



Agenda

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ISSN: 1013-0950 (Print) 2158-978X (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ragn20>

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To cite this article: Vivian de Klerk Masters degree and PhD , Larissa Klazinga & Amy McNeill (2007) The habitus of the dominant: addressing rape and sexual assault at Rhodes University, *Agenda*, 21:74, 115-124

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2007.9674885>



Published online: 21 Apr 2011.



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# The habitus of the dominant: addressing rape and sexual assault at Rhodes University

Vivian de Klerk, Larissa Klazinga and Amy McNeill

## abstract

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This *article* seeks to describe the changing ways in which Rhodes University has addressed rape and sexual assault. By highlighting the evolution of policies and methodologies, it aims to identify possible shortcomings of the past, and offer new strategies and principles which may be useful to fellow institutions grappling with sexual violence issues.

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## keywords

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rape, sexual violence, higher education, feminism, women

'The way a culture deals with rape is one of the best possible indications of how highly it values women' (Cochrane, 2006:25), since rape is a violation that is mostly committed against women by men.<sup>1</sup>

Although Rhodes University recently celebrated its centenary, it continues to evolve and adjust in order to best serve the needs of a changing South Africa. One of the ways in which one can track the pace of transformation is by examining the changing ways in which the University has dealt with rape over the years.

Repeated experience and patterns of behaviour reinforce existing social structures and practices as 'normal', and limit the potential for change. This *article* will show how Rhodes, initially an all-male institution which only admitted female students from the 1940s, developed a culture which

undervalued women. These implicit dispositions and attitudes which underlie behaviour are referred to as 'habitus' by Bourdieu (1984) (cited in Corson, 1993: 90). The habitus of the dominant tends to pervade the social system, making it difficult for those with an alternative 'habitus' (such as females or members of racial minorities) to participate as equals. In order to achieve change, some challenge of the *status quo* is necessary, and this *article* tracks the effect of repeated challenges over time. It highlights how rape has been responded to differently by various sectors of the University, with students (typically female) consistently complaining about gender inequality, sexism and sexual harassment over the years, and 'official' responses (almost exclusively male) being reactive, resistant, and aiming to preserve the habitus of 100 years, and the culture of machismo,

which viewed women as potential conquests, objectified and dehumanised them, perpetuating sexism and gender-violence and enabling rape, framed within a context of patriarchy, gendered role constructions and gender inequalities.

As a consequence, women's issues were not addressed seriously, since men clearly saw the issue of rape and the safety of women as the responsibility of women (Brownmiller, 1976:400). This, paired with under-representation of women at higher levels of authority at Rhodes, reinforced conformity to the values and norms of the majority culture, and became part of a broader, 'systematic process through which universities fail to address issues that impact a significant segment of their population' (*Activate*, 2003:131-132).

### **Men saw the issue of rape and the safety of women as the responsibility of women**

The past year has seen the appointment of Rhodes's first black Vice-Chancellor and first female Dean of Students, along with a 62 percent female student profile. This has shifted perspectives slightly, and lent new weight to efforts to challenge the *status quo*, bringing a marked difference in the way sexual violence is dealt with at Rhodes. By describing the evolution of policies and practices over 23 years, we aim to identify possible shortcomings of the past, and highlight new strategies which may be useful to fellow institutions grappling with sexual violence.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on archival and primary sources. The archival sources include internal university publications, including campus newspapers (*Rhodeo*, *Masikhule*, and *Activate*), University publications (*Rhodian* and *Rhodos*) and the minutes of various committees and societies including the Student Representative Council (SRC), the Gender Action Forum, Senate/

Student Liaison meetings (now the Student Services Council), Board of Wardens/Residences and Senate. Primary sources include interviews with key role-players. All of these sources provide pieces of the 'puzzle', but many are missing for various reasons. Primarily this is because, until very recently, rape was regarded as unspeakable, and incidents of sexual violence were either not reported or, if reported, were not documented or followed up, so no records were kept. Another reason is the terse and cryptic nature of minutes in an institution such as Rhodes, forcing one to 'read between the lines' in order to understand what was happening at the time. Fairly clinical records of meetings, with statements such as 'they discussed the issue at length' are ultimately unhelpful.

Two recent reported cases (2004 and 2007) were also selected for closer scrutiny. In order to investigate the 2004 case (an alleged gang rape during TriVarsity<sup>2</sup>), all available correspondence (official e-mail announcements, student, warden and staff responses) was collected, and the survivor was interviewed. For the 2007 case, details were readily available to the authors.

### **The history: 1984 – 2004**

During the 1980s, a time of political turbulence, student publications (e.g. *Rhodeo*, now *Activate*) were highly politicised and often censored. Despite this there were reports on sexism, inadequate safety for women and attempted rapes, backed up by evidence in the minutes of various committees that highlighted these issues. In 1984, the starting point for our research, only two reports regarding sexism and safety featured in *Rhodeo*, one (Anon., 1984:5) drawing attention to discrepancies between residence rules for men and women relating to restrictions on after-hours movements. The second reported on a "peeping Tom" who had been sexually harassing female students across campus and drew attention to campus security deficiencies (Anon., 1984:4).



*Students were outraged at attacks on women.*

That same year the SRC highlighted gender issues, safety on campus and sexual harassment at their leadership weekend and drew attention to “prowlers” on campus and inadequate lighting. They noted the absence of channels through which women students could communicate and report harassment and rape at the University, stating that:

‘it would appear that the several incidents of attempted rape, obscene phone calls etc were not isolated incidents and that the SRC should attempt to provide some sort of avenue of communication for women students who are victims’ (SRC Minutes, 1984).

