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### Intsika: The Young Women of South Africa

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## **Intsika: The Young Women of South Africa**

Molly E. Cohen

Thembeke, a fourteen-year old girl, once expressed to me her fears in going to school. She first stated that she hated school. Prompted by my further questioning and persistence, she finally explained that most of the time she didn't feel safe. The male students were always mean to her, she said, but now she had a boyfriend who protected her. Thembeke lives in Nyanga, one of the oldest black townships outside of Cape Town. Her fears are a common feature of life for many young girls like her living in townships. Gender-based violence is a huge problem in South Africa, and schools are one of the many places that young women are at risk. Most of the violence occurs in economically disadvantaged regions, like Nyanga, where there are not enough resources devoted to solving the problem. The statistics on rape in South Africa are jaw dropping, and only one in nine women who are raped report the crime. Young women, like Thembeke, are often the victims of rape and sexual harassment by their peers, their neighbors or even members of their family. Many girls remain silent about their suffering because of shame and fear, having no one to help them heal and blaming themselves for their fate.

The circumstances created by township life cause young women to be vulnerable to the perils of post-apartheid society. Many girls are unable to rise out of impoverished conditions because they lack self-esteem, sufficient education, positive role models and the resources to achieve their goals. A large number of these young women believe that their only option is to find a man to protect them, often sacrificing their future dreams. My experience working in Nyanga opened my eyes to the issues that shape the lives of girls like Thembeke. She represents a group of young women whose experience is much different than my own, and many of my peers. The economic conditions in post-apartheid South Africa make the plight of young women an incredibly difficult one.

Gender-based violence perpetuates and is perpetuated by poverty. The absence of resources and harsh economic disadvantage in townships remains a huge problem that influences men towards gender-based violence. The country of South Africa is one of the rape capitals of the world, crowning the media label of 'rape epidemic.' A 2006 case study reported close to 55,000 rape cases. An estimated 450,000 rape cases went unreported.<sup>1</sup> The statistics have drastically increased in the past five years. Sexual violence stems from South Africa's incredibly troubled past shaped by a history of racial segregation, inequality and brutality. The injustice that black and colored South Africans faced has had a long lasting impact upon the state and progression of the country that has never entirely been resolved. It remains apparent in the economic disparities that define the cities of South Africa, the high rate of unemployment, and the race and class division of the landscape. Black South Africans still have a much more difficult plight than the English and Dutch descendent members of society. The vast majority of violence and rape occurs in the townships, the home to South Africans who were displaced during apartheid, robbed of their jobs and deprived of their share in the country's wealth.

A survey conducted by the Medical Research Council in South Africa provided evidence that that one out of every four South African men had raped someone in their lifetime. More than half of the identified subjects admitted to doing it more than once. The study found that three fourths of the men carried out their first attack under the age of twenty.<sup>2</sup> Why are so many young men raping women? They want to be men. The cultural responsibilities of the male figure are to

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<sup>1</sup> "Rape Statistics South Africa & Worldwide 2010" [www.rape.co.za](http://www.rape.co.za). Web: 28 June 2011

<sup>2</sup> "SOUTH AFRICAN RAPE SURVEY SHOCK" *BBC NEWS*. BBC NEWS: 18 JUNE 2009. WEB: 28 JUNE 2011.

provide for and protect his wife, children and community and to hold the position of head of the household. The construction of masculinity itself is a key factor in the extremely high rape statistics. Poverty and unemployment prevent men from accomplishing many of these 'masculine' goals. The loss of power accompanied with disadvantages faced by men in South Africa forces them to reassert their masculinity in other modes. Sexuality is one of the only elements of masculinity that males still can access. South African men use sex to display dominance and control deemed necessary to their masculine identities. The more sexual partners a man has, the more masculine he becomes. Masculinity, thus, becomes constructed through sexuality and a primary impetus of the high number of rape crimes in South Africa. Men in the townships are much more likely to abuse sexuality because it is the a chief factor in their control. Therefore, young women and girls living in these conditions are often subjected to gender-based violence as a result of where they live.

Gender-based violence also greatly contributes to the high rates of HIV/AIDS in the townships. Women are at an increased risk of contracting the disease. Most of the instances of rape that occur in the townships are unprotected making rape the primary mode through which the disease is transmitted. Economic disparities contribute to men and women in townships not having access to preventative measures and contraceptives. Many young children are not aware of the dangers in sexual activity that can result in the spread of HIV/AIDS, therefore do not take measures to protect themselves against the disease. The organization that I interned for throughout the semester, Yabonga, ran a program for HIV/AIDS education for youth in the townships. There are some measures being taken to put an end to the rapid spread of the epidemic, but the rate of HIV/AIDS continues to be extremely high. In the case of rape, young women have no say in whether or not they use protection. As the number of rapes increase, the epidemic builds more and more strength. As a whole, the high statistics on gender-based violence correlates with the high rate of South Africans infected with HIV/AIDS.

