

South African Trial Brings Rape into Public View

Author: [Carolyn Dempster](#)

High rates of sexual violence appear rooted in ingrained male attitudes.

The rape trial of Jacob Zuma, South Africa's former deputy president, has resonated throughout a society that was affectionately dubbed the Rainbow Nation in the wake of the collapse of racial apartheid.

Supporters of Zuma, who remains deputy leader of the ruling African National Congress despite being sacked as South Africa's deputy president last June - defied the law by standing outside Johannesburg's High Court, holding aloft images of Zuma's accuser and chanting "Burn the bitch!"

Meanwhile, inside the courtroom, the 31-year-old HIV-positive woman who brought the case was being grilled by Zuma's lawyers about her own sexual history - the prurient details made public for the whole nation to hear.

For millions of the South Africans, but especially the tens of thousands of women and children who are raped every year, the message was patently clear: silence might have been a better option.

South Africa's Medical Research Council estimates that only one in nine rape cases is reported to the police. If the case ever gets to court, only seven per cent of reported rapes lead to a conviction. In the year from April 2004 to March 2005, there were 55,000 reported cases in South Africa.

No wonder, then, that Interpol has claimed that South Africa has one of the highest incidences of rape in the world, a rate comparable with a war zone such as Darfur in western Sudan, Rwanda or wartime Bosnia.

Yet South Africa is today a country at peace. So why is this campaign still being waged against women and children? Why is it that South Africa has produced such a wave of sexual violence? The answers lie in a complex mix of factors to do with male identity and sexuality, gender inequality, distorted cultural and traditional practices, the legacy of apartheid and the spread of the AIDS pandemic.

In spite of a highly liberal constitution that promotes and protects the rights of women and children, the task of changing gender attitudes and behaviour is proving to be a much more complex struggle than South Africa went through when it sidestepped civil war and negotiated the transition to democratic rule.

Prevailing attitudes underscore the urgent need for change. A survey of 2,000 men conducted by the "Men as Partners" project of the Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa found that 22 per cent of them approved of hitting a partner, and more than half believed that rapes were caused by women dressing or walking in a provocative manner.

In 2004, a nationwide study of adolescents based on interviews with nearly 270,000 South African boys and girls aged from 10 to 19 found that 58 per cent of all respondents felt that "sexual violence does not include forcing sex with someone you know".

Lorinda Berg, a clinical psychologist and the director of psychological services with the South African

prisons department has counselled thousands of convicted rapists in the course of her professional career.

"Mostly they are youngsters with very low self esteem," she said. "They don't show any remorse at all. It's as if they don't understand the impact on the victim, or really why it's wrong at all. Once they are taught victim empathy, they begin to understand."

Dr Rachel Jewkes, head of the South African Medical Research Council's Gender and Health Unit, has been studying sexual violence for the past decade. She says rape is "more common in countries with a more pronounced gender hierarchy, and in a culture where violence is used to exert dominance".

Most sociologists agree that rapid political and social change in post-apartheid South Africa has eroded the traditionally privileged position that men used to enjoy. A combination of poverty, unemployment and the empowerment of women has left men of all races feeling marginalised and anxious to re-assert what they believe is their rightful role in society.

These attitudes are compounded by the pervasive silence surrounding male sexuality. Men do not feel comfortable talking about intimate matters.

Mbuyisela Botha heads the South African Men's Forum, an organisation dedicated to involving men in stopping the violence against women. He conducts workshops with men living in townships and squatter settlements, in order to open up discussions around sex and male identity.

"In Zulu we have names for men who enjoy many sexual partners," he said. "These names say you are powerful, strong and virile. And many young boys believe that it is good to have two or three girlfriends, and have sex with all of them.

"Now in my [Zulu] culture we respect women. And in the way that men feel that they can take what they like, when they like - even with violence - our culture has been distorted. Still men decide how, when and where to have sex. They feel it is their right to exert that power."

So when Botha raises subjects like rape and domestic violence and argues the case for a change in mindset, and for more respect for women, he gets a mixed response.

"Some men say it's long overdue, and they agree that rape is a problem. But then other men say these are Eurocentric ideas and they have no place in an African setting," he said.

