

“If they rape me, I can’t blame them”: Reflections on gender in the social context of child rape in South Africa and Namibia

Rachel Jewkes^{a,*}, Loveday Penn-Kekana^b, Hetty Rose-Junius^c

^a*Gender and Health Group, Medical Research Council, Private Bag X385, Pretoria 0001, South Africa*

^b*Centre for Health Policy, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

^c*Independent Consultant, Windhoek, Namibia*

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Abstract

The study was based on 77 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 3 small group discussions which were conducted with informants in Windhoek, Namibia and rural Mpumalanga province, South Africa. Children (abuse survivors and others), parents, men and women from the community and a range of key informants (such as police, social workers, health workers, NGO staff and teachers) were asked about their experiences and perceptions of child rape and child rearing. This study has its roots in the recent popular concern about the high prevalence of child rape in Southern Africa. Drawing on the data, we reflect on aspects of the social context of child rape in South Africa and Namibia that at least provide space for, without actually legitimating, these acts. We argue that children are rendered vulnerable to abuse because of a series of ideas which create opportunities, the most important of which is the dominant patriarchal ideology, compounded by the pronounced age hierarchies found in these societies. The high status of men, with respect to particularly girl children, leads to vulnerability through reducing girls’ ability to refuse sexual advances and generating expectations in men that they should control women and children. Rape is often an act of punishment, used to demonstrate power over girl children and manufacture control. Rape is also used as an instrument of communication with oneself (the rapist) about masculinity and powerfulness. This ability to avoid being caught was important in some rapes. Some children are rendered vulnerable by coming from backgrounds where the likelihood of cases being pursued was low. Whilst it is often said that communities abhor child rape, responses to cases show that often strong action is not taken against perpetrators and the girls may be equally, or predominantly, blamed. In cases close to home, perpetrators are often protected. Thus the dominant message is that much as child rape is abhorred, responses are highly inadequate. Advances in gender equity are central to positive change.

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Introduction

Child rape stirs strong passions. Anger at the act itself is compounded by the symbolic threat of rape of

children to the moral order of society. Little wonder that the mass media in South Africa and internationally has clamoured for stories of child rape in South Africa, often inventing aspects of the events where facts were not known (Bird & Spurr, 2004). The media and politicians have been very quick to attribute the most prominent rapes to ‘others’—desperate people with HIV seeking sexual cures (Jewkes, 2004), or degenerate

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 12 339 8525;
fax: +27 12 339 8582.

E-mail address: rjewkes@mrc.ac.za (R. Jewkes).

alcoholics. Yet in a country like South Africa, where nearly 20 000 girl children¹ and over 30 000 adult women are raped and report to the police each year (Crime Information Analysis Centre, October 2004); or Namibia, which has approximately the same rate of rape in Windhoek (according to data from the Woman and Child Protection Unit) (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Rose-Junius, & Malala, 2004); child rape is not a fringe activity of a small number of psychologically disturbed men or paedophiles (cf. Mager, 1999, p. 184). Its very scale suggests that there are important aspects of society that, if not legitimating, at least provide space for, these activities.

The World Report on Violence and Health identified child rape as an important public health problem (Runyam, Wattam, Ikeda, Hassan, & Ramiro, 2002). It is associated with increased risk of sexual and reproductive health problems, mental health problems, increased health risk behaviours such as smoking and alcohol abuse, and behavioural problems. International studies suggest that about 20% of women and 5–10% of men may experience some form of childhood sexual victimisation (Finkelhor, 1994). Arguing that abuse is more common in households which are poor, lack social support or located in communities with less social capital (Runyam et al., 2002), the report chapter outlines a range of societal factors which are considered to be important influences on child abuse. Whilst the research base is highly fragmented, it suggests that influences on child rape include key aspects of the social context within which it occurs, such as cultural norms surrounding gender roles, parent–child relationships, the nature of the social welfare system, and the nature and extent of social protection and responsiveness of the criminal justice system. In many respects, however, the discussion of risk factors for rape in the World Report demonstrates how limited the global knowledge base on this problem is, and how little is known about how best to prevent the problem and support victims. This is particularly true of Africa. In 1995, Meursing et al. commented that very little formal research has been conducted on child rape in Africa. A decade later this is still the case. Meursing's paper is still the only attempt to explore empirically the social context of child rape. Other research has sought to describe the nature and magnitude of the problem, to identify factors which are statistically significantly associated with having experienced child sexual abuse or aspects of prevention and treatment (e.g. Jewkes, Levin, Bradshaw, & Mbananga,

2002; Madu & Peltzer 2000; Brookes & Higson-Smith, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2001). This work has recently been summarised by Townsend and Dawes (2004).