Many girls in townships, like Thembeke, do not have positive role models or adults whom they can discuss important issues in their lives, including rape and HIV/AIDS. During puberty, young girls go through many difficult changes, during which they need guidance. Before I started working in Nyanga one of my program mentors, Ouma, tried to explain to me what the young girls I would be working with would need from me as a mentor. Her words really stuck with me throughout the semester. She wrote, "a girl is growing up, starting to have her first period-- with no one to talk to about those issues or someone to tell her why there must be a blood flow— and also purchase her sanitary pads." A girl going through puberty is completely lost, and experiencing changes, such as menstruation, that cause severe mental, emotional and physical distress. Young girls can be traumatized by these experiences when they don't understand what is happening to them. As a young woman, I know how volatile this stage of life can be, but I was fortunate to have a parent who walked me through each step.

Often times, girls who do not have a parent figure will become close to anyone who gives them attention or shows an interest in them. This may be an older male with negative intentions, but feeling both vulnerable and neglected, a young woman may be likely succumb to the man's desires. Ouma explained that the family of a young woman in this situation will often support the relationship because the man can provide both money and resources that they do not have. Girls are conditioned to believe that this type of relationship is normal and acceptable reiterating that a man is the most important aspect to their lives. They do not have anyone to tell them it is wrong, and many girls who are raped or subject to unwanted sexual attention do not have anyone that they can look to for comfort, support and guidance.

Only one in nine cases of rape are reported, which ultimately perpetuates the increasing numbers of rape crimes. Women remain silent for many different reasons. In most cases, shame and fear prevent women from reporting the crime or telling a friend or family member. In many African cultures, a woman's virginity is linked to her family honor. Rape brings shame and embarrassment to her and her family. Family members have murdered women in the family who were raped for this reason. The blame is put upon the woman who is raped, not the perpetrator of the crime. Women are often seen to have been "asking for it" in one way or another. The phenomenon in which a woman who is raped is perceived to be sexually promiscuous produces the belief that she must have brought the fate upon herself.

Social conditions in townships create a heightened attention to sexuality that delineate strict boundaries on what is sexually normal. The norms of sexuality are devised as a way of protecting and coping with issues like rape and HIV/AIDS. People who are affected by either of these perils are perceived as outside of the community. This practice can be viewed as a way of distancing oneself and the community from rape and HIV/AIDS in order to cope with fear and distress brought on by the two deadly epidemics. The mindset that if the people who are raped or infected with HIV/AIDS are different than us we can protect ourselves shapes the silence around HIV/AIDS. Ultimately, by viewing the victim or the diseased as a deviant human being outside of their community, they separate themselves from the problems plaguing society. Women who are raped are often isolated and become outcasts from their community. By hiding their suffering, women save themselves from being exiled from their family, friends and neighbors. Thus, these women are silenced, intensifying the feelings of suffering and degradation.

Another problem that impacts the high statistics on gender-based violence in South Africa is the prevalence of severe drug and alcohol abuse. A study by the CDA in 2009 concluded that drug consumption in South Africa was twice the world norm.<sup>3</sup> While the problem is in effect throughout the country, drug and alcohol abuse tends to be most concentrated within townships. When townships were developed, architects of apartheid made certain that alcohol was available to local residents. Shebeens were built, which are taverns that produce and sell alcohol, and still exist today. The issues discussed earlier, including poverty, unemployment and the 'male' crisis, push many people towards both alcohol and drugs as a form of escapism. It is no surprise that a recently released United Nations Drug report pinned South Africa as one of the drug capitals of the world.<sup>4</sup> Methamphetamine, commonly known as 'tik', is one of the most common drugs, as well as the most lethal. Tik is inexpensively made and highly addictive, causing many people, including children as young as twelve years old, to become dependent on it for survival. Along with tik, heroine, cocaine, 'dagga' also known as marijuana and a few other substances are commonly used in contemporary South Africa. Drugs may not only lead to death, but can cause increased violence and abnormal behavior. In many cases, the perpetrators of crimes, including gender-based violence, are under the influence of substances or attempting to secure money for their next fix. An SAPS study shows that 60 percent of national crimes are related to substance abuse. In the Western Cape, the numbers were even higher, reaching up to

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<sup>3</sup> "Addiction Drug Statistics South Africa" Drug Rehabilitation Centers in South Africa. Drug-rehabilitation-centres.org.za. Web: 7 July 2011

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *South Africa: Country Profile on Drugs and Crime*. Regional Office for Southern Africa, 2002. Web: 7 July 2011.

