

## Rape a symptom of transitional turmoil

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*Media coverage of cases has mystified and distorted the problem by not showing that this violent crime knows no boundaries of race, class or politics*

Since the recent high-profile rapes in the Johannesburg suburbs of Malvern and Observatory, the phones at the Trauma Clinic of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) have been ringing off the hook. In itself, this is not unusual. Nor has the already high proportion of callers seeking counselling because they have been raped, gang-raped or victimized through domestic sexual violence, changed significantly. However, in the past two weeks an unusually large number of the callers have been journalists whose primary questions have been: "Can you give statistics on the upsurge in the number of rapes in the last two months? What is causing this rape epidemic?". To us, it appeared as if South Africa had suddenly discovered rape.

It is not disputed that South Africa has a very high incidence of rape. Nor is there any doubt that for the survivors, rape is one of the most devastating personal traumas - not least because of the stigma and "shame" often endured by victims as a result of the popular misconceptions and mythology associated with this kind of crime. For all these reasons, media attention and civic education with respect to rape is clearly to be welcomed.

But sensationalist and emotional media responses have arguably done more to mystify and distort the problem of rape, than they have done to elucidate it. Any observer of the media coverage given to the Observatory and Malvern rape cases could be forgiven for making at least two assumptions which are intrinsic to the mythology associated with rape in South Africa. Firstly, they may well assume that the majority of rape cases are across racial lines - that most rapists are young black men and that their preferred victims are young white women. Secondly, readers may also assume that rape is mostly committed by sexually motivated strangers.

It is ironic that these are the very myths about rape that so many women's organisations, NGOs and rape counsellors have for years been trying to redress. Rape as a crime - and the trauma which it causes - knows no boundaries of race, class or political persuasion. Although available information is sketchy, it is nonetheless apparent that rape occurs considerably more frequently within racial groups than it does across the "colour line". In South Africa, the majority of rape victims are impoverished black women who can least afford or access the medical and psychological attention which they so badly require.

Furthermore, despite receiving considerable media attention, the majority of rapes do not occur between strangers. More often than not the perpetrators are not

unknown intruders, but rather are known to the victims. "Date-rape", rape by neighbours, husbands, fathers and relatives are the most common types of rape. Rather than being a product of rampant sexual desire, rape is an assertion of power and a violent crime of aggression.

Finally, far from being "new", the magnitude of the problems of rape and gang-rape have been enduring manifestations of the turmoil and social conflict of violent transition in apartheid South Africa. For at least the last decade, the political and criminal violence rooted in apartheid - and which has so dominated the front pages of the commercial press - has been matched by incremental increases in the more "private" phenomena of rape, marital battery and child abuse. This has been an ongoing symptomatic manifestation of the growing powerlessness and perceived emasculation of men in this violence-ridden and traditionally male-dominated society.

There are some clear illustrations of this. It is no coincidence that the phenomenon of "jack-rolling" - a colloquial term given to gang-rape - emerged in Soweto during the tumultuous township conflicts of the mid and late 1980s. The term has its origins in the name of a youth gang called the "Jack-Rollers" who's modus operandi was primarily the gang-rape of young girls, rather than any other more "traditional" forms of acquisitive crime.

Rape and violence against women or children, represents a "displacement of aggression" which is rooted in violent social conflict. In this manner, men of all races symbolically reassert their power and masculinity within the last social arenas in which they still traditionally hold sway - over women and children in the family and the home.

Child rape too has continued unabated. On any one day, clinical psychologists at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's Trauma Clinic, may see as many as fifteen cases of child rape. Yet even with a welcome recent upsurge in public awareness of child abuse, such crimes have routinely gone under-reported or under-analyzed in the commercial press.

The actions of gang-rapists cannot be divorced from the decayed social fabric bequeathed by apartheid, including the "bastardization" of the family and the destruction of benevolent parental authority. Nor can it be detached from the deficits in our criminal justice system, the failures of our education system, entrenched sexism, or the history of institutionalised violence in South African society. However, the media have often failed by not reporting on these issues and the complexities of the social phenomenon of rape. Instead they have tended to focus on the "drama" of serial rape or have chosen to report on - and have frequently sensationalized - the human dramas of the victims. This has often involved painting doomsday scenarios of victims who are irreparably damaged and for whom there appears to be no solution and no future. These are precisely the wrong messages to convey to the 20 or so other women whose rapes go unreported for every reported rape case. These scenarios deny the experiences of the women and children who have survived the ordeal of rape and who have embarked on a process of healing.

Perhaps most striking is the lack of public and media attention given to the ordeal which survivors of rape must endure in the form of "secondary victimisation" which

they go through at the hands of the criminal justice system in South Africa once they have reported their cases. It is positive that the Observatory and Malvern cases have cast the public spotlight on such issues as the application of bail regulations. However, much of this has been shaped by a punitive obsession with alleged perpetrators, rather than being viewed through the perspectives of the victims themselves.

It is not a tightening of bail regulations that secures successful prosecutions or that will re-build the popular credibility of our criminal justice system. Until we deal with the investigative incompetencies and the grave difficulties of transforming police investigations into successful prosecutions, our criminal justice system will continue to re-victimise rape survivors by failing to apprehend the rapists.

In his stated intention to amend the Constitution so as to limit the right to a presumption of innocence until proven guilty, the Minister of Justice substitutes our collective human rights for the failures of the criminal justice system, as the major source of impunity for rapists. Yet it is arguable that it is in fact the "politics of impunity" which is more responsible.

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