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Baby rape: the family connection

Pearlie Joubert

"I'm not a bad mother. I got a boyfriend who built us a shack to sleep in and I wash my child every day and make sure she's never cold or hungry. But then we had a fight and my boyfriend waited for me to go to the shop. That's when he pushed his penis into my baby. One day I waited outside the door and when I heard the baby moaning, I went back inside. He took his hand off the child's mouth and pulled up his pants. He said if I don't like it, we can both voetsek and go and sleep under a bridge where we belong," says 23-year-old Cynthia Dekella*.

"We were living in his shack. He was busy with the baby a couple of times and I thought it's better to let him do this business because at least we've got somewhere to sleep and he bought us food," an expressionless Dekella said.

She only reported the rape of her child a couple of weeks ago, by which time the toddler's vagina was so damaged that she had to undergo reconstructive surgery to the perineum, the area between the anus and the vagina.

Last year, the Human Sciences Research Council released a report stating that in three out of five child rapes, the mother is aware of the abuse. Every day an estimated 150 children are raped in South Africa -- about 55 000 reported rapes a year. The Medical Research Council has found that this figure represents only one out of nine actual rapes. Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (Rapcan) reckons that about half a million children get raped in South Africa every year.

Dekella is one of five women from townships in Cape Town who was interviewed by the *Mail & Guardian*. These women's children, ranging in age from three months to five years, were raped and/or sexually abused by their father or their mother's boyfriend.

All five women are battling economically. Some live in plastic and wood shacks,

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Every day an estimated 150 children are raped. (Photograph: David Harrison)



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barely eating enough to stay healthy. Every one of the mothers the *M&G* interviewed is completely dependent on her partner for economic survival. None of these women is in their relationship out of love.

When Dekella reported the rape, her child became the 139th victim of rape under the age of five to be reported to one police station in Cape Town in the month of February alone. Cape Town is served by about 50 police stations.

In more than 80% of the 139 reported rapes at this police station, the perpetrator was the mother's boyfriend, an uncle, a grandfather, a father or another older family member. Of the 14 rapes reported in the past three weeks at this particular police station, seven were committed by the boyfriend of the victim's mother.

Cape Town's townships have been racked by a spate of child rapes and murders in the past six months. Last week, Hanover Park residents went on a rampage and fought running battles with the police in an attempt to get their hands on a man in police custody who was suspected of kidnapping and raping a little girl.

Two weeks earlier, furious residents in Mitchells Plain tried to gain access to a man who appeared in court after the rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl. The suspect, Richard Engelbrecht, is under investigation for the deaths of at least two other kids and was allegedly the mother's boyfriend at the time of the murder and rape of the 11-year-old.

With one exception, all five women interviewed by the *M&G* felt torn between their child and their relationship with the abuser.

Dekella tried to convince herself over a period of three months that her baby's vagina was bleeding and inflamed because of "an infection caused by dirty water".

"I knew my boyfriend was doing stuff to my baby, but I said to myself that my child is strong and that I must just make sure that he doesn't hurt her too much. I said to myself that it's this dirty water I'm washing my kid with that's causing this bloodiness," she said, not once making eye contact.

"I was scared he would kick us out and where will we go then? Who will feed us? Where will we live? Now he has kicked us out and my family took the baby and told me to go away and never come back. My boyfriend said he will kill us if he goes to jail. Now I stay here in Khayelitsha and I drink every day and I sleep where my head falls," she says.

Dekella claims her boyfriend -- whose name cannot be published because he is awaiting trial and has not pleaded yet -- is a "kind and gentle" man.

She owns one pair of pants, two T-shirts, three pairs of panties, a jacket, a bra, a blanket and some odds and ends for her baby. She says that she has never known more comfort, more material security or more love and care than she knew in the

year that she lived with the rapist of her two-year-old daughter.

Rashieda Adams* lives in a council house on the Cape Flats and has 10 children. Her youngest child was sexually abused by their father earlier this year and had to be hospitalised for treatment. The two older girls, aged eight and nine, told the investigating officer that “their daddy also hurt us between the legs”.

“I’ve been married to this man for 26 years. He has beaten me, raped me, abused me since shortly after our marriage, and then he started with my baby. I think he wants to control us completely and he can’t control me anymore. After so many years of being scared of him, I am no longer afraid and that’s when he went for my baby,” says Adams.

She stays with her husband because she has no idea what else to do. “When I reported this case, the magistrate at court told me to get my own house and a job and to take my children away. I just look at her and ask: where are you from? Where do I sommer [just] get a house and a job? Show me and I will leave this man and his house forever.”

* Names have been changed

Homes from hell

A senior police officer in Cape Town, who has worked in the field of domestic violence and rape for more 20 years, said this week that conventional policing cannot protect children because the abuse happens at home.

“The child’s home is supposed to be their castle, and the very gatekeeper to the castle is the killer and abuser of children. Our children are not safe in their homes, and more and more we see mothers incapable of or unwilling to protect their children,” she said. (This police officer cannot be named because she is not allowed to speak to the media.)

What the police have noticed, though, is a trend where “men’s anger and frustrations” with their own economic and/or social failure are taken out on the child. “The shit at home, at work, between the man and his wife, gets taken out on the child. The child has to bear the brunt of the father or boyfriend’s anger and it’s often sexual and brutal in nature,” the police officer said.

“We’ve seen a level of brutality and violence over the past year or two that I don’t understand. The levels of violence men use against small children -- and women -- are disproportionate. We see sadistic undertones in a lot of these cases, and often the perpetrator could’ve achieved his goal by using far less violence and brutality,” she said.

Dr Marcel Londt, a lecturer in social work at the University of the Western Cape, says sexual predators are ordinary people, “often loving fathers and good caregivers”. Londt and many researchers believe that the scourge of abuse can be partially

explained by the stark economic reality facing a large percentage of black and coloured people living on the Cape Flats and in townships in Cape Town.

According to the Human Sciences Research Council, local and international research has proven that high levels of poverty in the family and neighbourhood increase a child's vulnerability to sexual abuse.

She points out that the five mothers interviewed by the *Mail & Guardian* grew up in "harsh and hostile" environments where they never acquired the skills to take care of themselves and their children.

Londt says that when people grow up in such harsh and severe social and economic conditions, "the cycle of deprivation and brutality gains momentum. These women get brutalised and they don't have the skills to protect themselves or their children because they're so vulnerable, and that's what we call the cycle of sexual abuse. If I'm the mother and I don't have the skills, network and savvy to protect myself, I will put my child in a situation where she or he will also be vulnerable. The mothers also don't think that they're worthy or [deserve] care, love and nurturing. They don't think they deserve that and therefore they cannot offer it to their offspring."

Londt believes that mothers stay with the perpetrators of violence against their children because they can't empathise with them "simply because they don't empathise with themselves". -- *Pearlie Joubert*