80 percent.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, areas with a high percentage of substance abuse become breeding grounds for crimes of gender-based violence.

The problems in townships with drugs, alcohol and sexuality create an environment that encourages young women to have low self-esteem. Most girls do not have role models to look up to and to give them hope. If there are successful family members, they have often abandoned the rest of the family and moved into one of the nearby cities. There is a trend apparent in black cultures in South Africa, including Xhosas, Zulu, Sotho and many of the other tribes, in which those who have “bettered their lives” must keep away from struggling families.<sup>6</sup> There are two reasons behind this phenomenon. The first is that the family member will be obligated to support everyone financially. Ouma explained that the second and most important reason is “to stay away from any pull me down syndrome that comes with a family where the Mother especially does not have high self esteem to pass on to the kids.” Ouma explains the tendency for family members to condemn those who are driven to success and demote their accomplishments. They receive little encouragement, support or praise for achieving their goals, and remain subject to guiltiness and self-loathing. It is easier for a successful person to leave his or her home and cut off contact with friends and family, than to look them in the eyes everyday and have to deal directly with the shame that he or she is made to feel. With successful members of society out of the picture, young children are left without positive role models to look up to and receive encouragement from. Consequently, many young women in particular feel hopeless and do not believe that there is any other option for them than the lives that they were born into. The violence that occurs around them and the circumstances of life in poverty often prevents young women from freedom and happiness. Many like Thembeke, then become mixed up with boys at a young age, forgetting about their goals and education.

Gender-based violence prevents women from receiving an adequate education, which is the first step towards alleviating poverty and oppression. One chief reason is the pressing concern for safety of girls in school. Thembeke’s fear of going to school is not unfounded; school is a dangerous place for young girls like her. In 2001, the Human Rights Watch released a report on sexual violence in South African schools that confirmed that sexual abuse and harassment of girls by both teachers and other students is widespread in South Africa. The report states that, “Girls who encountered sexual violence in school were raped in school toilets, in empty classrooms and hallways and in hostels and dormitories” (Human Rights Watch 2001). There is no safe space for South African girls in school, which have become places of violence rather than learning. Not only is the bodily integrity of girls being threatened, but also they are being deprived of their right to an education. Sexual violence prevents many girls from going to school and when they do attend school, it severely impacts their ability to concentrate and learn. The report states that the school performance of girls who have survived acts of sexual violence immensely declines.<sup>7</sup> Many give up on their education or leave school early. Although the report was released in 2001, Thembeke illustrates that gender-based violence is still present in schools today. In South Africa, women are more likely to be raped than to learn how to read.

As a female living in Cape Town, I was attuned to the problems that women face in South African society. I knew, going into my semester abroad, that I would be in a country that

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<sup>5</sup> “Addiction Drug Statistics South Africa” Drug Rehabilitation Centers in South Africa. Drug-rehabilitation-centres.org.za. Web: 7 July 2011

<sup>6</sup> Mpela, Ouma. Email. 8 March 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools.” *Human Rights Watch*. March 2001. USA. Web: 17 July 2009.

was in the midst of change. I was aware of the horrible system of Apartheid, and I was curious to see a new nation and how far it has come since such brutal government ruling. I was surprised to find that South Africa still has a long path ahead for equality to be achieved, between black and whites, men and women and people of all cultures and ethnicities. The country has not fully eliminated its history of violence and struggles for power. The problems that remain are directly linked to the injustices of the past. Gender-based violence lies at the forefront of these issues, because it impacts a large amount of people and has so many vital components that perpetuate and impact the crisis.

For a woman living in post-apartheid South Africa, there are many dangers aligned with the instability and economic disparities that make up society. As a middle-class, white American, I was able to take necessary precautions to protect myself. I lived in an apartment building with five different locks in a suburb near the University. Whenever I felt like I was in a situation that was unsafe, I was able to call a taxi and leave. Young women in townships don't have these options. The girls that I worked with were lucky if they had a door to their home. They comprise the numbers of women who are victims of gender-based violence, rape and HIV/AIDS. Intsika is the Xhosa word for strength. Despite all of the obstacles South African women face, the strength that they possess is incredibly great. They are able to withstand, to persevere and to fight for their human rights. I write this paper in recognition of Thembeke and the other girls that I worked with. They are amazing young women and have great contributions to make for the future of South Africa. Their voices must be heard and a serious position must be taken to protect young girls like them, so that they can grow up to be the strong, powerful women that they have the capacity to become.



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