

# Rape culture at universities

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Students at various institutions around the country have expressed their anger toward “rape culture”, as awareness of it grows. These protests, many of which have been surrounded by controversy and debate, have been trending on social media over the past few weeks and have caused many students to question their safety in and around campuses.

According to Nicholas Lawrence, chairperson of UP & Out, rape culture in South Africa is “the way in which South Africa and more [specifically] the different communities within [the] country have normalised rape, sexual violence, and sexual acts based on the way in which society addresses them”. Lawrence also said that society has an “attitude toward certain conduct that normalises [it] and [therefore] creates a rape culture.”

On 17 April a list, known as #RUReferenceList, circulated on social media. Rhodes University (RU) quickly came into the spotlight as the list contained the names of 11 men who had allegedly raped, sexually assaulted or harassed women on the Grahamstown campus. The 11 alleged sexual offenders had not been formally charged with any sexual crimes and had not appeared in court for any of these alleged crimes. According to *Eyewitness News*, RU Vice-Chancellor Dr Sizwe Mabizela said that the accused students were “innocent until proven guilty” and that the list was “a violation of their rights”.

A week before the list was released, students launched an anti-rape campaign calling for changes to the university’s sexual harassment policy. Part of the anti-rape campaign was a topless protest that condemned “rape culture” in the university.

Three days after the #RUReferenceList was released, hundreds of RU students took to the streets, demanding that the men on the #RUReferenceList be removed from campus. They also expressed their dissatisfaction with the university’s sexual harassment policy, which they claimed favours perpetrators. Academic activities were suspended, and the police deployed teargas and fired rubber bullets at protestors.

The RU anti-rape campaign received support from students across the country. On 26 April, students from the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) showed their support for the RU protesters by holding their own topless protest outside the Great Hall on the Braamfontein campus. Some students carried *sjamboks* and engaged in a silent protest in remembrance of “those silenced either by death or because of the stigma that comes with being raped”, said one of the protest leaders, Sarah Mukwevho.

These topless protests have received mixed reactions on social media. Some have praised the students for taking a stand against rape, while others have questioned the agency of the protests and the motives behind them. In an opinion column titled “#RUReferenceList – desperate times, desperate measures” published by *Daily Maverick*, columnist Marianne Thiam said “The female body, the naked female body, so often the scene of the crime in this country, was made visible,” and she added that “I would rather that my son face a false charge in a court and be exonerated than learn that my daughter had been raped, abused or murdered and the perpetrator never arrested or punished because the system is clearly dysfunctional.”

A woman is raped every four minutes in South Africa. This means that during a 50 minute lecture, roughly 13 women are raped. One in four South African men has admitted to raping a woman.

Between 2008 and 2015, reported rape cases in South Africa have declined from 46 647 to 43 195. This is a decrease of 7.4% in reported rape cases in the country. Sian Ferguson, a student activist at RU, said, “Students don’t report [rape cases] because they are uneducated about reporting [them].” It is unclear how many rapes and sexual assaults are not reported to authorities.

The recent focus on sexual assault by students speaks to the current generation’s unwillingness to be silent on issues that are affecting them. The role of universities in tackling rape culture has also been questioned. In an analysis piece published by *The Conversation* titled “How universities can begin to tackle rape culture”, Elizabeth le Roux, a researcher in the faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, said about the role of universities in tackling rape culture: “This means they are well placed to educate students in a myriad [of] ways about identifying and tackling rape culture. An enclosed university environment also arguably makes for an easier setting in which to challenge the broader issue of rape culture – compared to, say, South Africa at large, but addressing rape culture will require long-term prioritising and commitment from university management. This is something that has been lacking on many, if not most, campuses.”

Lawrence said that UP doesn’t deal with rape cases as “there are no procedures, no [statistics about] incidents of rape. The staff at UP do not have any idea how to begin to assist a person who would like to report it.”

UP management recently announced that they will be running an awareness campaign focused on addressing cases of sexual crimes, discrimination, and hate speech. The campaign will be conducted through the use of posters which will be distributed throughout campus and through various social media platforms. The UP policies on sexual harassment are also under review to accommodate for better protection of victims. Security Services were unavailable for comment at the time of going to print.