

SEXUAL VIOLENCE STRIPS WOMEN OF POLITICAL STATUS

Tackling 'rape culture' crucial

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THE Student Representative Council (SRC) of Stellenbosch University (SU) recently launched a campaign to fight against "rape culture" on campus.

The term "rape culture" triggered an avalanche of emotional responses, but seemingly without leading to any attempts to clarify what the term may mean.

Unfortunately, lack of conceptual clarity, especially with regards to an emotive term such as "rape culture", often leads to miscommunication, misunderstanding, heated debates and high rhetoric, which hinder rather than promote much needed concerted action.

When thinking about or discussing the term "rape culture" or "rape-prone" culture, it is important to keep in mind that it does not mean that actual rape has become the literal norm, or even that a majority of cultural members become involved in it.

Rather, it means that there is a pervasive culture in a country or institution which renders rape a meaningful or easy option for would-be offenders.

With April being Sexual Assault Awareness Month, it is important to consider the term "rape culture" and its origins to avoid clouding the issue through conceptual obscurity.

It was coined in the 1970s by second-wave American feminists such as Noreen Connell and Susan Brownmiller; when feminists for the very first time placed sexual violence on political and academic agendas.

This is indicative of the ancient history of women's sexual oppression: that the theme appeared in public consciousness only so late in modern Western history.

Connell, Brownmiller and other feminists basically meant two things by "rape culture", namely that rape and other forms of sexual violence are much more pervasive than most people think and will like to admit, and that rape and other forms of sexual violence are to some extent normalised and trivialised by mainstream cultural practices and perspectives.

They thus drew attention to how misogynist cultures, jokes, media, role models, and so on, have the effect of normalising or naturalising sexual violence against women.

Not only South Africa, but also the US, Australia, Canada, India and Pakistan have all been accused of sustaining "rape cultures" (or, in the words of American anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday, "rape-prone" cultures). Add to this



TAKING A STAND: The extent of sexual violence in South Africa is well documented and it poses a substantial threat to our democratic project as a whole. With this in mind, campaigns like the one initiated by Stellenbosch University's SRC are important political struggles that we should all support, says the writer.. *Picture: DAVID RITCHIE*

the sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls during armed conflicts – even by peace-keeping forces – and it becomes clear that "rape cultures" are indeed much more prevalent than we think.

Since "rape culture" seems to be pervasive in certain countries, one must ask what the factors are that may contribute to this phenomenon.

Among these, we can highlight the following:

- Practices of blaming and shaming the victims rather than the offenders.
- Rape jokes.
- Trivialising or denying the harms of rape.
- High-profile figures who get

away with misogynist behaviour.

- The denial that men and boys are also victims of sexual violence.
- Official investigative, medical or other procedures that subject rape victims to secondary victimisation and traumatisation.
- Institutions that place their reputation, brand and public image above the sexual integrity of their members.
- Naturalising rape as a ten-

dency of male sexuality as such.

- Trivialising sexual violence as "rough sex".
- Selective, e.g. racist or classist applications of the sanction of sexual violence.
- Apathy displayed by the relevant authorities.
- Reinforcing of sexual stereotypes such as female sexual passivity and male sexual agency or even force.

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● General tolerance of sexist behaviour and institutionalised disrespect for women.

● And fraternity practices that treat sex with women as a competition among men.

Regarding our own context, the stakes in this type of debate are undoubtedly high, because nothing less is at stake than the full citizenship of women and girls (as the primary victims of sexual violence) in post-apartheid South Africa.

We have witnessed countless times how sexual violence and the threat of such violence are being used as effective means of stripping women of their political status and reducing them to voiceless, obedient, fearful, second-class citizens.

The extent of sexual violence in South Africa is very well documented – we have one of the highest incidences in the world – and it poses a substantial threat to our democratic project as a whole. With this in mind, campaigns like the one initiated by Stellenbosch University's SRC are important political struggles that we should all support.

Not just universities, but also society as a whole, stand to benefit from such initiatives.

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