

## Gang Rape and the Culture of Violence in South Africa

Vogelman, L. & Lewis, S. (1993). *Gang Rape and the Culture of Violence in South Africa*. Published in German under the title, *Illusion der Stärke: Jugendbanden, vergewaltigung und kultur der gewalt in Südafrika*, in *Der Überblick*, No. 2.

Lloyd Vogelmann & Sharon Lewis

Published in German under the title, *Illusion der Stärke: Jugendbanden, vergewaltigung und kultur der gewalt in Südafrika*, in *Der Überblick*, No. 2, pp. 39-42, 1993.

Lloyd Vogelmann is a founder and former Director of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

Sharon Lewis is a former Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

Violence against women is a virtually universal phenomenon, and it is widespread, common and deeply entrenched in most societies.<sup>1</sup> Rape, one of the most conspicuous forms of this violence, has reached epidemic proportions in South Africa. It occurs in all spheres of society and all women are potential victims. Women's fear of rape has begun to affect their basic day to day decisions and reduce their quality of life.

This paper will explore and attempt to explain the high incidence of rape in South Africa. The focus of the paper is on the phenomenon of gang rape, which in many ways crystallises the power issue which is at the nexus of rape. Gang rape is also an increasingly common form of rape: in a recent South African study, approximately forty four percent of rapists had engaged in gang rape,<sup>2</sup> while in the United States it is estimated that one in four rapes are gang rapes.<sup>3</sup> A description of "jackrolling" will provide an illustration of gang rape in the South African context.

It will be argued that rape is primarily an act of *power*, and to that any attempt to understand the aetiology of rape must take into account the wider social, economic and political factors, including the culture of violence from which subcultures draw their reference points. A detailed presentation of the individual and social factors which make up the aetiology of rape are beyond the scope of this paper, and so only a few of the central social and political factors which promote rape will be focused on.

Although rape assumes many forms, this paper will use the term within the framework of sexual coercion, in which the woman is the victim and the man is the perpetrator. Of course,

this is not always the case, but heterosexual rape is by far the dominant form of sexual violence.

### The Incidence of Rape in South Africa

It is generally established that the incidence of violence directed at women in particular tends to be reflective of the overall level of violence expressed in any society. South African society is an extremely violent one, and it is not surprising that in this context violence against women is prevalent.

Rape is an occurrence which, according to official statistics, occurred approximately 16,000 times annually during the 1980s. By 1992, the official figure for rape was 24,700.<sup>4</sup> Unofficially, based on the premise put forward by the National Institute of Crime Rehabilitation that only one in twenty rapes are reported, the figure is about 494,000 a year. This means that on average approximately one thousand three hundred women can be expected to be raped a day in South Africa. If these figures are accepted then the possibility of women being raped during their lifetime becomes increasingly significant.

### The Phenomenon of Gang Rape and "Jackrolling"

The gang rape is distinctive, because although it is a situation "in which no brutality, no threat even, would be necessary to subdue the victim",<sup>5</sup> sadistic violence occurs on a large scale. This use of excessive force and debasement vividly illustrates that rape is linked to other needs besides sexual gratification.<sup>6</sup> A brief description of one gang rape that took place just outside Johannesburg will give the reader some sense of the ruthlessness of this crime:

**One night, we saw two women standing at the gate. While we were talking with these two women, these fourteen "ouens" came up. We were all under the influence of liquor and we just decided at the same time that we are going to rape them. The one ran away, so there were about thirteen of us that rape the one woman ... . She was very "dead". They fucked her**

## **up, blue eyes and all ... because she didn't want to take her pants off.<sup>7</sup>**

The word "jackroll" was coined to refer to the forceful abduction of women in black townships by a specific gang called the "Jackrollers" which operated in the years 1987/1988 in the Diepkloof area of Soweto. The original Jackroller gang was made up of a tight network of less than ten associates, and was led by Jeff Brown, who quickly earned the "status" of the most feared man in the township. The most notable practices of the Jackrollers were rape and abduction, car theft and bank robbery. As the abduction of women became fashionable however, anyone who did it could be called a jackroller, and "jackroll" became a commonly used verb in the township vocabulary. The emergence of jackrolling coincided with the increase in township based youth violence and a dramatic rise in youth unemployment.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of aspects which make jackrolling different from ordinary rape. Firstly, it is primarily a youth phenomenon. Although rape is committed by males of all ages, jackrolling is committed by people who are still fairly young. Secondly, it is almost always committed in the open, and the rapists do not make attempts to conceal their identity. As a matter of fact, it seems that part of the exercise is to be as public as possible about the offence so as to earn respect. Most incidents of jackroll are committed in places like shebeens (informal township bars), picnic spots, schools, nightclubs and in the streets. Jackroll is often committed by roving gangs of armed youths.

