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South Africa's Rape Crisis: 1 in 4 Men Say They've Done It

By Megan Lindow / Cape Town

South Africans received a horrifying measure of just how bad their country's rape crisis is with the release this week of a study in which more than a quarter of men admitted to having raped, and 46% of those said that they had raped more than once.

The study, conducted by South Africa's Medical Research Council, 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. ([See pictures of South Africa, Fifteen Years On.](#))

Researchers interviewed 1,738 men of all race groups, in both urban and rural settings in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, provinces marked by high rates of AIDS and poverty, and the men answered questions about rap and HIV using small handheld computers in order to guarantee anonymity. Of those admitting rape, 73% said that they had committed their first assault before the age of 20. According to the researchers, many of the study's participants appeared to see no problem with what they had done. These findings, says Mbuyiselo Botha, a senior program advisor at Sonke Gender Justice, an advocacy group for abused women, "highlight the lack of remorse among men in our country, and also the attitude that women remain fair game for us." Men, says Botha, "continue to abuse even to the point of getting away with murder."

South Africa has one of the highest incidents of reported rape in the world. The most recent statistics show that 36,190 cases of rape were reported to the police between April and December 2007, though experts believe that number only accounts for one out of nine cases. But the number of rape cases that make it to court — let alone result in a conviction — are far fewer.

Researchers said that many of the perpetrators reported having bullied or been bullied. The study also underscores the huge divide between South Africa's liberal constitution, which enshrines the rights of women and children, and "the realities of a society where poverty, inequality and violence are rife."

Gender advocates say that the 2006 rape trial of prominent politician Jacob Zuma was incredibly damaging to their cause. Zuma, who was elected President this year, was tried and acquitted of raping an HIV-positive family friend. He told the court that the woman had dressed provocatively, in a traditional wrap-around kanga, and that it was against Zulu culture for a man to leave a sexually aroused woman unsatisfied. ([See a profile of South African president Jacob Zuma.](#))

Zuma's plainspoken views as a polygamist and a traditionalist appeal to many men who feel adrift in a society that defines men by the material trappings they attain, says Aernout Zevenbergen, author of *Spots of a Leopard*, a book on masculinity in Africa that is soon to be released in English. "Rape is a signal of a society that is sick to the core," Zevenbergen says. He points to South Africa's long history of migrant labor, in which men left home to work in the mines, as having broken apart generations of families. This system set the stage, he says, "for an epidemic of young men who, in the absence of positive male role models, are now consumed by a sense of anger and entitlement."

"What we have are the wounds of men creating wounds in women, creating wounds in children," says Zevenbergen. "Who is going to stop the vicious circle?"

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