



Women bear the deepest scars from Africa's wars

The statistics out of the continent have never been more appalling. From Cairo to Cape, the continent's daughters continue to face gruesome sexual attacks from their male peers

In 2009, a nationwide survey was conducted by South Africa's Medical Research Council in which one in four men questioned said they had raped someone. Nearly half of them admitted more than one attack. Rape is so prevalent that the Rape-aXe, a female condom with teeth (below), was launched by a South African doctor who was trying to help curb the issue."



FILE | NATION

Zaina Niangoma, 46, who was raped along with her 15-year-old daughter by three members of the Hutu rebels of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and congolese Mai-Mai militia that attacked her village of Luvungi on the night of July 30, 2010 poses on September 3.

BY SAMANTHA SPOONER

This year Africa provided the setting for two shocking mass rape incidents in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In July and August, 242 rape incidents were reported in and around a village called Luvungi, although that figure is now believed to be closer to 500.

Again, the UN has recently announced that throughout September and October, an estimated 600 individuals had been raped along the Congo-Angola border. These figures are a dreadful reminder of the ways in which women's bodies have been used as another battleground, and rape a weapon of terror.

Forcing someone to have sexual intercourse with you classifies the act as rape. And rape is an act with many classifications in Africa. As demonstrated, it is one of the most widely used acts of terror, and it has also been used as a path to 'cure' HIV or support other beliefs. It is also a form of domestic violence.

It is not confined to Africa — those who rape out of sexual desire, sadism and as a means of control cannot be restricted by geography, race or class. Womankind Worldwide, a UK-based charity, estimates that one in five women globally will become a victim of rape, or attempted rape, in her lifetime. What is of note, however, is that rape is prevalent in conflict and situations of socio-economic instability, making it an increasingly common occurrence in Africa.

According to Interpol, South Africa has the highest number of declared rapes in the world, with nearly half of the victims younger than 18. Gang rapes are also common in the country, and the crime is said to be a form of 'male bonding' between teens.

In 2009, a nationwide survey was conducted by the country's Medical Research Council in which one in four men questioned said they had raped someone. Nearly half of them admitted more than one attack. It is so prevalent that the Rape-aXe, a female condom with teeth, was launched by a South African doctor who was trying to help curb the issue.

The statistics are shocking. www.rape.za, a blog site run by a rape survivor, reported that in South Africa in 2006, there were close to 55,000 reported rape cases. A further 450,000 rape cases go unreported, based on the premise put forward by the National Institute of Crime Rehabilitation that only one in twenty rapes are reported.

Some 200,000 child rapes are also said to take place in South Africa every year. This high figure can partially be attributed to the 'virgin cure' myth that one will be healed if they have sexual intercourse with a virgin, a conviction which gained prominence in 19th century Victorian England due to Christian beliefs in the legends of virgin martyrs' purity serving as a form of protection.

Prof Rachel Jewkes of South Africa's Medical Research Council attributed the high rape figures to South African men who over the centuries have been social-

ised into forms of masculinity. Men are meant to be strong and tough and the use of force to assert dominance and control over women, as well as other men, is seen as the norm.

In other African countries, the situation is looking increasingly bleak. In the Egyptian case, rape is overtly used as a means by which to oppress different groups within a certain society. Last year, the *Assyrian International News* reported on cases involving Coptic Christian girls who were kidnapped, raped and forcibly converted to Islam by a Muslim gang. These gangs acted with impunity and the 'conversion crime' was ignored by the government.

In Kenya, earlier this year, Amnesty International released a report titled 'Insecurity and Indignity: Women's Experiences in the Slums of Nairobi, Kenya'. It emerged that women living in slums were so afraid to leave their homes that they would avoid using communal toilet facilities because of the fear of being raped.

But their own homes may not be the safest of places either. Marital

rape was invisible for a long time in Kenya: women were unable to challenge the act since it was believed that a man's conjugal rights included his right to have sexual intercourse with his wife when he pleased.

Reforms are finally now underway to change that perception following a meeting in Nairobi this year, where human rights lawyers from Canada, Kenya, Malawi and Ghana planned to alter the legal status of African women.

In countries with active armies and rebel factions, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and the DRC or the Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) in Rwanda and the DRC, rape incidents are extremely high.

The rebel groups will often kidnap women and children, even though most of them (the rebels) were themselves abducted, and use them for sex. Since late 2008, the United Nations has estimated that the LRA has abducted more than 2,000 people. Rebel activity has also led to the premature marriage of young girls in Uganda

since marriage is now regarded as way to avoid abduction — you may still be raped, but the chances are you will be left at home.

In some African countries, rape is associated with a ritual or belief. In Ghana and some parts of Nigeria, for example, a type of slavery exists known as *Trokosi* — the literal meaning of this is wives are slaves to the gods.

The 'Trokosi Tradition', as it's formally called, is a practice whereby families give their young girls to the village priests to 'atone' for the sins committed by family members. If a girl is not available, boys or adults are sometimes, although rarely, used. The girls can stay with a priest for years and sexual exploitation is standard practice.

The terror of rape is very real in Africa, and the horror of the act cannot be redressed under slogans of beliefs. What is of the greatest concern is the continent's inability to fully comprehend the scale of the atrocities. The figures available are only those which have been reported.

Many rape survivors are afraid of being shunned by their communities, and a high proportion of rapes take place in remote settings where women are unaware what action should be taken in the event of rape, so they don't.

Furthermore, out-of-court compromises and settlements put a lot of pressure on the victim of rape not to pursue the case to its logical conclusion, and thus the case goes un-reported. What is happening is just the tip of the iceberg.

— www.africareview.com

55,000

The number of reported rape cases in South Africa in 2006. A staggering 450,000 other victims were estimated to have opted to suffer in silence that year alone!

50%

The percentage of all rape victims that is believed to be aged below 18 years. In Egypt, rape is used as a means by which to oppress different groups.

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