

'A girl born in South Africa has a better chance of being raped than learning to read'

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The first goal of the 2010 World Cup is unlikely to be scored within 23 seconds of the 4pm kick-off in the opening match at Johannesburg's Soccer City stadium on June 11 next year.

But a South African girl will be raped inside those 23 seconds. And 23 seconds later another will be raped. And 23 seconds later. And 23 seconds later ...

Child rape, including that of babies, is so out of control in South Africa that Lesley Rudd, pictured above, descended from a prominent Pittenweem fishing family and until recently one of Britain's top nurses, decided she had to do something about it.

Following retirement in 2004 as chief nursing officer of the England and Wales Prison Service, she was on holiday in Portugal where she read an article about the horrific rape in South Africa of a five-month-old baby.

"It's when my whole world tilted," she told the Sunday Herald as she visited pre-school crèches in black townships around Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp, and the gold mining centre of Orkney, some 100 miles southwest of Johannesburg.

It's more than a blind eye the police are turning to child rape. They're actually turning victims away Joan van Niekerk, national director of Childline.

"I'd trained as a specialist paediatric nurse and just couldn't get it out of my mind. Back home, the more I studied South Africa the more I realised how insubstantial the child protection infrastructure there is, although there are many very good people on the ground doing very good work."

And so The Infant Trust was born. Rudd initially tried to operate through established charities, but discovered that none of them was dealing with the ghastly crime of 'baby rape'.

With support from one major donor, the Lord Joel Joffe Foundation, and many smaller contributors, she now runs the trust from the attic of her home, paying herself no salary and diverting 97% of the money raised to South African organisations dedicated to trying to break the cycle of abuse.

Rudd has been for a visit to the Potchefstroom-Orkney-Klerksdorp branch of Childline, where the director, Alice Carnell, an Afrikaner social worker whose Scottish husband died a few years ago, put into the hands of the Sunday Herald the beautifully decorated but tragic testimony of 12-year-old Thobeka Joya, its pink cover studded with drawings of teddy bears.

"What did happen to me? A time to tell," Thobeka headlined her story.

"What did happen to me was a rape," she begins. It occurred in the bathroom of a house when she was much younger than 12: the assaults by a close relative continued over a long period.

Her graphic description of rape is too disturbing to publish. However, she continued: "I wanted to scream and then he told me if I scream or tell anyone he will beat me till I die. I wanted to stay as a virgin till I am married to the person that I will agree to marry."

Thobeka's story was unusual only inasmuch as she put it down on paper and said she wanted her name published.

Raped babies have no understanding of what is happening to them and toddlers and primary school children are usually too terrified or incapable of explaining what happened to them.

"The scale of this is enormous," said Alice Carnell. "Young women grow up expecting to be raped at some point. We have more children in therapy than ever before, and it's so difficult for the children to disclose what is happening to them."

Childline, with funding from The Infant Trust, began a training programme with women who run pre-school crèches – so-called "crèche mamas" – often in corrugated iron huts, teaching them how to read the clues about which of their children have been sexually abused.

"When we can get the crèche mamas, with training and support, to pick up abuse, then we have tremendous power to change things," said Lesego. It is a matter of picking up clues, said Ngakane, a 22-year-old law student and trainer of pre-school teachers.

A small child might never make eye contact. Various play and art therapy techniques are used to detect what has happened to the child. Some drawings are perfectly normal, but when they depict naked children and sometimes men, alarm bells ring.

Carnell said that ideally every child under the age of three who has been raped should receive remedial healing for at least 20 years to overcome depression, suicidal feelings, attention deficit disorder and other traumas.

However, therapy services in the government sector are virtually non-existent and NGOs can only cope with a small part of the need.

Ngakane said that while she was conducting one course for crèche carers, one of the mamas she was teaching was herself raped. Carnell added: "On some of the courses as many as 90% of the women carers have said they were sexually abused themselves as children. Many say, 'This is the first time I've ever been able to talk about it'."

Despite more children being in therapy now than at the end of the 1990s, people are extremely reluctant to go to the police, said Childline social worker and crisis line manager Elize Maartens. "Also we're definitely receiving more reports of teachers, police officers, even psychologists and social workers, being involved in child rape."

With recession reducing the funding of organisations such as Childline, the money British donors pump into The Infant Trust is vital in keeping the courses for crèche mamas going. "I wanted to work with people on the ground, understand their issues and help empower local people so they can develop essential skills," said Lesley Rudd.

At first, she concentrated wholly on the phenomenon of the rape of babies under 18 months old, but soon realised that rape of children of all ages was endemic.

It was one story that had shocked her into action, but there are countless others. A nine-month-old baby was raped by six men, aged between 24 and 66, after the infant had been left unattended by her teenage mother.

A 14-month-old girl was raped by her two uncles. An eight-month-old infant was gang-raped by four men. Samuel Lempe, a Protestant Church minister, was charged and convicted for raping and murdering the eight-year-old daughter of a family friend. One 16-year-old was so traumatised by the prospect of testifying against her stepfather, who had raped her, that she committed suicide in court. And so on and on.

The headlines about rapes that frequently appear in South African newspapers are usually followed by only two or three paragraphs that completely fail to depict the full horror.

