

# WAITING TO SPEAK

## SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA SUMMARY REPORT

## UNDERSTANDING THEIR NEEDS

The purpose of this study was to explore the needs of survivors of sexual violence in South Africa. Despite sexual and gender based violence receiving increasing public attention globally, those affected remain largely silent. Rape statistics do not begin to explain what victims experience and many survivors, particularly those who experience rape by their partner, do not report the rape. Survivors are often invisible and isolated. The wider public can have a negative, judgmental attitude towards them, particularly if they are commercial sex-workers,

South Africa has a very high prevalence of sexual violence; women and young girls are often vulnerable to rape and sexual violence. The South African Government has a 365 National Action Plan to end gender-based violence. While there are many organizations working to address this issue, strong coalitions within the faith community are lacking. Over 80% of the population of South Africa profess a Christian faith, which makes churches a significant and powerful force that could influence the government.



Reflecting on a day and place she was gang raped. Photo: Hope Africa and the Diocese of False Bay

Wider society needs to acknowledge the pain and needs of survivors. There is a real need for a movement of survivors to come together and express their feelings and demands to policy makers. This research hopes to facilitate this process and empower survivors to champion change and effect current policies and interventions.

With a survivor movement society will be able to hear their voices. It is time to act and we will speak out ...silent no more!

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The research was carried out by Tearfund South Africa, in partnership with Hope Africa during May and July 2014.

Tearfund South Africa (SA) is a branch of Tearfund UK. Its aim is to accompany and strengthen local partnerships and collaborations in South Africa, with a specific focus on mobilising the church. Tearfund UK is an international NGO working across 60 countries globally with a long-term commitment to working with Churches globally with a vision to empower and enable them to address issues to poverty and justice. Since 2010, Tearfund UK has been involved in building national and global movements of faith that have a vision to end sexual violence. In partnership with the Anglican Communion and UNAIDS, they have launched a coalition called 'We will speak out' ([www.wewillspeakout.org](http://www.wewillspeakout.org)). National coalitions have been developed in the Great Lakes countries of Rwanda, Burundi and DRC and in Liberia.

HOPE Africa (Health, Opportunity, Partnership and Empowerment in Africa) is a non-governmental organisation based in South Africa, which has worked for 13 years in the social development outreach programmes of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

The research was qualitative, combining focus groups and in-depth interviews with 64 survivors of sexual violence. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. It was carried out in four areas of the Western Cape; Bredasdorp, Khayelitsha, Fisantekraal and Athlone. The study participants were all women who varied demographically in age, race and socio-economic status. They were assured of complete confidentiality.

### Western Cape Research locations



The impact of sexual violence is deeply rooted in survivors and leaves deep emotional scars. Where rape is perpetrated by a family member it is particularly traumatic and can leave women paranoid about the safety of their own girl children.

Survivors spoke of their experiences:

"Husbands can sell you to another man,"

"Poverty causes us to be victims – we are forced to have sex to get money,"

"There is nowhere to go, and there is no one to talk to."

"Rape stays with you even if you want it to go away – the flashbacks return and you re-live it again and again."

The researchers were most grateful to the women who spoke out and shared their most intimate stories. Through their participation in the research, they have reached out to other survivors searching for a voice.

### Study objectives

1. To explore survivors' understanding of sexual violence.
2. To understand why survivors remain silent.
3. To map and explore the impact of sexual violence on the lives of survivors.
4. To gain understanding of the priorities of survivors in order to facilitate their healing and restoration.
5. To determine whether individual survivors would benefit from a survivor movement.
6. To ascertain the role of the Church in handling sexual violence.



Research information gathering meeting ends in group prayer. Photo: Hope Africa and the Diocese of False Bay

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The research unearthed hidden root causes about why women stay silent in abusive relationships without seeking justice. It shows the need for women to reach-out to others as survivors, and to speak out against the exploitation and violence inflicted on women for no reason.

### Understanding of sexual violence

Survivors' understanding of sexual violence was far wider than that of rape. Their experiences were sobering and included the use of force, personal violation, a troubling inter-generational cycle of rape, brutality, transactional sex, alcohol abuse, poverty, domestic violence and a loss of control.

"Abuse kills us inside"

### Silence in the face of overwhelming suffering

Most participants knew their perpetrators – who raped them repeatedly. The perpetrators made the victim fear that if she broke the silence, they would kill her or her children. Survivors remain silent because they feel threatened and afraid.

In addition to the threat of physical reprisals, survivors also fear social stigma and judgement, and lack protection from legal or social support systems. They may blame themselves or they may stay silent in order to protect their families. In addition survivors mentioned their financial dependency on family members.