A notable feature of the literature on child sexual abuse, with the exception of the contribution of Meursing et al. (1995), is a failure to consider the gendered nature of the violation and to discuss vulnerability to child sexual abuse through the lens of gendered power relations. Whilst a substantial proportion of child rape is known to be perpetrated by other children, male youth and sometimes women, adult men are more often the perpetrators and girls the victims. Furthermore there is often a failure to situate child rape within the broader context of child rearing. The development of a sociological understanding child rape requires reflection on multiple aspects of childhood, including ideas about sexual desires and sexual activity of children, intergenerational perspectives on sexual desires, child rearing and social hierarchies. In this paper, we take as our point of departure an assumption that widespread rape of girls fundamentally becomes possible because of a series of ideas that make children vulnerable through creating opportunities for abuse. We will argue that no single idea can be held to be the 'culprit' for child rape but they intersect together, with other risk factors for perpetration of abuse including those related to individual psychology, to create conditions of risk, with different factors being more or less relevant in different situations. Through providing a necessarily selective, interpretive account of some aspects of child rape and childhood, we reflect particularly on the gendered nature of the violation and, in so doing, seek to enhance understanding of this deeply emotive issue. This paper explores aspects of the socio-cultural context of child rape by drawing on findings of ethnographic research conducted in South Africa and Namibia.

Methods

Research organisation and settings

The data was collected in September and October 2002. The two study sites were chosen largely for their accessibility and diversity. The South African site was rural but included a small town with an informal settlement. Levels of unemployment were high, work available was often seasonal or casual on farms or factories. Many local people commuted to Johannesburg and Pretoria for employment, either on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, leaving grandparents looking after grandchildren while parents worked. Although there were a number of health facilities within the district, most cases of child rape that were reported

¹We use the word 'children' to refer to people aged 0–17 years, the United Nations' definition of childhood. This is done to avoid engaging with distinctions between 'real childhood' and 'youth' or 'adolescence'. In child abuse discourse, such differentiation often leads to discussion of 'more serious' and 'less serious' child rape which we seek to avoid (see below).

either to the one main police station or to local clinics, were transferred across the provincial border where specialist services were provided. The Namibian site was the capital city of 250 000 people. In Windhoek all cases of abuse of women and children are referred to the Women and Child Protection Unit, which has a one-stop centre with police, social workers and health services available 24 h a day.

In South Africa, data took the form of 30 in-depth interviews and 3 small group discussions, the latter were held with 9 teenagers. Staff at the specialised clinic were interviewed as well as those from health care centres within the district, which referred to this clinic. Interviewees included: one doctor (a district/police surgeon), four nurses, two social workers, two police officers, four teachers, a service provider working in a crèche/facility for the disabled, and sixteen men and women from the community. Apart from the doctor, who was Cuban, all interviewees were African.

In Namibia, 47 people were interviewed. Fourteen interviews were undertaken with children who had been sexually abused, both boys and girls. Nine were undertaken with parents or guardians. These cases were identified and approached through the Windhoek Women and Child Protection Unit. They were supplemented by interviews with well-known key informants and community leaders or workers who were in some way involved with child care and protection. Sixteen key informants were interviewed: two police officers, one nurse who ran a children's home, one social worker from the Windhoek Women and Child Protection Unit, five NGO staff, two teachers, two traditional healers, two traditional chiefs, a priest, and eight men and women from the community. Interviewees were Afrikaans, Nama-Damara, Herero, and Oshivambo speaking.

The scope of interviews varied. Service providers talked about cases they had seen, perceptions of links with HIV, of causes of vulnerability to children and limitations of the services. Children who had been abused spoke of experiences as well as generally discussing adult-child relationships. Men, women and young people, who were not selected for interview on the basis of any special knowledge of child rape, discussed child rearing in general, their perceptions of child rape, and perceptions of links between child rape and HIV, as well as perceptions of services provided and barriers to using services. Special care was taken in interviews both in terms of the process of obtaining consent, and the nature of questions asked, to ensure that abused children did not have their confidentiality breached.

Interviews and analysis of data

Data was recorded with audio tape recorders, after informants had given consent, or notes were taken. All

tapes were transcribed and translated into English and all interview notes were written up. The scope of enquiry outlined in the research proposal guided the data analysis and analytic induction was used. Each set of interviews was coded by 2 of the 3 authors. There were such strong similarities between the interviews conducted in the two countries, and the theories being derived from the data to explain the context of child rape, that it seemed reasonable to bring together the data from the two settings in writing this paper and to create one account.

Ethical issues

In designing the study the researchers used the WHO Guidelines for Ethical Research on Violence Against Women, as well as discussions with other child rape researchers. Ethics approval for the study was given by the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and in Namibia, it was also sought from the Ministry of Health and Social Services. The University Ethics Committee raised concerns about ensuring the confidentiality of abused children, avoiding secondary victimisation and having referral systems in place if a current case of child rape was disclosed to the researcher. All of these concerns were addressed both in the design and implementation of this study. All informants were told that participation should be voluntary, they did not have to agree to be interviewed and that if they declined they would not be adversely affected. Verbal informed consent for interviews was sought as this was deemed least intrusive. All children were approached after agreement of their parents.

Interviews with children who had been abused and their parents had to be approached with great sensitivity to avoid re-traumatising the children. It was important to include these to give the children (who were teenagers) a chance to voice their experiences through the research. Unfortunately, it was only possible to access them in Namibia. These interviews were conducted by trained social workers, two worked at the time for the Women and Child Protection Unit and two had been previous employees. They were therefore very familiar with the field, and what is and is not appropriate when approaching and talking with abused children and their families. Meetings of research team members in Namibia were held regularly. Support of interviewees was one of the main subjects discussed, and all interviewers reported on each interview they had done. The lead researcher in Namibia, who was herself a former social worker specialising on child rape, was satisfied that no one was unduly traumatised by the interviews and that all necessary support was provided. Parents and children said they welcomed the opportunity to see a person again to whom they could talk and

relate how they had managed to work through the trauma.