"Consequently, people in South Africa have a sense that it is not as bad as it really is," said Joan van Niekerk, national director of Childline, who said her organisation receives a million calls a year from abused children pleading for help.

She added: "The scale of the problem is absolutely overwhelming. We come across terrible, terrible accounts of abuse. A woman born in South Africa has a greater chance of being raped than learning how to read. It's more than a blind eye the police are turning to child rape. They're actually turning victims away."

Johannesburg paediatric surgeon Professor Peter Beale became so angry at the dreadful extent of reconstructive operations he was carrying out on child rape victims that he appealed to the national media to publish photographs of one victim, six-year-old Lerato. He wanted to shock his countrymen into realising that child rape had become commonplace, that their country had become a paradise for rapists.

Lerato's injuries were so horrific that every newspaper refused to publish the injury photos. The damage done to the little girl is too horrific even to give details of in a British paper. However, the Johannesburg Star reverted to an old technique, used to challenge censorship in the apartheid era, by publishing a story beneath a blank space where the picture should go.

Professor Beale said: "This is happening too often – the scourge, the shame of rape." Doing nothing about it is tantamount to treason against the people, he said.

Construction engineer Mike Msimanga discovered Lerato's dreadfully wounded naked body at the base of an electricity pylon.

He had thought she was dead, and said: "Both my guys ran away. They couldn't handle the sight. If I close my eyes I can still see the picture of the kid. I can never, never understand how a man could do this. I've got a six-year-old. I've got three kids of my own."

Professor Beale performed emergency reconstructive surgery over a period of 20 hours.

She survived. Her wounds took many months to heal, but Professor Beale said: "I cannot say much about the emotional and psychological scars she will be left with."

The puzzle is why child rape is so out of control in South Africa. Two of the country's leading child care experts, Shaheda Omar and Luke Lamprecht, offered some thoughts to the Sunday Herald. Both organisations receive support for their programmes from The Infant Trust.

Omar, a clinical social worker with Johannesburg's Teddy Bear Clinic, which provides a wide range of services to sexually abused children, said no one single cause could be pinpointed. There is no consensus why rape and other violence in South Africa is so widespread.

"In pre-apartheid society [across all racial and cultural groups], there was a patriarchal system in which women were seen as chattels and the property of men," she said. "Any notion of women's and children's rights was totally ignored, dismissed".

"The apartheid era contributed to the violence. The 1976 riots overflowed into the lives of families and children. Mob violence generated a culture of violence that filtered into children's lives. The apartheid government [and its laws, which displaced families] destroyed the nuclear family and children looked to other youths and gangs – anything to be able to 'belong'."

In the post-apartheid era, with more women empowered by liberal reforms, Omar argues that men, who historically enjoyed patriarchal power, had almost been emasculated by the changing relationships – a condition exacerbated by an unemployment rate running at more than 40%.

Lamprecht, national director of Big Shoes, which works with paediatricians and child care homes to improve the medical care of orphans and vulnerable children, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS, said some 60,000 child rapes were reported to the police each year. But the figure is the tip of the iceberg. The best estimate is that only one in nine rapes is reported.

"Really, we haven't a clue, although we've seen a definite increase in the levels of brutality, with huge vulnerability among five and six-year-olds," said Lamprecht.

"Some police stations don't bother to register cases. Our police services are, quite honestly, shit".

"But if we extrapolate from one in nine unreported, we're talking about 580,000 rapes a year, or 5.8 million in 10 years. So, the needs are unlimited amidst limited resources. We simply don't have enough money to do what needs to be done."

Like Omar, Lamprecht said he could not put his finger on any one cause of child rape and other violence inflicted on the young. "But one thing that's unique about South Africa is that we had a civil war [in the 1970s, 1980s and early nineties] that some of us had no knowledge of".

"There was dehumanisation. 'Might is right' became engrained. There was a draining of respect for other people."

"We come from a brutalised background, and we lost sight of the fact [in the post-apartheid years] that we still had a bunch of very damaged people. Children are not respected, nor are they kept safe. We have people becoming brutalised who themselves become brutal."

Care workers refer, under their breath, to the enormous damage caused to their work by the rape trial three years ago of Jacob Zuma, elected this year as head of state.

Zuma was accused of raping a 31-year-old HIV-positive woman, Fezeka Kuzwayo. He admitted having "consensual sex" without a condom, but having showered afterwards to avoid contracting AIDS.

He alleged Kuzwayo had enticed him by wearing a loose kanga wraparound skirt, and that in his Zulu culture the worst thing a man could do was leave a sexually aroused woman unsatisfied. Zuma supporters outside Johannesburg's High Court chanted "Burn the bitch".

Zuma was found not guilty, following a trend in which only 7% of rape cases brought to trial result in guilty verdicts. Kuzwayo fled into exile in the Netherlands, where she has been granted political asylum.

The result of the high-profile case, said care workers, had encouraged many young men to think they had a right to force themselves on women and that if they were brought to trial the chances of being convicted were slim. It reinforced the view that rape is largely a risk-free activity.

"My own hope," said Luke Lamprecht, "is that maybe the Zuma government will have to over-compensate for the events at his trial and that therefore we may see progress."

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