Survivors felt that because they could see no way out, they needed to endure the pain both for the sake of their children and because marriage is regarded as binding culturally.

### The impact of sexual violence on victims

The impact of sexual violence was wide ranging. It could result in a lack of self-confidence, shame, lack of trust and unwanted pregnancies. For some victims the trauma has affected them physically, giving rise to a wide variety of illnesses, while others noticed changes in their character. Depression and suicide as well as long term effects on interpersonal relationships were also common.

Another long term consequence is the impact on young children of observing domestic violence. Young boys might model their father's aggressive treatment towards their mother, continuing the cycle of abuse.

### Gaining healing from sexual violence

A prominent theme among survivors was their desire for support; to feel loved, to share their stories and to support others. Other expressed needs were to access professional and legal assistance.

There is a need for victim support centres and specialised sexual crime units at police stations, designated medical doctors for sexual trauma cases and court practitioners to assist with navigating the court system.

### Developing a survivor-led movement

All participants agreed that the formation of a survivor-led movement would bring many benefits. Such a movement would help bring healing, foster solidarity and break the silence. Survivors could access a support group and build a circle of trust with other survivors.

These benefits would begin to restore confidence to survivors and provide a way of reducing their vulnerability to repeated sexual violence.

### The challenge to the church

'And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.'

Luke 18: 7-8a

The study established that the church in South Africa is ill-equipped to deal with sexual violence. Participants did not feel that churches were places where they felt free to be themselves and share their real life experiences of sexual violence due to fear of gossip, stigma, judgmental attitude and ostracism. Sadly several participants shared stories of sexual violence from church officials. These views pose a serious challenge to the relevance of the church in dealing with sexual violence.

"My 9 year old daughter was raped in the church when she was hungry and went to the soup kitchen."

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Survivors of sexual violence are waiting to speak out. Their voices carry strength and the hope they might overcome their situations. Once society acknowledges their pain, then judgment would no longer be a pervading fear. Advocating for change in government policy would enhance the response to survivors needs. The formation of survivor-led forums could help survivors overcome their trauma, encourage more survivors to speak out and would enable restoration and healing to begin.

### Survivor movement

A survivor movement should be led by a survivor or survivors and reach out to all those suffering in silence. Their united voices could be heard within a safe forum, not hidden behind alarming statistics.

Among the key services offered should be group therapy facilitated by survivors, supportive systems in reporting sexual violence to the authorities and skills training (to equip women so they are no longer unemployed and dependent on their partners.

### Advocacy for policy change

The findings suggest a gap between policy making and the implementation of those policies in communities. Those who put policies in place do not communicate directly with the people who are beneficiaries of these policies. This poses a critical short-coming in South Africa's legal system and the implementation of existing laws dealing with sexual violence. There is also a need for policy change which a survivor movement could help catalyse.

A survivor movement can allow the survivors voices to be clearly heard; promoting advocacy to protect the rights of victims.

### Education and awareness around sexual violence

There is a need for considerable education and awareness-raising around gender issues and sexual violence. People need to understand the different kinds of abuse and how to go about reporting it. When people are not satisfied with the treatment or service they receive, again they need to know how to report this and ensure that justice is done.

The failure of response from the legal and social support systems adds to the disempowerment of survivors.



A survivor movement would allow women a safe forum to speak out. Photo: Hope Africa and the Diocese of False Bay

### Role of the church

Survivors need help to find healing. A key part of healing is enabling survivors to accept the love of God and to forgive themselves as well as the perpetrator. The church should be a house of healing and peace where there is no fear of judgement. It is also called to be the voice of the voiceless.

Church leaders need to be equipped with biblical teaching and interpretation, with awareness of how best to support victims of sexual violence and with the necessary information for them to do appropriate referrals and counselling.

On a practical level churches could provide a space for support groups to meet and could also provide parental skills workshops. Churches could have a positive role in developing awareness around gender issues and sexual violence.



Men from the church and community speaking out against gender based violence. Photo: Hope Africa and the Diocese of False Bay

Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.

Tearfund has 10 years' experience working through church-based partners in the response to sexual violence.

Tearfund is a founding member of We Will Speak Out, a coalition of faith-based groups, international aid agencies and individuals committed to see the end of SV in communities worldwide.



[www.wewillsspeakout.org](http://www.wewillsspeakout.org)

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This summary report is based on research commissioned by Tearfund and conducted by Bongzi Zengele.

For the full report visit [www.tearfund.org/sexualviolence](http://www.tearfund.org/sexualviolence)

All names have been changed in order to protect the research participants.

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**tearfund**

*Following Jesus where the need is greatest*

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