

## Adolescents' Perceptions of Rape in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** In order to study adolescents' perception of rape, relevant literature pertaining to rape and adolescence as a stage in the development of an individual was reviewed. The descriptive method of research was used to collect data with regard to adolescents' perception of rape. Data was analysed using inferential statistics. From the information gathered the following are the most important findings of the research regarding adolescents' perception of rape: adolescents are aware that rape is unlawful, they believe that effective law enforcement can curb rape. Adolescents do not believe that a culture of violence contributes to rape and that women are reluctant to report being raped. Adolescents' perception is that rape victims have difficulty in coping with relationships with other people. The study reveals that it is vital for rape victims to talk about the rape. Adolescents perceive rape as a crime of aggression that decreases the self-esteem of women. They do not believe that there is any relationship between rape and family violence. The study also revealed that there is a significant difference statistically between the responses of males and females regarding responses to question that deal with rape whereas there is no significant difference between the responses of males and females regarding questions based on adolescence as a developmental stage. Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations: adolescents must lobby support to ensure more effective law enforcement, speak out against rape and must not be put under pressure by peers to engage in sex. Parents need to communicate more effectively with adolescents. Law enforcement must be stepped up in order to curb rape. Programmes must be put in place to educate adolescents regarding rape.

### INTRODUCTION

Rape is a traumatic event in the life of a person, is *inter alia*, a brutal attack against women, almost always involves force and violence and has devastating consequences for the individual. The consequences may be psychological or physical and the individual has to cope with them in order to maintain equilibrium. The epidemiology of rape has become an issue of considerable political importance and sensitivity. Rape levels of non-consensual and coerced sex are clearly high in South Africa (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). South Africa, according to Sande (2010), records the highest rates of rape in the world. Child rights groups say that a woman is raped every 17 seconds (Joffe-Walt 2013). Although women have for the past 30 years openly organized and educated the public around the issues of rape and given support to rape victims, it is still not easy for women to talk about rape as it makes them feel uncomfortable. They avoid discussing rape. Some women believe that the rape victim is not completely innocent. Such attitudes are deeply rooted in society, which makes it very difficult for rape victims to speak about their experiences. Rape has to be viewed as a social problem rather than a product of individual psychopathology that is so common in criminological disclosure. Whilst recog-

nizing that in a small proportion of cases there are individual factors of overwhelming importance in the perception of rape, individualistic explanations are inadequate for understanding a phenomenon which is experienced by a very high proportion of South African women and perpetrated by a large proportion of men. A survey conducted in 2009 by the Medical Research Council found that 28 per cent of men in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces said that they had raped a woman or girl (Sande 2011). Clearly the most important underlying causes of the problem of rape are rooted in society, and fragmented though the data are, they point to gender power inequalities and low status of women (Heeralal 2004). Other factors of importance are poverty, the generally high levels of violence in society and school abuse. A study, conducted by South Africa's Medical Research Council in 2009, reveals a deeply rooted culture of violence against women, in which men rape in order to feel powerful, and do so with impunity, believing that their superiority entitles them to vent their frustrations on women and children. The men most likely to rape, the researchers found, were not the poorest, but those who had attained some level of education and income (Lindow 2009).

National data show that adolescents continue to have the highest rates of rape and other

sexual assaults of any age group. Adolescence is a time of heightened sexual risk, not only because young people are experimenting with the newfound sexuality but also because they are inexperienced in communicating their sexual needs and desires to their partners (Rosenthal and Peart 1996:22). Concerns about adolescents' vulnerability to HIV and AIDS and other sexually Transmitted diseases and evidence of considerable sexual violence against women make it vital that more is learnt about the difficulties that young people have in negotiating sex and the factors that lead to coercion of one sexual partner by the other (Holland et al. 1991a: 332; Gavey 1992:325). Most of the research related to sex offenders, however, focuses on adults. This study has attempted to gain an insight into adolescents' perception of rape by examining the reasons why rapes occur, the reactions to rape, the needs of rape victims, how victims cope with rape and parents responsibilities towards rape victims.

### **Research Question**

What are South African adolescents' perceptions of rape?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design as it collected data on the target population (adolescents) with the view of describing the direction and intensity of adolescents' perceptions of rape. The design is considered suitable because only a part of the population (though a portion that is representative of the entire population) was studied and findings could be generalized to the entire population. The target population for this paper are adolescents. The sample consisted of 347 adolescents who were grade 11 learners from secondary schools (147 were males and 200 were females).

### **Instrument**

A questionnaire consisting of two sections was administered to respondents; section A was used to collect the bio-data/demographic characteristics of the respondents while section B

consisted of thirty five items on a 3-point Likert-type response rating scale: Agree (A); Disagree (D); and Uncertain (U), to ascertain adolescents' perceptions of rape.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The responses to the structured questionnaire were studied during the empirical investigation. The data that was gathered from the responses were interpreted by means of descriptive statistics. From the information collected, the following are the most important findings regarding the perception of adolescents towards rape:

The majority of adolescents are aware that rape is the intentional unlawful intercourse with a woman without her consent. It is however a matter of concern that some adolescents disagree with this and almost one in five adolescents are not aware that rape is against the law. Although it is generally accepted in society that sentences for rape offenders is often too mild, 50% of male adolescents disagree with this. On the other hand, 49% of female adolescents believe that sentences for rape are often too mild. Adolescents believe that rape can be prevented if the law enforcement system is more efficient.