Faced with what appeared to be a tidal wave of rapes, especially of young children, the government passed a law in 1998 prescribing minimum sentences for rape. But even the prospect of a life spent behind bars has not curbed the high incidence.

Child rape, a taboo in most societies and cultures of the world, has now reached alarming proportions in South Africa. One local radio station has described it disapprovingly as "the national sport."

The Childline organisation estimates that one in four girls and one in five boys growing up in South Africa is

at risk of being raped before the age of 16. In 2001, the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town released the findings of a nine-year study showing that the average age of children brought in for reconstructive surgery following a rape was three years old.

Superintendent Andre Neethling, a senior police officer and head of the Sexual Offences Unit in the densely populated province of Gauteng, with Johannesburg at its heart, has been investigating child rapes for most of a career that has spanned some 20 years.

"Our child protection officers have a caseload at any one time of about 80 cases," he said. "And about 85 per cent of those cases are chronic, which means the abuse has been going on for a long time. Usually children will only disclose when they are older."

Silence and stigma cloak the true extent of child rape. It was only when a nine-month-old baby girl was raped in the town of Upington in October 2001 that South Africa's collective conscience was stung to the quick. The baby was given the nickname "Tshepang", meaning "Hope".

Charlene Smith, a rape survivor, journalist and activist, explained why this rape provoked a storm of public moral outrage. "A baby lacks the capacity to talk, or run away," she said. "And it says some very serious things about us as a society. It says we are a very sick society".

For Lara Foot-Newton, a playwright and director whose own daughter was also nine months old at the time, the story made a deep impression, "It [the story] was everywhere and it wouldn't leave me alone. Who could do such a thing? It depressed me. I started reading about rape, talking about infant rape; I mean, who could tear an infant to pieces...How can a human being become that?

"And then I looked at the figures: 20,000 child rapes reported every year... and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Which is why I decided to write the play 'Tshepang' to promote understanding."

Breaking the silence has been critical in tackling the problem - more so in the face of an AIDS pandemic with some 5.6 million South Africans already HIV-positive. In this context, any rape, but especially that of a very young child, can prove to be a death sentence.

There is also growing evidence that in the absence of clear messages about the causes and treatment of HIV/AIDS, many HIV-positive men still believe the myth that they can cleanse themselves of the virus through sexual intercourse with a virgin, preferably a child.

Charlene Smith tells a story which illustrates the damage caused by such views, "I was working with a nine-year-old child whose mother took her to the mother's boyfriend who was HIV-positive, and the mother watched while he raped the child. The rapist admitted this because he believed he could save himself."

A newly-released study by the Simelela Rape Centre in Khayelitsha, a black township in Cape Town, shows that that 442 rape survivors sought treatment in the centre's clinic last year. Of these, the youngest was a one-year-old baby and the oldest a 69-year-old grandmother. One in three cases involved girls aged 14 or younger.

Whether or not the spectre of AIDS is fuelling child rape, there is no question that the pandemic is creating

a generation of AIDS orphans – boys and girls who are made vulnerable to abuse because they have lost their parents to the disease.

Rose Tamae, runs the Let us Grow organisation in the sprawling settlement of Orange Farm, west of Johannesburg, describes how such children can be trapped by their circumstances, “There was the case of this little girl: her mother was sick with AIDS, and the local tuck-shop owner would give the girl a loaf of bread in return for sex. She was scared of telling anyone and wanted to help her sick mother. She was trapped in a terrible situation.”

In a society where violence is often the norm, and risk-taking is regarded as desirable behaviour among young men, the prospects for rolling back the tide of rape and containing the spread of the AIDS pandemic seem slim.

In the case of the Zuma rape trial, a great deal of damage has been done, not least because the defendant used to head both South Africa’s Moral Regeneration Campaign and the National AIDS Council.

This trial differs from other rape cases in that it has been played out in the glare of publicity.

In the words of gender activist and former ANC member of parliament Pregs Govender, the case provides “an opportunity for South Africa’s women to clarify and change the power inequalities and definitions of masculinity”. It is, says Govender, a chance to “affirm that women and children are not objects to be owned and disposed of as men please”.

Carolyn Dempster is a South African writer and broadcaster who has worked as a correspondent for the BBC World Service, CBC Radio (Canada), and WGBH Radio in Boston.

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