

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE PROBLEM OF RAPE



The history of modern South Africa tends to be analysed through a race lens—and we discuss how to understand race in Chapter 7. South Africa was subject to a systematic form of racial discrimination and segregation, known as Apartheid, for most of the latter half of the twentieth century. While Apartheid is no longer operating formally within South Africa, issues of race and racism are still an integral component of understanding the country (Seekings & Nattrass 2008).

Perhaps because of this legacy, sometimes issues can be interpreted through a racial lens rather than other formats that might be more appropriate. One social problem where there is particularly relevant is that of sexual violence. Rates of rape in South Africa among the highest in the world (Vetten 2014), and it is a central focus of feminist activism in the country.

However, scholars have also highlighted that some of the public discussion of rape locates the issue as a predominantly *racial* one rather than a *gender* one (Moffett 2006). That is, much of how rape is discussed in the media in South Africa locates the blame specifically with black men. By marginalizing the crimes of white men, the public discussion of rape demonises black men, serving as a racist rhetorical device to justify the role and legacy of apartheid (Buiten and Naidoo 2016). Thus, by incorrectly accusing black men of being primarily responsible for rape, discussions and policy about rape can be framed and used to police black men rather than protect women. In order to challenge this, Moffett (2006: 129) argues that rape in South Africa must be understood as “rooted in apartheid practices that legitimated violence by the dominant group against the disempowered”, which both recognizes the importance of Apartheid in this context while not privileging race above gender in the analysis.

This is important because feminist analysis of rape across many cultures recognizes that rape is not just as a harmful criminal act but also a form of *gendered* social control (see Walby et al. 2017). With women overwhelmingly the victims to male perpetrators, feminist academics have argued that rape must be examined as a *gendered* phenomenon in which men’s power is exerted against women to perpetuate gender inequality (e.g. Brownmiller 1975). The recent revelations about sexual harassment and abuse in Hollywood and other major institutions speak to a broader context where certain men feel able to act toward women in ways that range from the inappropriate to the illegal.

Thus, while research on rape in South Africa certainly supports this perspective (e.g. Jewkes and Abrahams 2002), the media discourses about rape and the race of South African men is particularly problematic. The issue of racism within the policing and public understanding of rape is not restricted to South Africa, with it being a long-standing and iniquitous component of the American criminal justice system (Wriggins 1983). Yet the history of apartheid in South Africa, alongside its broader history, means that a critical sociological focus on rape is particularly important for the country—including a postcolonial approach that recognizes the importance of the history of Apartheid regime without focussing on race at the expense of gender (Coetzee and du Toit 2017).

References

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