A peculiar characteristic of jackroll is that it is seen as a sport of the tough gangsters. There is in fact a common township saying that: "Jackroll is not a crime it is just a game".<sup>9</sup> As one commentator points out: "It has become a male fashion, that is, a popular form of male behaviour indulged in by even young school boys ... . The tough and 'manly' jackrollers become their role models."<sup>10</sup>

### **Masculinity and Socialisation**

Man's wish to dominate, which may be expressed through rape, is not instinctual. Controlling and domineering behaviour is learnt from family modes of relating, the media, sexist sexual institutions and activities and society's glorification of "strong armed" masculinity and docile femininity.<sup>11</sup> Men have been taught to define their power in terms of their capacity to effect their will, without the consent of those involved, especially women. This often manifests itself in the attitudes of young males towards sex and sexuality, as demonstrated by the following conversation:

**You see I have told myself that "cherries" can't tell me anything, when I want it she must give, you see girls think they are clever sometimes. She will make excuses claiming she is sick, and all that. I make it clear that when I say I want it now. If you are soft and you let her get away with it, you will not get her ... likes it or not, she has to give it.<sup>12</sup>**

Thus the underpinnings of rape lie in the rapist's objectification and dehumanisation of his victim. For an individual to rape or to engage in extreme violence, it is necessary for him to perceive his victim as less than human. By dehumanising the rape victim, she loses her status as a feeling, thinking human being who has the right to make her own choices, including the right to say no. Rape is not the only means by which women are dehumanised, rather it is an extension and a more extreme form of the broader social oppression and subjugation to which women are subjected.

Another feature of gang rape (although it also occurs when there is an individual rapist) is to force the victim's husband or boyfriend to watch the offence. Making a man watch the rape of his sexual partner has two primary purposes. Firstly it ensures that he is a participant in the rape as he has to "passively" observe it. Secondly it is an illustration of the rapist's greater power relative to the other man, since this man is perceived as incapable of safeguarding and controlling "his woman".<sup>13</sup> This type of rape serves to affirm the rapist's masculinity while destroying that of another man.<sup>14</sup> In the process, the position of woman as property of man and as sexual object to be used and abused becomes obvious.

Gangs seem to be the exclusive domain of the young males, with women as peripheral yet crucial "components" of this youth culture. They are seen as objects of competition and as sources of affirmation for the masculinity of the young men. Two generalisations about rapists can thus be made. Firstly they have a strong desire to assert their power, or masculinity, through coercion, and secondly they are unable to perceive women as people.<sup>15</sup> The practice of jackroll is an emphatic description of this chauvinistic ethos which underpins the pervasive youth culture.

### **Marginalisation**

The social sanction of violence can be seen as both an illustration of and an attempt to avoid exclusion from the centres and forums of power and influence. For black youth, the legacy of apartheid has resulted in familial instability, limited access to educational and

employment opportunities and the denial of their political rights.<sup>16</sup> The youth gangs, which have proliferated over the past few years, provide a concrete index of marginalisation, as they are a response to these political, economic and social constraints.

Gender relations cannot be separated from class and race structures, particularly within the South African context, and the expression of violence against women has to be viewed against this specific political context. One of the most striking features of South African society is its stratification along class, race and gender lines. If one accepts that violence and abuse against women is a manifestation of the power imbalance inherent within patriarchal relations, how does this inter-relate with other hierarchically-structured relations? It seems that in general women bear the brunt of men's need to assert power. In the South African political economy, where working-class and particularly black men daily experience themselves as oppressed and impotent, their frustration about this marginalisation is likely to take expression in domination in the private domain, where women are the most accessible target.<sup>17</sup>

In exploring the effects of marginalisation, work is of central importance, because men fix much of their identity around their occupation.<sup>18</sup> Unemployment in South Africa is extremely high, particularly amongst the youth and unskilled sectors of the population. The present unemployment rate hovers around four to five million people, with the youth, who constitute an overwhelming majority of the new job seekers, representing over thirty percent of this figure.<sup>19</sup>

It seems plausible to argue that jackrolling is directly linked to attempts by young males to reassert their power via distorted masculine sexuality. When jackroll first emerged the victims were carefully selected. Initially many of the victims were those women who were thought to be out of reach because of their class and status. Such women would be called by derogatory names such as "Amahaiza" meaning snobs:

**These women think they are better than anyone else, they look down on us, they prefer men who have money and drive in nice cars. When these women get jackrolled its okay, she likes big men so let them give it to her.<sup>20</sup>**

It is clear that rape is used as a means of thwarting marginalisation, as it is a powerful and effective way of reasserting one's centrality and importance, at least in relation to the victim, and to those in the community who feel threatened by this violence.

## A Culture of Violence

The term "culture of violence" is often used in South Africa to explain and describe the country's heightened incidence of violence. The endorsement and acceptability of violence to which this label refers is crucial to an understanding of any violent incident in South Africa. Resolving conflict and problems through violence has long been a major part of South African culture. Violence played a significant role in African tribal society, in white colonial settlement, in the South African government's programmes of repression and also in the liberation struggle against apartheid, and it continues to be a popular method of resolving conflict and achieving certain goals in the family, in sexual relationships, in the school, in peer groups, as well as in the industrial relations and political spheres.