Findings

Sexuality and sexual desirability of children: normal but not to be encouraged

Discourse and practices related to sex and sexuality in Southern Africa are characterised by an interplay of two, very contrasting, sets of ideas. On the one hand, there are notions of sexual repression that have their roots in missionary teachings of Christianity and the Western discourses of sexual repression, which have been so articulately critiqued by Foucault (1976). A contrasting set of ideas, have their roots in Southern African cultural traditions and are characterised by a degree of openness and frankness about sex. Sexualised games played by children and ribaldry between adults and children have been a long-standing feature of normal childhood in our field site and many other parts of the country. Authors, writing about quite different historical moments and contexts, have described ‘sex play’ (Ntlabati, Kelly, & Mankayi, 2001; Longmore, 1959; Mager, 1999, p. 129), that sometimes includes penetration, as very common amongst girls and boys from a young age (about 6 or 7 until early teenage years). In the field site in South Africa, adult men and women spoke of ‘taking snuff’, which was an example of adult child ribaldry. One older woman described it as “a very pleasant thing” and explained “a child jumps out of the water undressed and granny tickles his penis and says ‘Oh snuff let me have some’. Everybody laughs and the child runs away to get dressed and that is over”. Men would similarly touch girls, including fathers touching their daughters. If they were teenagers, the men might touch their breasts. One man explained “the child won’t see anything wrong with being touched on the private parts”. Although these practices were discussed in interviews in the past tense, we were told that this was still part of life there.

The normality of sexualised play and joking between (and within) generations appeared to create space for ambiguity about the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable practices. Carers, girls, and possibly even the boy or man involved, could find boundaries of ‘normal’ play crossed without warning. A 16 year old Namibian boy had molested his 9 year old step-sister for more than a year, before his step-mother perceived his actions to be abnormal and did something to stop them. His step-mother said she knew he had sexual feelings for her daughter, but implied that she thought these were fairly normal and had arisen from seeing the girl after school in the house just wearing her panties. She revealed that she had observed a long period of sexual

touching and teasing before the girl was raped, which she did not see as abnormal, so did not try to stop.

Were the sexual feelings he had for his step-sister, or indeed another man could have had for her, abnormal? Most people interviewed found the idea of an adult man desiring a child to be unthinkable, but ‘teenagers’ were not thought of as children in this respect. ‘Teenage’ girls’ bodies were constructed in both settings as highly sensual and a ‘natural’ object of male desire. Furthermore the word ‘teenager’ was used very loosely in the interviews, indeed as an explanation for abuse in children from about 9 years (which was the age of the girl in question). A Namibian man explained:

“[sexually desiring girls] is normal. Herero men are proud of their manhood and of their status in society. They are also expected to show it by being manly towards women, even young women. By that I do not mean they must use [have sex with] young girls, but it happens and I know the community often turns a blind eye. Yes it can be accepted as normal ... Our girls mature earlier than their brothers... It used to be [accepted for men to be attracted to girls within the family]. Family men could even take their nieces as brides at an early age, but I do not think so any more”

This informant spoke of the ‘normality’ of men acting on feelings of desire for young girls. He implied that there was no incest taboo, which is a difference from South Africa where within clan sex is prohibited by most social groups (Guma & Henda, 2004; Niehaus, 2002). In both countries, informants agreed that it was common for teenage girls to have relationships with older men, so-called sugar daddies. Society in general did not condone these, as a South African teacher explained “Both [the man and girl will be criticised in a sugar daddy relationship], but in most cases the girl will be criticised more”. However, privately, in many, especially poorer, households they were accepted, and even sometimes encouraged, if they are likely to be advantageous to the girl’s family. Female peers might be very envious if the man provided good presents. Thus, pride in sexuality could in some circumstances be extended to pride in the fruits of demonstrations of sexuality.

Discussion of male desire for ‘fresh’ teenage bodies clearly indicated a perception that sexual desire was inevitable and experienced by men, but ‘provoked’ by women. One informant explained that this could happen when a child joked with them, sat on them, or sat close to them. Another mentioned that “men look at things like body build, breast and hips and legs that are fully developed and that turns them on. If girls are sexily dressed, it may stir things in men’s minds... Girls should know these dangers”. Thus the responsibility for controlling men’s sexual desires, and any ensuing acts

of molestation or rape, was placed on women and girls (cf. Meursing et al., 1995 on Zimbabwe). A failure to do this would result in blame of the girl, as one 18 year old South African explained:

“It is not easy for me to wear tight trousers when there are men at home. I stay with my mother and my younger sister most of the time. So when my father, my uncle or my brother is there I don’t wear them because if they rape me, I can’t blame them. Same as at school, if you dress in a way that is not right at school, you will be raped and you must never blame anyone”

‘Respect’ and the social position of men and children

In child rape, there are critical axes of difference between victim and perpetrator of age and gender. In South Africa and Namibia, social relations between people of hierarchically different levels are governed by a notion of ‘respect’, which dictates appropriate practices in speech and action. Guma and Henda (2004), with no reference to gender hierarchies, assert that ‘culturally derived authority vested in age hierarchies may under certain circumstances constitute a risk to children’. Other authors have rather emphasised the gendered nature of ‘respect’ (e.g. Magwaza, 1997; Mager, 1999). How ‘respect’ operates in terms of the conduct expected in particular circumstances differs between areas and social groups, but there are very substantial commonalities throughout Southern Africa. Understanding ‘respect’, and how it relates to the hierarchical positions of men and women, is crucial for understanding the responses of girls to sexual advances from men and the scope of possible reactions to these.

