



**PROTEST:** Open Stellenbosch protesters and allies march through the campus to show their support against sexual assault at the university. They say several sexual assault cases have been swept under the carpet at the institution.

Picture: DAVID RITCHIE

# For how long must 'rape culture' at Maties continue?

## Stellenbosch University students say they are tired of pleas going unnoticed

**T**HE OTHER day an angry father wrote in one of the Afrikaans newspapers: when will Stellenbosch University (SU) acknowledge that there is a rape culture in Stellenbosch and start doing something about it?

The same question is asked by a group of protesting students who are tired of SU ignoring their pleas to recognise the many instances of violence against women on our campus.

The reality is, though, that many of us at SU have been writing and speaking about the travesty of rape and the broader phenomenon of violence against women that the American political scientist and feminist scholar Carole Sheffield calls "sexual terrorism".

Rape is the pinnacle of a larger scourge of violence against women that includes domestic violence and (sexual) harassment that, through the reality and threat of violence, terrorises women, utilising fear to control, dominate and keep them in their place.

For me, the broader question we have to ask ourselves is why, if so many of us have been saying this is a problem, nothing has changed?

Why is it that whenever my colleagues or I teach or lecture on this subject that some student always asks that we should remember that men are also raped?

Yes, according to statistics, 10 percent of all rape victims are men.

And rape in all instances is inexcusable.

But why is it so difficult to focus on the plight of the thousands of women who are raped daily?

Women whose bodies are not only violated but who also experience the very core of their very being destroyed.

And why is it that the next question often pertains to the fact that we should not forget that women also are rapists?

Yes, every now and again one hears of a woman or two who force men into having sex. But this is less than 1 percent of all instances of rape.

Together with the other classic divergence tactic of "blaming the victim" (she should not have been out that late; she should not have worn what she did), these arguments in some way take the focus away from the fact that men rape because they can.

Because deep down some men really do not

### Juliana Claasens

regard women as their equals.

Because too many men from all walks of life secretly harbour the deep-seated myth of male entitlement. Beliefs that often are brought to the fore in the presence of alcohol.

How do we go about ending a rape culture? This should actually start long before students arrive at university.

It should already start at home where boys are taught the importance of empathy; to respect others, and that all people are equal. It should start in schools where boys are taught that rape is no joke and that "no" means "no!" Not try harder.

What is crucial in the family setting and schools is the importance of fostering other forms of masculinity that are not associated with violence and coercion.

My work as a biblical scholar has been dedicated to the role of narratives both ancient and modern that "narrativise" the trauma of rape in helping men and women to recognise the existence of a rape culture.

I propose that biblical narratives such as the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13) or the attempted rape of Susannah by two esteemed elders in her community that forms part of the Apocryphal addition to

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the book of Daniel, have the power to draw readers in and do two things: First, these narratives offer fertile space to help victims of rape and sexual assault, as well as women and men who stand in solidarity with those who have been violated, to overcome the barriers of silence, secrecy and denial, so naming the violence of rape which is deeply systemic in nature.

And second, these narratives that also show the courageous responses of victims of sexual violence who resist in whatever way they can to encourage women and men everywhere to do whatever they can to refuse to accept the current rape culture as "normal".

Attempts like the recent midnight vigil at SU's Harmonie Women's Residence, which included fire alarms going off at 2am as a sign that we will no longer be quiet about violence against women in our community; Taking Back the Night campaigns on campuses across the US; the Thursdays in Black initiative in which everyone is encouraged to wear black on Thursdays as a reminder of the reality of violence against women, are all creative ways of reclaiming our agency and in some small way help end a rape culture.

These and other similar initiatives are rooted in the "crazy" belief that we can live in a world where there is no violence against women.

In an essay in the book, *Transforming a Rape Culture* (2005), Andrea Dworkin's bold act of imagining a 24-hour day in which no single woman is raped, reminds us why we continue to write, teach, speak, and march to end the rape culture in our community, our country and the rest of the world.

She writes: "And on that day, that day of truce, that day when not one woman is raped, we will begin the real practice of equality, because we can't begin it before that day."

"Before that day it means nothing because it is nothing: It is not real; it is not true."

"But on that day it becomes real."

"And then, instead of rape we will for the first time in our lives – both men and women – begin to experience freedom."

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