributed to white women's authority ("Greenpeace Slams New Nuclear Plant" 2017; "Greenpeace Stages Protest" 2011). Meanwhile, black women's involvement was often described with less concrete terms tied to family or community if mentioned at all. Examples include "Duduzile Mkhwanazi, a local farmer and mother of three" rather than antimining protestor (Jason Burke 2018), or Bawinile Mchebi, "daughter of a veteran of the Pondoland uprising of 1960" despite being an Amadiba Crisis Committee member (Lucas Ledwaba 2019). Such patterns not only contribute to rendering WED stories invisible, but also homogenize the mentioned few. Representational differences become more evident when considering implications applied to the underdog narrative.

The underdog narrative is often used to impart a sense of gender empowerment; however, its uneven tokenization does little to challenge WED silencing. Pumla Dineo Gqola (2007) criticizes the "dominant talk of empowerment of women" because it expects women to strive to achieve higher and become empowered to attain recognition of "honorary" whiteness or maleness instead of transforming systems and society to accept diverse people's contributions, experiences, and struggles (p. 116). Tropes promoting the exceptionality of prominent women defenders may indirectly suggest that it is enough to recognize certain nonwhite women defenders because if they have achieved success, they have attained a comparable level of privilege as whites.

The case of partnership between mining rights advocate Elisa Louw and Ph.D. student Michelle Goliath, for example, exemplifies empowerment speech overshadowing systemic issues. Goliath is credited for helping female miners such as Louw obtain permits. Goliath is depicted concretely as a spokesperson and researcher, whereas Louw has a reductive profile as a desperate mother underdog with less explicit explanation of her mobilizations and more focus on her perseverance through suffering. "Thanks to Goliath's passion for helping people who have run out of conventional employment options," Louw is quoted saying "she helped us to obtain our legal permit to mine . . . I could go home and sleep without worrying about the safety of the old people and children who are mining. The permit changed my life as a woman. My voice is heard; my words count. I am proud of myself" (Tehoho Setena 2019; Getrude Makhafola 2019). In focusing on one woman's difficulties having her voice heard until those words were spoken through the lips of a white comrade, empowerment discourse does not invoke systemic injustices to change. Reporting rather implies that if other women can endure and mobilize, they can better their situations, leading to increased burdens on black women to resolve repression themselves.

Discussion

Though showcasing their stories acknowledges women defenders' tenacity in dire circumstances, some reports may inadvertently stereotype women defenders with motherhood tropes or contribute to an underdog narrative of mainly black women as not allowed to be anything less than extraordinary. I argue that when attempting to empower women defenders, such scripts strategically essentialize WEDs as self-sacrificing, which reflects the intersectionally uneven erasure of women's diverse experiences and contributes to structural and cultural violence.

WED voices beyond the script of motherhood

Maternal stereotypes contribute to implicit violence. For instance, relegating WEDs to support roles and assuming they cannot contribute valuable knowledge bar women from opportunities, contributing to structural violence disadvantaging women. Additionally, as Phoebe Godfrey 2005 observes, women's family safety concerns force them into a narrow range of acceptable forms of mobilizing. Their activism often incites husbands' wrath and other criticisms for allegedly acting against their family when they mobilize precisely to defend them. Serial brutality may also occur as women defenders tend to not just be targeted themselves. Owing to their caretaking responsibilities, hitmen attack their families, communities, and the spaces they can be in.

Meanwhile, repeated images of victimized (black) mothers elicit pity and shock for agendas that are not their own. Applying Crenshaw's (2016) intersectionality, this is a South African manifestation of silencing specific to converging marginalizations of womanhood, blackness, and poverty. Many reports' descriptions of women depicted them as passively victimized, hysterical mothers, conflating womanhood with caretaking and emotional (hyper)sensitivity (Scott et al. 2002; Le Roux 2002). Moreover, historically marginalized blackness normalizes black deaths, violent experiences, and collective trauma, as well as denies their humanity and subjectivity in situations worsened by poverty and loss of livelihoods (Chiumbu 2016). Media perpetuates cultural violence by homogenizing WED experiences within universal scripts of vulnerability and virtuousness (Arora-Jonsson 2011). The feminization of poverty, inferior racial status for black people, and gendered social expectations situate WEDs as victims rather than actors. Consequently, some writers overemphasize and essentialize their suffering, appropriating their struggles for an environmental agenda, which white women are less subject to owing to more control of the narrative. Yet beyond differently colored experiences of injustice, although some reports acknowledged intersectional identities, focusing on marginalities obscures the privileges that many women defenders also have besides race, such as class, sexuality, ability, connections, or more (Joshi et al. 2020). Therefore, the motherhood trope is often problematic in not only exacerbating counter-progressive stereotyping of black women especially, but also in the location of maternal/women's activism within marginality and not empowerment.