Many ethnographic sources discuss the patriarchal code of respect in South Africa, from a wide range of historical periods and contexts (e.g. Wood, 2003; Pauw, 1963; Hunter, 1936; Mager, 1999, p. 178; Magwaza, 1997). Our interviews and observations show that the central elements of these ideas still prevailed in South Africa, even if much of the more elaborate ritual, including aspects of the language and behavioural avoidances, is only found in deep rural areas these days. Our informants described ‘respect’ in Namibia in a way that resembled more closely how it had operated in South Africa in the past. In the next two extracts two Namibian girls (15 and 19 years) talk about their perceptions of their position in the hierarchy and its implications for their lives:

“In my culture children have no status and if you are a girl child you have even less status. I must always remember that and wait until an adult addresses me before I dare to speak. If it is a man, I must ask to address him, keep my eyes cast down too and bow if

he gives me something. That shows respect... Respect must come from both sides. If an adult is very rude, or swears at me and offends me I am allowed not to do what he or she expects, but it will remain very difficult for me because we are strictly taught to respect all adults”

“you must show respect towards adults, for example...don’t quarrel with an adult...although they reveal bad attitudes towards you and even use foul language against you. It is not easy. Children get no respect as humans from adults...[you have to respect] all of them, but I think respect must be mutual, not all of them deserve it, they are rude and sometimes ignore us as children”

Some of the Namibian informants said these strict rules of respect were applied until the teenage years, whereas others said they governed relations between older and younger people throughout ones life. Demonstrations of respect to adults included always being polite, greeting people and talking to people you meet, being obedient, listening, being trustworthy, not talking back, not talking when adults talk, letting adults go ahead in a queue, letting adults eat first and going with adults somewhere when told to. Whilst all informants discussed respect in very similar ways, those from Oshivambo, Herero and Nama-Damara backgrounds, described practices that created almost complete spatial separation between girls and adult men, with communication through intermediaries and aversion of gaze. Men and boys, we were told, were respected more than women and girls.

Rules of respect were enforced through a range of punishments. These included being ignored, not played with, denied food, locked in a room, confined to the home or yard, threatened that the ancestors will be told about them and punish them or a *tokolosh* [magical evil creature] get them, not allowed to go to school, being scolded and given a “good” hiding. Some children were sent away from Windhoek to live on farms with aunts and uncles. Our informant indicated that children were frequently beaten by their mothers, fathers, or uncles, indeed any adult would be allowed to beat a child, except teachers, who did so anyway. One adult man explained “I believe in a good hiding when necessary, not to damage a child’s eye with a stick or to hit him that he bleeds, just a decent spanking”. Several children mentioned that their parents or caregivers were very strict, always found fault and gave instructions rather than asking children what they wanted, and as a result they could not approach them to talk about their problems.

Namibian teenagers were adamant that respect should operate in two directions—from child to adult and adult to child. Yet ‘respect’ shown to children seemed to be quite different from that shown to adults. Rather than

being a code for unquestioning obedience and subservience (Magwaza, 1997), it was closer to the use of the term in colloquial English, i.e. adults not being rude, swearing or offending children. An 18 year old Namibian girl complained “if I feel an adult does not respect me, I would not respect him or her, but my parents disagree. They say adults are adults and children are children.” Several service providers perceived that rules of respect made children vulnerable to rape. One local South African service provider explained:

In this community a child is a child, a man is a man and a woman is a woman...when an adult says go and fetch water for me or do something for me the child has to do so.

In this context it is quite possible to imagine that a child would find it very difficult to refuse sexual advances from a father or uncle.

Uncontrollable desire and dangerous men

The status of adult men, at the apex of the age/gender hierarchy, was often such that their actions went without question. The responsibility for preventing a socially unacceptable act, such as rape, was thus placed on women, who could be criticised, ostracised or otherwise punished. Two related notions were important, in both instilling in women an understanding of why they had to look after themselves by respecting men, and absolving men from guilt. These were the uncontrollability of male sexual desire and the dangerousness of men.

The young woman (above) who had to protect herself from her male relatives by not wearing trousers, seemed to have no expectation that the men in her life would be able to control themselves sexually. We do not know what they thought, but we were told that the fear of their reaction served to constrain her dress and behaviour in their presence. This is very similar to observations made by Western feminists, that the threat and reality of rape leads to women developing strategies for self-protection, that result in apparently voluntary limits on their behaviour and mobility (Kelly, 1997).

In South Africa, most informants thought that a man who is sexually aroused would have to have sex. In fact, some argued that a man might find a child a convenient object to have sex with when aroused for some other reason. Children were said to make convenient sexual partners, since they were either too young to talk, or could be ‘bribed not to talk’, by men who just wanted to ‘satisfy themselves’. Linking this to poverty, some informants argued that poor or unemployed men, who were not able to get adult girlfriends, would turn to children for sexual gratification. In many cases abuse seemed to have happened not because the abuser was attracted to children in the classic sense, but just because

at that moment they were available, and a consenting adult was not.

The idea that men who are sexually aroused are not able to control themselves, clearly, could be used as an excuse for rape and has been discussed in other Southern African literature on sexuality (Meursing et al., 1995; Wood, Maforah, & Jewkes, 1998). In the South African interviews, not only was the counter view fairly silent, but there was a suggestion that not to have followed through in such a situation would have been tantamount to weakness on the man’s part. Knowing this, one woman explained that teenagers in short skirts were deliberately taunting men, which would explain their rape, if it occurred: ‘teenagers... think if they are wearing short skirts they are abusing men, they are challenging men, because they say if you wear a short skirt you want to be raped, they [men] are threatened’. An older South African man seemed to agree with this and complained of flirting teenage girls wearing hipsters and G strings, ‘I feel they don’t respect us’.

It is evidently not the case that all South African men have sex when aroused. However the discourse around male responses to arousal suggest that the performance of masculinity in a response to a perceived challenge in the form of a ‘provocatively’ dressed girl was important, and viewed as an appropriate response for some men. The idea of uncontrollable desire operated more pervasively as a discursive device to coerce girls into more conservative styles of dressing and behaviour, and to remind them of the need to respect (inherently dangerous) men. It could also be used to explain some rape as ‘biological’ rather than ‘sociological’, and thus absolve guilt. In this respect, it was useful to men and further entrenched their dominance.

“Men are dangerous, anything can happen...men can do sex any time, anywhere” (South African older woman)

The view that men were inherently out of control, and thus dangerous, was widespread in the South African interviews, articulated by both men and women. In an extremely violent society, it is seemed both a reflection on the state of affairs, eloquently summarised by the observations of Mager (1999), that most often rape was an act by ‘ordinary men’ acting out their sexuality in relation to dominance over women. It was also a powerful myth which served to maintain a fear and respect of men. However, some of the men interviewed suggested these ideas impacted negatively on their relations at home in quite other ways: ‘It is bad because as a man you also feel like a rapist. It becomes difficult for you to play with your own children in the family’.

From analysis of the data, it was apparent that the threat of men was perceived in terms of power, privilege, unpredictability, and the inability of men to control

themselves when sexually aroused. Some men were said to rape because they held a position of power. Whilst some informants suggested that powerful men perceived sex as an entitlement of their position, for example if policemen raped children in jail, such an act would also constitute a gendered performance of ‘power over women’. Child rape as an instrument in the manufacture of gender hierarchy, was visible in several of the accounts of rape. The data more strongly supported an argument that a desire to achieve this motivated many cases of rape, even when accounts were ostensibly couched in terms of ‘entitlement’ to sex. For example, a Namibian father, who had become estranged from his wife, had told his daughter “you live under my roof” and therefore should have sex with him. Several of the South African interviewees spoke of rape of children occurring in a family when the wife was sexually unavailable due to pregnancy, post-partum abstinence or marital conflict. The link between rights to sex and entitlement to control was made by a South African man who told us: ‘some men feel they can control their wives and daughters as they wish, so they have sex with them’. This idea had further been captured in local legend around child rape and was mentioned by several informants. There had been a case brought before the Chief 2 years previously. When the father was asked why he had had sex with his daughter he replied: ‘I can’t grow a tree and when the tree starts to have fruit...let others taste it first’. We would suggest that rather than ideas of entitlement to sex being particularly important in child rape, it is the idea of entitlement to control girl children (and women)—with rape being both a performance, and instrument, of control.

Rape as punishment was a recurring theme in cases of child rape in both settings; it was often punishment of the child’s mother. Indeed, this proved to be the explanation for the infamous rape of the infant from Upington, in October 2001 (Bird & Spurr, 2004). Ideas of punishment, and the use of rape to display control over women, probably often overlapped with other motivations in cases of incest with daughters. A 19 year old Namibian woman described being raped by her father as punishment:

My friend Vanessa and I...arrived home at 4.00 am. When we entered my father called us but my friend just walked on. When I got to the room he asked me to close and undress “I want to see whether you have had sex with the guys, apparently you are looking for sex”. My father forced me to suck his penis. He was violent. He insert his penis into my vagina, I tried to scream and he said he would call my siblings to come and watch what we do. Thus I kept silence until he satisfied himself.

Accounts of child rape in our research, clearly showed that perpetrators were often drunk, or alcohol played

some other role in creating vulnerability. Indeed, alcohol often features in rape of women of all ages (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). The relationship between alcohol and violence against women in general is complex (Jewkes, 2002), but the observation of a Namibian informant is quite pertinent: “People don’t think when they are drunk. They just do things”. Thus alcohol removed layers of inhibition which otherwise may have been in place, making it more likely that an act such as rape would occur. Alcohol also created opportunity for rape in circumstances where the likelihood of a case being pursued would be very much less. Some of the male and female youth who were raped had had their alcoholic drinks spiked with drugs and so did not know who raped them. In one case the young man was out at night because his violent, drunk father had made home intolerable. Another informant spoke of children being vulnerable to abuse if mothers get drunk and then do not know where they are. It was rarely mentioned, but clearly lack of a strong parental presence and supervision created vulnerability in these children. Our data suggests that alcohol may create vulnerability to rape, but it is in no respects an underlying cause.

Neglected children, truncated childhoods: “if they rape them no one will notice

Much as violent men may find risk taking exciting and even recreational (Wood, forthcoming), rapists often seem to go for victims where they do not think they will get caught. Opportunity to rape emerged as a very important theme in discussions of child rape and in men’s accounts of perpetrating rape (Wood, 2003) against women of all ages. Perpetrators often indicate that they take precautions to reduce the risk of being caught or subject to strong sanctions (Wood, 2003). This group of rapes may be different in important respects from those discussed above, where rape is seen as an instrument of communication with the victim (or her mother). Here, there is a suggestion that the act may be primarily a device for communication with oneself. In understanding them, it is useful to draw on Moore’s (1994) theories of thwarted male identity, with rape used to reconfirm fantasies of male powerfulness which may have been threatened by a sense of powerlessness stemming from the operation of structural factors (e.g. poverty, race, unemployment) creating vulnerability outside the arena of gender.

In the South African rural setting, work scarcity caused many mothers to leave their children in unsatisfactory situations and seek work in Johannesburg or Pretoria. It was not uncommon for adults to move away and leave a teenage daughter living alone in the house to finish school. Such children had very little protection. A local community-based organisation saw many children who had been left without adequate food

and clothing, and they were said to be particularly vulnerable to involvement in transactional sexual relationships. Some informants said that poor and hungry children would be tempted to agree to anything in return for food. Sometimes children were left for much shorter periods, but if they were hungry they could be vulnerable. A nurse working with the district surgeon explained that she saw many 'neglected children mainly from informal settlements, where you find the mother goes out to drink or leaves the children on their own to go and look for food...usually they say they were out looking for food when the child was molested'. One of the teachers located their vulnerability in their neglected state "because anyone else can see that even if they rape them no one will notice". This is strongly resonant of Ramphela's (1993) observations of children born to single women living in migrant labour quarters in Cape Town. They were referred to in a derogatory way, compared to those of married mothers, and were not considered as deserving of nurturance, and protection, from others in the community. This rendered them vulnerable to sexual exploitation by men in the compound, especially if their mothers drank.

The reality of life in the community in South Africa, was that fathers were usually uninvolved in child rearing and so responsibilities fell on women. There was no mention in any interview of fathers as protectors of their daughters, or role models for their boys, but maternal absences and lapses were singled out as causes of child abuse. However, the absence of mothers was also a narrative form and commentary on women's roles; part of the feminisation of blame for rape. The absences which interviewees perceived to create opportunity for abuse stretched from years to that of hours. Whilst one boy, who had been abandoned after birth by his mother and adopted by a friend's father, was raped 10 years later, other children were said to be vulnerable to abuse if they came home early from school, or at lunchtime, and found the house empty. One woman from the community, who expressed disagreement with the discourse of 'absent mothers', cited an example of a case she knew where the father raped the daughter when the mother went away for an Easter weekend of prayer. A further 'absence' of mothers, which was visible in the data, was a notional one occurring when mothers turned a blind eye to abuse. During the research, we were frequently told of mothers, or other guardians, who did not report cases of child rape, or did so and then withdrew the charge, because they were worried about who would provide for the family if the husband went to jail, or was angry with her.

How did communities and families perceive child abusers?

"The community is getting very uptight and they want to correct things violently...They promise

violence if they find such a person [a child rapist]. It looks as if the community reacts more strongly when a small child is raped, than when it is an adult woman. I have seen marches on TV by angry women when a child is raped, but I have not seen it when an adult woman is raped" (Namibian male community worker)

"Men [who rape children] are outcasts in my culture. We consider it a very serious crime, but there are people who will protect them, like a wife or family member. They will deny it because they know he may even be killed by the child's uncles...child abuse and child rapes are serious. It is only when the girls are teenagers that people may think they are guilty too. I tell my girls to look after themselves because they can also be seen as looking for trouble if they wear sexy dresses and if they are out late at night, or if they drink with men. It is just like that" (Namibian father)

Perceptions of people who sexually abuse children, and the children who are victims, also form important parts of the context of child rape. When asked, in general, about how abusers of children were viewed in the communities, a unanimous view was expressed. One woman from the community explained: "Rape is seen as unacceptable in this community. Every time it happens the community is filled with disgust". Informants asserted that rapists would not be trusted ever again, no one would leave their children with them, and women would not marry them. However, the actual responses to rapists were rather more complicated than this. In several of the cases we were told that the abuser's family became very angry when charges were laid with the police, indicating that they did not all share a view of unmitigated horror at the actions of their relative. Discussion of whether one would be blamed for reporting child rape to the police was a recurring theme in the Namibian interviews, indicating that strong views were held on either side and many people would view reporting as inappropriate.

Three common responses to rape by the child, and his or her family, were described. One was to report to the police and pursue a court case, or report to the Chief for a traditional court case; a second was to do nothing; and a third, was to accept material goods, usually livestock or money, as a compensation payment. In Namibia, additionally, traditional healers described magical vengeance; and one man told how his niece was raped when she was 12 years old and was forced by the family to marry the rapist.