Adolescent males believe that men rape to express their domination over women but the females disagree with this. Thus females do not see rape as an expression of men's domination over women. The study reveals that the majority of adolescents do not perceive rape as an expression of the measure of power. Overall, more respondents agree that rape is an expression, by men, of their domination over women. Adolescents' perception is that sexy women are more likely to be raped, although almost one in three adolescents are either uncertain whether "good looks" contribute to women being raped or disagree with this statement. It is disconcerting to note that the majority of adolescents do not find rape as a degrading action, with 72% of male respondents disagreeing with the statement. Although adolescents do not see provocative dressing as asking to be raped, the data suggests there is an association between dressing and incidents of rape, but more adolescents are uncertain if rape can be attributed to provocative dressing

Most of the adolescents in the sample do not see any association between rape and unac-

accompanied women (they are uncertain about the statement). This would suggest that women could be raped even if other people accompany them. A considerable number of adolescents are not sure whether their victims know rapists or not. Thirty-three percent of adolescents believe that their victims know rapists. Significantly more females believe that rapists are known to their victims than males.

Adolescents believe that women are reluctant to report being raped. The female respondents, in particular are of this opinion. Statistically there is a significant difference between the responses of male and female responses to the statement that women are reluctant to report being raped. Research indicates that victims do not report their assault to authorities because they feel that they will be blamed or disbelieved (Hodge and Cantor 1998; Walker et al. 2005). Attitudes towards victims, according to Pollard (1992), have a direct influence on whether or not a victim reports the assault (rape) to police medical services. This means that the perpetrators of such crimes go unpunished, and victims do not seek the help that they need to recover from the incident (Davies 2002). It is evident from the study that adolescents perceive rape as an action that decreases the self-esteem of a woman, consequently reporting of rape cases is low. Significantly more females than males are of this opinion.

Most of the respondents, especially females agree that rape victims have difficulty coping with relationships with other people. However, there is a relatively high degree of disagreement and uncertainty among males to this assertion. The study revealed that it is vital for the victims of rape to talk about it. Significantly more females than males are of this view. The uncertainty among males to this view is significantly more than that of female respondents.

The majority of respondents are of the opinion that parents do not need to support a child that has been raped. This would suggest that adolescents might not want their parents to even know that they have been raped. It is surprising that more females than males are of this opinion. There is however, also a reasonably high degree of uncertainty among adolescents concerning this matter. However, a study carried out by Peterson-Badali and Broeking (2010) suggests that parents and youth need to be educated about the importance of parental involvement

(that is, parents can be influential in what happens to youth) as well as what parents can do at the police station, in courts but more especially in the context of extrajudicial measures and dispositions.

The study revealed that adolescents see peers as encouraging them to engage in sex. More males than females experience this. More females than males disagree that peer pressure causes them to engage in sex, suggesting that females are less prone to peer pressure than males (males experience a greater amount of peer pressure to engage in sex).

It is evident from the study that adolescents are uncertain if there is a direct relationship between women abuse and rape within marriage. There is indication that some adolescents may agree with this statement.

## CONCLUSION

Rape is a serious crime that is increasing rapidly in many countries. Adolescence in South Africa, according to the study, see rape as being unlawful. They believe that rape can be prevented if law enforcement is more efficient. The perceptions of male and female adolescent's differ on key issues concerning rape.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes the following recommendations to adolescents, parents, and law enforcement agencies,

### Adolescents

Rape is a serious crime that is increasing rapidly in South Africa. Adolescents need to become aware of the facts concerning rape in order for them not to engage in rape to make an impact on society regarding rape, and to restore the dignity that rape victims (women) deserve. Adolescents must lobby support from the community and local authorities to ensure that law enforcement is more efficient, thereby preventing rape from occurring. Adolescents should be aware that assistance from parents can assist victims overcome the trauma of being raped. Adolescents should be told that experimenting with sex can lead to: unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV and AIDS. Adolescents must realize that making decisions

about sexuality is extremely important. Adolescents, especially males, must ensure that peers do not put pressure on them to engage in sex. This can be achieved if they are aware that they should not be coerced into sexual activities by peers. Adolescents must assist peers to become aware that rape affects the life of a victim adversely. Adolescents must speak out against rape, using whatever forum is available to them.

### Parents

Adolescents need to have a close and warm relationship with their parents, and parents need to see their children adopt their norms, attitudes and values. Parents need to gain the trust of their adolescent children so that they are able to communicate freely with their parents, especially if they fall victims to rape. Parents must talk to them about these issues. Parents need to be sensitive to behavioural changes in their adolescent children 'so that they can detect if their child has been raped. Parents need to communicate with their adolescent children regarding rape.

### Law Enforcement Agencies

Incidence of rape can be decreased considerably and prevented if law enforcement agencies perform their task effectively and efficiently. Sentences for rape must be increased to a level that will act as a deterrent to rape. The number of specially trained personnel to handle rape cases must be increased, so that adequate attention is given to rape victims. Communication mechanisms must be established between communities (adolescents) and law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement officers must be more proactive. Partnerships between schools and law enforcement agencies must be formed and extended to all schools.

### Further Research

During the course of the investigation the researcher became aware of many areas of concern regarding adolescents' perception of rape. Some of the areas of concern were highlighted in the study but require in-depth research. An investigation into the following areas should be considered for further research: why male and female adolescents' perceptions of rape differ,

and what can be done to changing negative attitudes towards rape.

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