

## 'Most savage' crime of baby rape is SA's badge of shame

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Call for perpetrators to be charged with attempted murder

BABY rape is a particularly South African phenomenon that some experts say should result in the perpetrators being charged with attempted murder because of the severity of the injuries suffered by the tiny victims.

This week, South Africans were again outraged after a six-week-old baby girl was allegedly raped by her 24-year-old uncle in Kimberley.

Henrietta Mafaro, operational manager for paediatrics at Kimberley Hospital, said yesterday that the baby was stable and out of intensive care. "We are quite satisfied with her progress. She's breastfeeding well. The mom is a bit emotional, as can be expected."

Paediatric surgeon Peter Beale said the phenomenon of "very early baby rape" appeared to be prevalent "just in this part of the world".

"The rape of a small infant is so extreme it's hard to comprehend. It's the most savage kind of act by an individual with no decency whatsoever."

In infants, severe and potentially fatal injuries caused by rape include tearing of the anus or vaginal lining, rupturing of internal organs, and displaced and damaged organs. An adult's penis is often the same size as an infant's entire torso, and forcing it into the tiny body causes severe damage.

Beale, the academic head of paediatric surgery at the University of the Witwatersrand, said: "I think it's not inappropriate to charge somebody with attempted murder in what is a potentially lethal assault."

He added that action against the scourge was needed at the highest level.

Social worker and consultant Amelia Kleijn said men who raped babies were not necessarily mentally impaired.

Kleijn, who wrote a doctoral thesis on the rape of children younger than three years, said local and international research showed that children in societies with very high levels of physical punishment would grow up to be extremely violent adults.

Her thesis found that every

perpetrator of infant rape had had a highly dysfunctional childhood and been subjected to high levels of physical abuse.

None of the men found sexual gratification in raping the children. There was usually another motivation such as revenge, attempts to control victims, or the feeling of power, Kleijn said.

"When an infant gets raped and [it] gets a lot of media attention, everybody runs around going oh my god, this is terrible," she said. "And then nothing happens until the next horrific incident. The reality is these rapes are nothing new and it has nothing to do with apartheid or so-called virgin cleansing. It's got everything to do with the way we raise our children."

Recent child rape victims in-

clude a 23-month-old toddler in Sterkstroom in the Eastern Cape, a nine-month-old baby in Franschoek, and a two-year-old girl in Knysna.

In October, the rape and murder of cousins Yonelisa, 2, and Zandile Mali, 3, in Diepsloot, north of Johannesburg, sparked massive outrage.

Shanaaz Mathews, director of the Children's Institute based at the University of Cape Town, agreed that infant rape was a distinctly South African phenomenon. "It's not common in other countries. Often when babies are raped, it is also related to what is happening in the context of relationships. Often it is a way of punishing mothers or females. It's about getting back at the mom."

Joan van Niekerk, marketing manager at Childline, said it was "totally appropriate" to charge a child's rapist with attempted murder.

Van Niekerk, president-elect of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, a body in which about 150 countries are represented, said: "We do seem to have higher levels of all abuse against children and child homicides than the international average."

She said men who did not develop empathy because of poor bonding during childhood were more likely to commit sexual offences in later life.

"Childhood and relationship factors fuelled by alcohol, drugs or mental illness are contributory factors to a terrible act like this," she said, referring to the rape of the six-week-old baby.

Bafana Khumalo, senior programme specialist at the Sonke Gender Justice Network, said: "I think there's something unique about the nature of this type of abuse in South Africa, which we need to get to grips with. In many instances, it's men who have been abused themselves by their fathers or some father figure."

Shaheda Omar, clinical director for the Teddy Bear Clinic, said although there were reports of baby battering globally, "we are getting more evidence of sexual abuse or sexual brutalisation in South Africa".

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