Despite its downfalls, the motherhood trope grants some defenders a voice where they had none previously. When not imposed and used to victimize them, women taking control of the narrative themselves may strategically essentialize motherhood to extend their influence. As Anderson et al. (2011) write, African women's activism

has a long history of strategically essentializing diverse women into traditional narratives of femininity to gain moral leverage in their advocacy owing to their ascribed pacifism and devotion to nurturing and protecting life. In a structurally racist South African context normalizing the violent policing and disposability of black lives, black maternal activism and public grieving politicizes their suffering. Erica S. Lawson 2018 suggests that reclaiming motherhood tropes challenges historically problematic stereotypes of black people as ignorant or aggressive in contexts justifying violence and silencing against them. Hegemonic stereotypes of woman as more caring or less corrupt can also be intentionally leveraged to increase women defenders' legitimacy (Joshi et al. 2020). However, in line with Raymond Suttner's (2012) arguments, much care must be taken not to obscure the diversity of WEDs and their uneven experiences of violence in a dynamic context where women and those reporting about them should no longer rely on counterproductive tropes. Such tropes are partially responsible for why the women themselves typically do not have agency over representing their own stories to begin with. Their stories must not be reduced to universal scripts.

WEDs as more than just your friendly neighborhood superhero

The underdog narrative perpetuates representational violence against especially black WEDs through implying that the solution is that women should be braver in gendered ways. Firstly, idealizing women defenders for sacrificing themselves deflects pressure from systems producing injustices. As was the case with many of the articles, this becomes an intersectional issue of structural violence against poor black women, who, owing to gendered labor and moral expectations, must fill gaps not met by public services and the government (International Alliance on Natural Resources in Africa 2016). Their assumed universal vulnerability normalizes violence toward low-income black women as inherent "Others" lumped together as suffering underdogs. Less emphasis thus covers unequal power distributions in South Africa across demographics of women (Arora-Jonsson 2011). Meanwhile, white WEDs were recognized for their unique contributions even when only briefly mentioned in texts mainly about their black counterparts.

Depictions of WEDs as underdogs contribute to cultural violence by portraying WEDs as martyrs, ostracizing those not adhering to notions of how they should speak and behave. Pumla Dineo Gqola (2007) points out a "cult of femininity" wherein women must perform suitable behaviors to be "safe" and "passive" (p. 116). This renders gender-based violence, such as rape, sexual harassment, and normalized violent discourse about women's bodies invisible even when following expectations to be quiet and nonconfrontational. WEDs must thus cope with being pushed around even within mobilizing groups, where many are subjugated in support roles in environments inconducive to speaking out (Susan Buckingham and Rakibe Kulcur 2009; Pumla Dineo Gqola 2007). Throughout most articles in this study, positive depictions of WEDs construed women defenders according to these ideals, perhaps using strategic essentialism to appeal to a wider audience that may otherwise see such women as aggressors. South African black WEDs may also suffer from the "angry black woman" stereotype owing to intersecting ideologies about race, class, and gender

coercing black women into adhering to expectations for politeness or else face accusations of being hyperaggressive, deflecting attention from accusers (Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood 2017).

Overall, the underdog narrative has been a positive change in representations of women highlighting their overlooked environmental justice contributions and violent experiences. However, to truly give diverse women defenders platforms for their voices, they must also speak their truths rather than be tone policed or have their stories presentable only as strategically essentialized tales of saints. More WEDs challenge such barriers by embracing being "unruly" or "difficult" (Pumla Dineo Gqola 2007). Those who write their own stories resist attempts to make their image more palatable and apolitical by freely representing the complexities of life at the frontlines.

Conclusion

Throughout South Africa, discursive violence against women makes them among the most burdened and silenced. While such violence is not exclusively against women, WED representation carries uniquely gendered cultural tropes strategically essentializing their activism within maternal themes produced differently from those about masculinity. News reports shape and draw upon cultural narratives about femininity, blackness, and poverty, influencing perceptions of ecological distribution conflicts and the intersectionally marginalized women defenders involved in them. This research investigated how South African WEDs are represented in the media, and how such depictions reflect their experiences of violence, silencing, and empowerment. Findings indicate two narratives of motherhood and of underdogs dominating media discourse, both of which pressure black women especially. White women, though subject to hegemonic femininity, still have more voice, and subsequently have their own manifestations of the narratives. Yet while black women defenders' diverse struggles and contributions are increasingly brought to light, they are also strategically essentialized as universally vulnerable and burdening them in ways adhering to the very stereotypes silencing them to begin with.

This is a distinctly gendered manifestation of structural and cultural violence. Throughout use of language, imagery, and more, culturally violent constructions of WEDs as suffering and self-sacrificing downplay their knowledge and experiences. Consequently, institutions perpetuate structural violence by giving less space for WEDs to exert equal agency. Even when mobilizing, they must use socially sanctioned strategies. Such inequalities feed into other manifestations of violence as women increasingly have odds stacked against them while also shouldering more responsibilities. Still, in contrast to many of the studies in current literature on depictions of actors in South African EDCs, this study indicates that reporting is increasingly supportive of WEDs as a group that has historically been the most invisible and looked down upon. The next step is thus to shift the narrative away from long-standing prejudices, instead contributing to meaningful transformations beyond old scripts, something more WEDs are doing as proudly "difficult."

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

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