How abusers were perceived, seemed to depend as well on the circumstances of the rape and the child. There was general agreement that the rape of a 5 year old would be viewed differently from that of a 15 year old. Whilst community action against rapists was discussed in Namibia, it seemed to be focused on rapists

of small children. If the older girls were sexually active, or ‘walked around at night’, the opinion would be that they ‘asked for it’. Such ideas were even expressed by the mothers of children who had been raped. There was some discussion about whether family member rapists should be reported to the police, or dealt with in families, and many people in the community held the latter view. Some mothers were quite ambiguous about where their ultimate responsibility lay when faced with incest. One explained that she scolded her daughter after she disclosed that she had been abused. She did not report the abuse in order to protect the men in her family.

Several of the South African interviews revealed that in the hierarchy of social problems, many things were seen as worse than child rape and incest. Many of the informants mentioned that when faced with prospects of disrupting the family, losing face, greater poverty and losing the home, child rape would be overlooked. Several also indicated that maintaining gender hierarchy and family structures were more important than taking action against an abuser. For example, the woman whose child was raped by her husband over the Easter weekend, was told by some in the community to stay with him. Another woman from the community explained that in rural areas, if a wife suspects her husband, and confronts him, and her mother-in-law comes to hear of it, she will argue with the wife saying: ‘how can you ask a man that kind of question, a man is head of his house, he can do what he likes’. The mother-in-law would call the man for a secret meeting to reprimand him, but would not let the wife know. It is hard to know to what extent these were rational and considered responses or whether they were examples of individual and community level cognitive dissonance about what’s going on, which enabled child rape to be seen as “bad” when it affects others, but that internal (and also public) discourses of justification, rationalisation, alternate priorities, and simple denial can take over when it hits too close to home. Niehaus (in press) has argued that in Limpopo Province of South Africa, historically rapes perpetrated by men outside the family were treated much more seriously than those by ‘insiders’. It is possible that this is a reflection on the same phenomenon. None the less, it is hard to escape the conclusion that child rape was viewed as bad, but not always terribly bad.

Sexually abused children

“They like the attention and they even lead men on. They do not complain until they get raped”

“When it is a small child, like the 3 year old and the 8 year old that happened in December in Okahandja, then I am sure all of us know that the rapist is to blame totally. I think there are times when she is 10

years and older that people will wonder whether she could not avoid it. She could cry for help. She could avoid the dangerous situation. I do not know and then also if she was already a girl who had sex before, or if she drinks with the man she surely could see the danger. In my community girls are believed to be more and earlier matured than boys. They will be blamed too” (Namibian man)

In contrast to the way men who abused were treated, blame of all but the youngest victims was a recurring idea in the interviews. Some of the children were blamed by others, and some blamed themselves. The mother of the 16 year old girl who was drugged and raped at a party, admitted that she blamed her daughter, even though she recognised her daughter had learning difficulties. A 3 year old boy, who was raped when sleeping, was beaten by his father when he found out. The mother of a girl who was impregnated through rape when she was 13 had, 2 years later, still not forgiven her. These sorts of responses are very similar to those described by Meursing et al. (1995). Several Namibian informants commented, with surprise, that the police not blamed them when they had sought help. In South Africa, mothers were often also blamed if girls were raped when the mother had left them alone.

Several informants in Namibia indicated that raped children were stigmatised. One 14 year old rape survivor said that older women (aunties) told their daughters not to play with her any more, and that her mother was going to have to send her to stay with her grandmother to go to school the next year to get away from the community. The girls at her school had been told she had taken money from the man who raped her and then lied. A male community worker explained: “children who have been sexually molested are treated like people with leprosy. They suffer stigma. They are isolated in the community as if they are guilty.” One girl withdrew a charge because she was frightened the school would find out if the case went ahead, and she would be ridiculed. She attempted suicide. This is similar to accounts of incest in Botswana (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (WILDSA), 2002) that showed that many women prefer to keep the crime of incest a family secret, rather than face stigmatisation in the community.

In South Africa, it was clear that child rape was a topic of hot gossip in the community. Teachers heard of cases from children at school, parents heard of cases of school girls via their children and people knew the houses where it had occurred and mothers of the children even if they did not know them, personally as one woman from the community revealed:

They’ve shown me the mother of a child whose daughter was raped by a relative. I don’t know if it was an uncle or what but the man who raped the

child was staying with them in their house...I was shown her mother by some people at the F section. I don't know them

Whilst on one level gossip could be regarded as positive in so far as it is indicative of social condemnation of child rape, and led to some cases coming to light, it did not always imply sympathy with the child and his or her family. Families were perceived as being tainted by abuse, especially incest, mothers as negligent, and abuse was seen as indicative of an unsatisfactory home. Some informants spoke of child rape being seen entirely a private problem, to the extent that no one would help a family and, at worst, some people might even delight in the misery of others. As one woman from the community explained:

“The community doesn't say anything about this incident [incest], which means its your own problem. No one can help you nor can they ever say anything. Even the community leaders, they don't care about it... Nobody will be responsible for sharing your problems. They just relax or may be become happy because they are jealous by nature”

This picture of a highly competitive and jealous community reflected a discourse about social relations that is common in South Africa (e.g. Campbell, 2000). It rarely exists without being accompanied by a competing, contradictory one of the community, family and neighbours as supportive in the face of difficulties. However these two discourses frame the environment within which child rape occurs and create a climate of considerable lack of certainty about what reaction will follow the disclosure of a particular act of child rape.

