

Rape only the tip of the iceberg in the **SEXUAL ABUSE** of young children

By Linda Richter



The rape of Baby Tshepang in September 2001 woke South Africans up to the horror of 'baby rape', as doctors gave the media graphic descriptions of the damage inflicted on the victim's tiny body. Five more babies were reported to be raped within two months of Tshepang's assault.

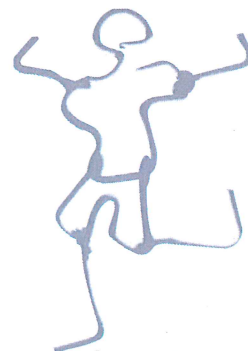
According to hospital statistics and reports from district surgeons, the rape of infants has occurred periodically for many years. One reason advanced for the possible increase in the rape of young children is the myth that having sex with a virgin is a cure for HIV/AIDS. Considerable debate surrounds this assertion, with little data to decisively settle the issue either way. There is historical and comparative evidence that virgin myths surface fairly often, and they are well

documented in legal cases in the late 19th century in England and Scotland with respect to syphilis, for example. Nonetheless, public awareness campaigns about HIV/AIDS need to ensure that this belief is soundly debunked.

News reports reveal that infant rape is not peculiar to South Africa, or to this continent. For instance, the *Natal Witness* on 17 August 2002 reported that an Australian man was sentenced in Perth to 18 years in prison for raping an eight-month-old baby in a park.

As appalling as such accounts are, they can blind us to the fact that rape is only one form of child sexual abuse. We think and speak about child sexual abuse as if it always followed the same pattern, was prompted by the same motivations and led to the same consequences.

Rather, there are several distinct kinds of



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sexual abuse perpetrated against prepubertal children. It varies by features of the event, the age and experience of the child, the duration of abuse, the circumstances under which the abuse takes place, and its effects on the child and the family. These fine distinctions in child sexual abuse reside in police files, in the notes of service organisations, in whispered disclosures between friends and family, and in the memories of children and perpetrators. Little of this knowledge currently informs theory, research or recommended practice in South Africa.

I am convinced that our lack of knowledge is, in part, defensive. A week after I became a staff member at the medical faculty of a large teaching hospital, I was asked to see a four-month-old infant, who had been raped, and to try to speak to her grandfather who was under suspicion as the perpetrator. I was overwhelmed at the thought that my own son was not much older than the child I was going to see. I turned back before reaching the ward and sat in my office for the afternoon, crying with anger and fear.

I believe many of us try to protect ourselves from knowing more than the broad outline of sexual acts performed on and with small children. In much of what I read about child

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because she fears that her partner may leave her if she intervenes.

Yet rape is only one of several acts of sexual abuse against children. Children may be drawn into seemingly voluntary sexual acts with adults through a combination of enticement and threat. Such children often find it difficult to escape from these relationships because they fear that they will be assumed responsible for what has occurred.

There is also the sexual abuse of children for financial gain. For instance, a school principal in one of the Child, Youth and Family Development's (CYFD) studies on the issue, reported that a Grade 6 child was being sent out by her father to prostitute. Such behaviour is a significant problem and is likely to increase if the high poverty levels in South Africa are not addressed. Children may themselves initiate sexual activities with

perpetrators may groom the child for other sexual acts later on.

Child pornography, including the use of children in so-called 'snuff movies' which may even involve filming the child being tortured and killed, has also received a great deal of attention in the media, usually with the focus on the severe penalties for perpetrators. Yet very little has been written about the fate of children who are abused in this manner, many of whom are trafficked amongst paedophile rings. International agencies co-operate to identify and rescue children from these conditions, but they cannot stem the proliferation of film material being circulated around the world on videotapes and through the Internet. One young girl who was rescued from a Canadian paedophile ring told me that she would never recover from the fact that she could, in minutes, be found on the Internet engaging in bestiality and other degrading acts. An editorial in *The Mercury* on 13 February 2003 claimed that 'South Africa is clearly in the grip of a near-psychotic wave of sexual and other violence against children (also against women) which runs counter to the values and traditions of every section of society. It points to a deep-seated social/psychological dysfunctionality

In this tiny community near Uptington, South Africa, a nine-month-old baby was gang raped by six men between the ages of 24 and 66 years old. They were all friends of the family, relatives to some. Children are the most vulnerable in this traumatised community still trying to come to terms with the atrocity, fearing that the town they call home will always be known as that place where children are not safe. The raped baby's aunt, comforts Gertruida Rens (centre) as she recalls the events of that Friday night. Valencia, Rens' granddaughter looks on. It was in this room that the baby's grandmother brought the child the night she was assaulted. In the weak light of Ren's lounge the women discovered a bleeding gaping wound as they parted the infant's legs. (Photograph by Nadine Hutton/PictureNET Africa)

sexual abuse, I find only the outline, and often a stereotypical one, stripped of the complexity, the complicity of others, the repetition of the acts, the experience of the child and the perpetrator, and the words that describe, or silence, the acts.

The act of rape against babies or toddlers has received a great deal of media attention of late, generally because of the horrific physical damage that it causes young children, but also because it is so perplexing, especially given that perpetrators are seldom psychotic. The rapist is most often a relative, friend or near neighbour. In some cases, other adults may be complicit in the rape when they fail to act on suspicions. Other adults, including caregivers, may co-operate with the abuse. For instance, a mother may turn a blind eye to her partner raping her child

adults in the hope of receiving food, clothes or protection.

The most underreported forms of child sexual abuse are those that involve no actual sexual contact between the abuser and the child. Examples of this are showing children pornography, having children watch adults engaging in sexual activity, encouraging children to masturbate as an act of voyeurism, and sexual photography of children for personal or commercial use. In all such cases the child is used, either psychologically or physically, to host the fantasies and uncontrolled sexual expression of an adult. The harm caused to the child is psychological, emotional and social – areas that leave scars more difficult to treat than physical injuries. Non-contact abuse is also often a forerunner to other forms of abuse, by which

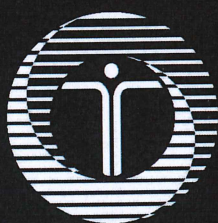
which requires urgent expert analysis.'

Public outrage at the sexual abuse of young children is not enough to stop these crimes. In fact, our horror can keep us from the detailed work that is needed to gain a systematic understanding of the problem, to work out and implement strategies to protect children from sexual abuse, and to support and treat abused children. The first step towards this is to see child sexual abuse for what it is, in all of its expressions. •

Professor Linda Richter is Executive Director of the Child, Youth and Family Development (CYFD) Research Programme of the HSRC and one of the editors of The Sexual Abuse of Young Children in southern Africa, a book that addresses more comprehensively many aspects of the subject, including baby rape. Details on how to order the book are available on the back cover. An article on the subject also appeared in the Child Abuse Review, Vol. 12, 2003.

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