This heightened incidence of violence is not experienced equally across class, race and gender lines. Although violence touches everyone in South Africa, the most victimised are the working class, poor African communities and women. Furthermore, not all members of these communities experience the same level of violence in their different life spheres. For example, women will be more frequently assaulted by their husbands than vice versa. The emergence of these differences in victimisation is linked to factors such as physical strength, financial resources, organisational strength, potential for arrest, legal rights, custom, and the values of the perpetrators and victims.

## A Subculture of Violence

While the term "a culture of violence" denotes the broad acceptability of violence, there are differences in the extent to which certain groups endorse violence. Gangs are an example of a subculture in which violence is particularly pronounced, and this is connected to the composition of its members and their societal location. With regard to township gangs, both the youth and maleness of their members encourage the use of violence, as a result of the strong association between masculinity and violence. Secondly, given the marginalisation of the members, violence offers a quick and easy method to level the social playing field, to make an impression on an otherwise indifferent society, to gain social approval (from fellow members), and to obtain power and pleasure. Given the breakdown of law enforcement and generalised moral codes in South Africa, men are also more likely to rape as there are fewer social and legal restraints. They are able to engage in gang or individual rape, with the confidence that their crime is unlikely to be reported, and that even if it were, they are unlikely to be arrested and convicted.

Within the subculture of gangs, rape provides a rationale for solidarity and an interaction based on male bonding and masculine validation.<sup>21</sup> Since a subculture of violence encourages violence and views it as socially acceptable, and because the members of the subculture regard their violence as socially useful, it is those individuals who do not engage in violence who are seen as morally questionable. Such circumstances help the individual to

justify his violent actions, and also to reduce any sense of guilt that they may suffer after raping their victims.

## Conclusion

Rape, like all forms of male violence against women, is connected to the broad socio-cultural milieu which is suffused with beliefs of male dominance, supremacy and aggression. Inequalities in male-female relationships as well as in the social, economic and political structures in South Africa ensure that women remain vulnerable to attack. Gang rape and the advent of the "era of the jackrollers",<sup>22</sup> illustrate the way in which this vulnerability is exploited in the context of South Africa's "culture of violence".

Overcoming violence against women in the South African context will have to be linked to overcoming violence in the society in general as well as to exposing and eradicating gender oppression.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Vogelmann & Eagle, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Vogelmann, 1990a.

<sup>3</sup> A statistic revealed in the 1988 film *The Accused*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Star*, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Medea & Thompson, 1974: 36.

<sup>6</sup> Deming & Eppy, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Vogelmann, 1990a: 114.

<sup>8</sup> Mokwena, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Mathiane, 1990: 148.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Vogelmann, 1990a.

<sup>12</sup> Mokwena, 1991: 18.

<sup>13</sup> Vogelmann, 1990a.

- 14 Griffin, 1971.
- 15 Fremont, undated.
- 16 Vogelmann, 1990b; Mokwena, 1991.
- 17 Vogelmann & Eagle, 1991.
- 18 Tolson, 1977.
- 19 Riordan, 1991; SAIRR, 1990.
- 20 Mokwena, 1991: 21.
- 21 Brownmiller, 1975.
- 22 Mokwena, 1991.

## References

- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Deming, M.B. & Eppy, A. (1981). The sociology of rape. *Sociology and Social Research*, 65 (4), 357-380.
- Fremont, J. (undated). *Rapists Speak for Themselves*. Publisher unknown.
- Griffin, S. (1971). Rape: The all American culture. *Ramparts*, 10 (3), 33.
- Mathiane, N. (1990). Beyond the headlines: Truths of life in Soweto. Johannesburg: Southern publishers.
- Medea, A. & Thompson, K. (1972). *Against Rape*. London: Peter Owen.
- Mokwena, S. (1991). **The Era of the Jackrollers: Contextualising the rise of youth gangs in Soweto**. Paper presented at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Seminar No. 5, 25 July.
- Riordan, R. (1991). Marginalised youth. Paper presented at the Joint Enrichment Project Conference entitled: *Marginalised Youth*.
- Russell, D. (1991). *Rape and child abuse in Soweto: An interview with community leader Mary Mabaso.M*

South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) (1990). *Race Relations Survey, 1989/1990*. Johannesburg: SAIRR.

*The Star*. 17 March 1993.

Tolson, A. (1977). *The Limits of Masculinity*. London: Tavistock.

Vogelman, L. (1990a). **Violent crime: Rape**. In McKendrick, B. and Hoffmann, W. *People and Violence in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Vogelman, L. (1990b). *Black Youth in South Africa: Some factors to consider*. NICRO Congress.

Vogelman, L. & Eagle, G. (1991). **Overcoming endemic violence against women in South Africa**. *Social Justice*, 18(1-2), 209-229.

© Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation