

Report on Women RISE Writing Retreat led by fieldwork researchers

held in Cintsa East, Eastern Cape, South Africa

on 15 - 18 August 2023

1. Introduction

A writing retreat for the Women RISE fieldwork researchers was convened in Cintsa West, Eastern Cape, South Africa, by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) with its partners in a "Women RISE" project sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada: McGill University in Canada; Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in the Eastern Cape; and the Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council (ECSECC). The purpose of the writing retreat was to help the researchers prepare their academic papers for presentation at the ASNA conference in September 2023.

Attended by the project's researchers, Zipho Xhego, Anelitha Tukela, Bonelwa Nogqaza, Zikhona Mtwa, Tandokazi Silosini, Nombulelo Shinta and Kamvalethu Miza, the writing retreated offered the research team a space to:

- Present to each other their paper ideas.
- Assist each other with conceptualizing the ideas and arguments to make for their papers.
- Share data and evidence from the different research sites that the researchers are located in to support the claims we each make in our papers.
- Provide a conducive space for intensive writing of the papers away from the distraction of the field.

2. Retreat Programme and Overview

Women Rise Writing Retreat, 15th -18th August 2023

Tuesday- 15th of August

17:00- 19:00: Arrivals and settling in

19:00- 21:00: Dinner

Wednesday- 16th of August: Presentations and ideas for the papers and feedback from the panel

9:00am 9:15am: Tandokazi presentation

9:15 am-9:30 am: Discussion and feedback

9:30am- 9:45am: Anelitha presentation

9:45 am-10:00 am: Discussion and feedback

10am-10: 15am: Zipho presentation

10: 15 am – 10: 30am: Discussion and feedback

10: 30 am- 10:45am: Zikhona presentation

10:45 am-12pm: Discussion and feedback

12pm-12:15pm: Kamvalethu presentation

12:15pm-12:30pm: Discussion and feedback

12:30pm-12:45pm: Nombulelo presentation

12:45pm- 1pm: Discussion and feedback

1pm- 1:15pm: Bonelwa presentation

1:15pm – 13:30pm: Discussion and feedback

13:30 – 14:15 Lunchtime

14:15 – 3:15pm: Writing

3.15pm – 3:30pm **Break**

3.30pm – 4:15 Writing

Thursday 17th of August: Writing day

9am-9:30am: Discussion on writing progress

9:30 – 10:30: sharing of data from different field sites

Break

10:45am- 13:00: Writing session

Lunch break

2:00pm- 3:00pm: Writing session

Break

3:15pm-4:00pm: Writing session

Friday 18th of August:

9am- 11am: finalizing papers and submitting to mentors

Departure

3. Paper presentations and peer feedback

Each of the researchers gave a brief overview of what they were working on with their paper and what kind of evidence and data they would need from the other researchers. After each presentation, the team would give ideas and suggestions on how to approach the idea and share examples from their field sites. The researchers also had one-on-one sessions to share data during the writing process. Below are excerpts of the presentations detailing the provisional titles of the papers, the main ideas and a summary of the feedback that each of the researchers received from their peers.

3.1 Tandokazi Silosini - “Women talk” Eziko: Gendered Subjectivities in the Home Space

This paper examines how the gathering of women and labour performed during traditional ceremonies, particularly funeral preparations, serve as a space for the re-production of feminine subjectivities. The COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) resulted in a suspension of gatherings of

people. This meant that the performance of traditional ceremonies and rituals was limited as per the COVID-19 lockdown regulations instituted in terms of the National State of Disaster in 2020. The pandemic brought a spotlight on funerals which were listed as "super spreader events". In the 'post-pandemic' era the funeral is an important sight of ruptures and continuities in the socio-cultural practices and meanings that the funeral demonstrates in rural areas. While the pandemic was characterized by isolation and disconnection through 'social distancing', the lifting of the National State of Disaster presents an opportunity to investigate how post-pandemic social spaces and gatherings have evolved. The division of labour and space in rural areas of Mpondoland follows a gendered structure as both men and women have designated roles and duties which they perform in the home and ceremonies and gathers. The funeral is no different. *Eziko* is the space designated to women for the cooking labour which is women's work. By analyzing the nature of the conversations had *with Eziko* about funeral preparations I attended, I argue that this cooking space serves a psycho-social function by bringing village women together and how death and funerals illustrate the importance of community networks of care and labour.

3.2 Anelitha Tukela- *The "Violence of Hope": Women and the New Vigilantism in Kwelerha, Eastern Cape.*

This paper focuses on the rise of new forms of vigilantism led by women in former Ciskei's rural areas in the post-pandemic crisis. There has been a rise of Gender-based violence and criminality in rural areas, where women during the COVID-19 pandemic became targets of crime. Even during the pandemic, violence against women had become one of the leading topic, however, due to the failure and corruption of the South African police in these communities, women had to stand up and find ways to deal with the violence. In Kwelerha during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rise in crime, where the criminals around the community targeted women's businesses; women had to find new ways of protecting themselves from such crimes and that resulted in new forms of vigilantism that would offer protection where South African police had failed. Women became the leaders of these new structures of vigilantism to bring hope to the community and remove the stigma that women are easy targets of crime in the area. This brought hope within the community, imposed fear on perpetrators and showed the capabilities of

women. This paper aims to investigate the nature of their beliefs in and support of what we call new violence of hope and explore whether the new structures will ultimately offer women the protection and freedom they seek. The paper also wonders whether rural women have any reason to be optimistic about this violence against the backdrop of the history of rural violence and women.

3.3 Zipho Xhego- The Calling of Bees: The Power of the Small Assemblies of Women in Cwebe, Eastern Cape.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural South Africa, women face the challenge of rebuilding their lives against the backdrop of devastation and death. In these landscapes, families look for signs of hope and opportunities that will trigger the possibility of renewal and rebuilding. In rural homesteads in Cwebe, hopeful signs are often associated with movements around cattle byre or kraal (ebuthlanti), where the ancestors visit. Today, most kraals stand empty, but families retain them as places to engage with family ancestors in times of need. After COVID-19, many rural families have been overseeing these spaces where the presence of bees can be meaningful. In Bosnia in Europe, the anthropologist, Larisa Jasarevic, claims that bees are believed to be divinely inspired by knowledge. They do more than assist with pollination and produce honey to eat. Like humans, they are a species that imparts knowledge and sustains human life. Bees are associated with well-being and are seen as a life-sustaining force. This is also true in Bomvana land on the former Transkei coast. The assembly of bees ignites excitement and encourages families to meet and consider a change that often results in collective rituals. This paper aims to explore various forms of informal assembly amongst women in post-pandemic Cwebe and to assess how these assemblies contribute to their health and livelihoods. It also reflects on how other developments (such as the digital payment of grants) undermine the capacity for assembly and debate. The paper sees women joining various assemblies, including frequent gatherings at local shebeens and discusses what that might mean.

3.4 Zikhona Mtwá- Pregnancy and Reproductive Health in Times of Crisis: The Impact of the Covid Pandemic on Young Women's Health.

This paper is concerned with youth pregnancies and reproductive health services in rural areas. The paper focuses on the customary forms of pregnancy management in rural areas. It explores how pregnancy was and sometimes still is managed by women and their close kin without bio-medical intervention and how pregnancy and childbirth are navigated in without bio-medical services and state assistance within the framework of customary practices. The paper then considers how young women currently access the reproductive health services offered by the state, how pregnant women and their families use these services, and how this has impacted pre-existing cultural practices for rural women. Against this backdrop, the paper turns to the province-wide closure of clinics and hospitals during the pandemic lockdown and how that impacted young women's pregnancy management and reproductive health. Did the young women return to past practices or use private health practitioners as service providers? One of the themes in the paper is the commodification at the local level of the free health services of the state in this time of scarcity. In contrast, others returned to customary practices within families. The paper concludes with a discussion of the post-pandemic realities for young women and what interventions might best serve the interests of young women today.

3.5 Kamva Miza- Rural Governance and the state: The moral economy of service delivery at the margins in South Africa.

The state is not a cold monster; it is the correlative of a particular way of governing,” states Michel Foucault. “The problem is how this way of governing develops, what its history is, how it expands, how it contracts, how it is extended to a particular domain, how it invents, forms, and develops new practices.” In other words, one should not first posit the existence of the state and then examine how it manifests itself, but “start with these concrete practices” to discover the nature of governance and the practice of the state. This paper aims to apply these insights to the nature of state formation and development practice in the Eastern Cape concerning rural areas. The paper will start with a discussion of the ideas and practices that exist in both the state and the NGO sectors about the nature of their agency and the meaning of the rural development agenda. What defines this agenda in their minds and ideology, and what practices are best suited to managing this sphere of engagement? The paper will then hone in on the work of four specific

areas of engagement: livelihoods planning, policing, social development, and gender-based violence (GBV) as particular fields of practice. It will investigate the policy imperatives that officially or theoretically structure engagement in these three areas, namely by law, policy and mandate, before exploring how statecraft is created translated and constructed as a set of concrete practices, both in the past and in the present. The particular focus of the ethnographic work in the paper will also not primarily focus on exchanges and interactions between elites (state officials and tender entrepreneurs) but rather on the way the state constructs and encounters rural people at the clinic, the police station, at school, on a what project or land restitution scheme. Conceptually, then the paper seeks to depart from a dominant normative (capable, constitutional etc.) or ideological (developmental or neo-liberal) imperatives of the state to one which defines the state through the moral and social practice in context. The paper also avoids the pitfalls of perspectives that limit their focus to the theme of ‘unintended consequences’ consequences of development by connecting the consequential and accidental as state formation.

3.6 Bonelwa Nogqaza- Open Wounds: Covid and the Politics of Cuts in Tsolo, Eastern Cape.

This paper explores the consequences of framing the Covid pandemic as an issue of culture and custom in rural South Africa and the implications of this for the way culture has been re-politicised in this time of ‘recovery and reconstruction’. It mediates this discussion through an account of “wounds” and how the wounds of the past remain open fields of conflict and debate. The paper focuses on the views of traditional healers, ncibi (surgeons) and rural community members on the mouth as a wound that should not be covered and inxeba, the wound of circumcision. The paper explains local attitudes to the imposition of masks without adequate communication and engagement and the implications of future state intervention in the cultural life of communities through the bans of customary practice. The paper shows how the insensitivity of the state’s COVID response opened the old wounds of colonialism and the visions within communities between believers and non-believers. It shows how these divisions continue to simmer in rural communities and how they have been reignited through the management of the pandemic and other external development initiatives, such as the mining on the Wild Coast,

which has pitted defenders of local cultural practices and the environment against pro-development factions in the same communities.

3.7 Nombulelo Shinta- Reluctant Makotis: Contested Custom and Social Hierarchy in the Post-pandemic Rural Eastern Cape.

Young newlywed women play an active role in family rituals and customary practices, where they perform unpaid labour in rural communities in South Africa. In the Eastern Cape, these women are known as makotis (plural) and are always at the heart of any traditional ceremony, preparing food, helping older women, serving men, and performing the bulk of the labour at these events. During the pandemic, the makotis found themselves at the frontline as they were asked to clean potentially COVID-infected bodies of the dead before burials. They were also asked to serve in risky conditions at Covid funerals, while others stood back. Being pressed into these roles, generated debate among young women concerning the dangerous and unpaid labour they were asked to perform. Since the pandemic, there are now many more uMcimbi (rituals) taking place in the villages as families being that their future well-being will depend on their communication with their ancestors, who have been angered by the shutdown of customary practices since 2020. This has meant that young married women living in the village or a nearby town are required for (unpaid) labour every weekend. The paper focuses on the social dynamics amongst the makotis as a group or category and how this interaction generates critiques of customary roles and practices. There is also tension between the home makotis and those who come into the village from the urban areas and are perceived to do less work.

4. Comments and Recommendations

The writing retreat was a great success. The presentation and feedback session were very useful for all the researchers. All researchers live in different field sites which are mostly disadvantaged rural areas, which are not very conducive for writing, in these areas they always experience power outages and bad network connectivity. The writing retreat helped them with providing a better writing space, time apart from distractions helped with focus and reflections on writing. The presentation of ideas among researchers helped the researchers to write more and had other

new ideas that came along during the discussion session. The sharing of ideas and data among researchers helped them produce a good presentable academic paper.

The benefits of the workshop as reflected by the researchers on the last day of the writing retreat:

- Having the writing workshop was a great strategy and strengthened the teamwork and collaboration among the researchers.
- The researchers also reflected that the workshop assisted them in terms of constructive criticism that they gave each other during the feedback and discussion sessions.
- Helped in terms of data sharing from other field sites that experienced the same challenges and issues.
- The workshop helped the researchers to debrief about the struggles and challenges they are facing in their respective field sites concerning their mental health and well-being.
- The researchers stated that they learned barriers and enablers to increased writing output during their interactions with other researchers.

The researchers had some recommendations about how future writing retreats in the Women's Rise project can be conducted. The researchers stated that because they arrived at the retreat on Tuesday evening, they were only able to have Wednesday afternoon, and Thursday and 2 hours on Friday morning to write. They recommend that in future, a writing retreat happens over five days instead of four so that we may have Tuesday afternoon, the whole of Wednesday and Thursday for writing and conclude the retreat on Friday.

Conclusion

However, by having a writing retreat researcher realized that getting away from the distractions of daily life is one of the prime benefits of attending a writing retreat. They were retreating from the demands of their everyday lives, as researchers were all in their field sites which were full of distractions from the community as many issues and challenges always need their attention. The workshop helped researchers clear their minds and be more focused on writing as they were

facing struggles of mental health and well-being in their field sites. Therefore, the researchers claimed that the writing workshop created a motivation to write.