Discussion

In this paper we have set out to reflect on aspects of the social context of child rape in South Africa and Namibia, drawing on primary data and our knowledge of the context. We do not claim to explain or generate theory on why some adults, and male children, sexually abuse children, so much as to provide an interpretive account of the social context in which the multifaceted set of acts referred to as child sexual abuse occur. When asked why child rape occurred, many people said quite simply they did not know, they did not have any idea why men rape children. None the less, many others expressed strong views on this topic. Child rape had been in the news (see Bird & Spurr, 2004), particularly prominently in South Africa but also in Namibia, and many informants had discussed it and formed views, which reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, experience from cases encountered in, or known of, from the community; gossip from friends; views and prejudices

regarding social relations; and comment from the media. Running through the discourse on child rape, were striking images of provocative girls, absent mothers, uncontrollable urges and dangerous men. Underlying these were quite complex dynamics of power, status and gender socialisation.

Informants represented child rape as overwhelmingly a female problem. Not only were girls the majority of victims, but girls, or their mothers, were held primarily to be accountable for it. In most cases discussed, men were excused for either behaving ‘like men do’ in such situations, or the act itself was portrayed as being less serious than it might appear, chiefly because a woman was said to have ‘caused’ it or to be so vulnerable that it was inevitable. This is highly resonant with observations from Zimbabwe, that rape is very close to ‘normal’ male behaviour (Taylor & Stewart, 1991). Child rape, whilst not exclusively an act of power of men over women, predominantly is so. Analyses that fail to pay attention to its gendered nature are clearly limited.

Whilst some of the cases of abuse in our data may have arisen in a grey area between sexualised play and abuse, the status of women and girl children in the community was by far the greatest source of vulnerability to child sexual abuse. Whilst other authors have argued that rules of ‘respect’ *per se* may render children vulnerable to abuse, we would suggest that these merely reflect a deep-rooted system of patriarchy and that the source of girl children's vulnerability for the most part lies in this ideology. Thus child rape often becomes an instrument in the manufacture of gendered hierarchy, even if that is not the immediate reason for the rape. It is also a mode of communication; both communication about power relations to the victim and to oneself in a self-assessment of masculinity.

There are many challenges in representing aspects of the social context of child rape in the areas studied. On one level, it is very complicated interpreting representations of abuse and its circumstances as many ideas which were presented as ‘fact’ in the interviews, such as the uncontrollability of male sexual urges, were clearly questionable. However, if some men in some circumstances believed that they should have sex when aroused because of this discourse, it would be a motivating and causal factor in child rape, even if the great majority of others did not hold the same view. Thus it is important to understand the role of discourse on rape in shaping women's and girl's behaviour and maintaining the gender status quo; but also to recognise that some of the ideas may be acted upon.

Representation of child rape and danger in our societies and communities is further complicated by the plural and shifting nature of discourses. Whilst most people would deny that society, communities and families permitted rape of children, the fact that it was not automatically seen by all as a good reason for a

woman to leave her husband; a neighbour to report to the police; a teacher to override a parent's views; or a police man to take a suspect into custody; is indicative of more general ambivalence about the nature of the offence and its seriousness (discussed further in Jewkes et al., 2004) that we would suggest stems from widespread perceptions of the legitimacy of men exercising power over women. It may be an oversimplification to say that opposition to child rape was superficial, but the study findings certainly suggest that in many specific circumstances protecting children is given a lesser priority than other things. The study findings suggest that prevention of child rape is linked to improvements in the social position of women and girls, and the struggle for the recognition of women's rights. In a very practical sense, much more advocacy is needed to change the way child rape is viewed and to challenge the status quo regarding the hierarchy of priorities of professionals and social institutions including churches in this regard.

In understanding child rape, it is important to acknowledge the role of structural factors in contributing to children's vulnerability. The last decade in South Africa has been characterised by very rapid urbanisation, changing the social structure of villages and leading to many people moving into new settlements in urban areas. This has profoundly influenced child care. Rural villages' ability to offer traditional communal childcare has been undermined by younger stronger adults leaving, and many newly urbanised people lack the social networks in urban areas to get child care. In a context of poverty, where buying child care is not an option, many children are left in inadequate circumstances whilst their parents (or more usually mothers, since fathers are so often absent) seek work, food or entertainment. Poverty also very profoundly shapes the options for women in contexts of incest. Our research has shown that women are at times placed in the highly unenviable position of having to choose between having a home and food on the table, and taking action against a partner who is abusing their daughters. These are the sorts of choices that in an ideal world no woman would have to make, but they are part of the reality of the lives of many women in Southern Africa.

In conclusion, although child rape in South Africa and Namibia should not be seen as a unified category with a single cause, it cannot be understood without reflecting on the gendered nature of the violation. Patriarchal ideas render girls vulnerable to abuse through legitimising on some level displays of male power in private, and sometimes public, spaces, and acts which serve to manufacture gender hierarchy and communicate about gender power relations. Child rape is represented as an overwhelmingly female problem, with conspicuous feminisation of blame. This suggests that the prevention of child rape must be intimately

linked to efforts to transform the status of women and children in society.

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