Documents from 1985 provide evidence of more

attacks on women students, including attempted rape. As a result, the SRC demanded the establishment of a Crisis Centre that would include counselling and treatment of rape survivors, but financial factors were cited to explain why this was denied, and at the subsequent Senate/Student Liaison meeting, the Vice-Chancellor merely ‘noted the various views expressed’ (Rhodes University Senate Minutes, 1985). In a subsequent meeting of the Board of Wardens, where they were informed ‘of a further assault on a woman student on campus after sunset’ the committee recommended additional campus security guards, and encouraged women to use the escort service provided by the guards. Furthermore, they recommended that an ‘urgent re-evaluation of [the] University’s security system be undertaken’

and noted that additional guards should only be a stop-gap measure. However, although the hiring of additional guards was approved by Council in August, five months afterwards, the recommended "urgent re-evaluation" did not occur, and SRC member Julie Scott is reported as saying that 'she felt the University's attitude towards the problem lacked seriousness' and that 'they are failing to recognise the immediacy of the issue...asking women students to dress sensibly and walk in groups is merely treating the symptoms and not the cause' (*Rhodeo*, 1985:3).

1986 saw further complaints about restrictive residence rules for women students, raising the point that rules which kept women students locked in the residences from 11.30pm suggest that rape and other assaults never happen before 11.30pm, though attacks were indeed happening during "respectable" hours. Female students felt that these rules actually endangered those who did not make it back before curfew and who ran the risk of being locked out.

### **Female students were 'locked up' whilst male students enjoyed unrestricted freedom**

This response to rape and the security of female students (and staff) was typical of the 20-year period under review. It is clear from the reports available that Rhodes was intent on imposing restrictive controls upon women students to "prevent" rape, but was unwilling to provide adequate lighting, security and counselling. Female students were "locked up" whilst male students (potential perpetrators of rape) enjoyed unrestricted freedom. As Patricia Smith put it, 'protection was available, but only at the price of restriction' and 'women were not entitled to freedom without endangerment' (1999:34).

1986 saw some progress towards a Crisis Centre. In the light of the high rate of attacks on women on campus and 95 percent support

in an SRC survey of 400 students an *ad hoc* committee was established to investigate the need for the Centre and 'also [to] address...the moral responsibility a university might or might not have to its students in this connection' (Senate Minutes, 1986). By 1987, with rape and safety featuring persistently in the student press, a Counselling Centre was opened on a one-year trial basis, with a part-time co-ordinator and trained student volunteers (Middleton, 1987:6). An SRC-led campaign against female residence rules resulted in a recommendation from the Board of Wardens for more flexible intervisiting rules and front door keys for first years on request (previously this was a special privilege).

However, problems persisted and 1989 brought a fresh 'wave' of attacks and student outrage, resulting in the formation of a women's group, determined to tackle gender issues and safety (Anon., 1989:4). The administration responded in a predictably muted, reactive and diplomatic way, encouraging female students to use the campus escort service, and urging rape survivors to press charges if they had evidence.

Student press and other documents resonate with further evidence of strong student awareness and activism around sexism and the safety of female students during the 1990s. An SRC-linked Women's Sub-committee enjoyed a 'large membership' and campaigned against gender inequity and for the provision of contraception on campus. They also looked into the establishment of a Rape Crisis Committee. *Rhodeo* was consistent in its reporting and condemnation of sexism on campus. In one article pertaining to residence rules the author makes valid points:

'[T]he rules become redundant when the wardens of the men's reses make it clear that they will turn a blind eye to the presence of women after midnight as long as they don't scream too loudly...[I]nstead of [the University] trying to reshape the attitudes of

male students and to alter their perceptions of women as tokens of their manhood, the problem has supposedly been addressed by curbing the freedom of women' (*Rhodeo*, 1990:6).

By 1990, the University was still essentially managed by men, with no women on Senate or Council, no female heads of department, and only seven female senior lecturers (a problem common at tertiary institutions globally, and still pervasive in South Africa today (*Activate*, 2003:130)). In 1991 the SRC Women's Group produced a report on the growing extent of sexual harassment, claiming that over half the student population found campus unsafe at night, and 12 percent did not walk alone after dark. The report was also particularly damning about lighting on campus. It claimed that the student body had little confidence in the University's handling of sexual harassment and rape, and that student complaints were being disregarded and fobbed off. It also alluded to the lack of clear channels to report such incidents, and especially the lack of appropriate women (the Student Adviser and Dean of Students were both males). Ironically, the Dean of Students was quoted as saying that as there had been no reporting of such incidents, there was no problem and therefore no need for the University to take action. The *Rhodeo* editorial pointed to the 'head-in-the-sand' attitude of the administration, noting that:

'[they] cannot say that only a few incidents and rapes have occurred on the basis that only a few incidents have been reported to them... [t]he channels of reporting these incidents are clearly lacking...[i]t is simply insufficient to open one's doors and welcome complaints' (*Rhodeo*, 1992:12).

As a result of this pressure, another *ad hoc* committee was established to investigate the problem. This committee drafted a sexual harassment policy by June 1993, which was eventually finalised in 2001.

Again indicative of a lack of commitment at senior levels, after Senate approved the appointment of an Anti-Harassment Officer in 1995, the post was filled in 1998 as an interim part-time post and discontinued by mid-2004.

During these years there is repeated evidence of growing frustration, as shown by the following two comments:

'I am not blaming [the administration] for... rape or sexual harassment. What I am blaming [them] for is the patronising, insulting and ignorant way in which they have chosen to ignore women's fears and the realities of harassment' (*Rhodeo*, 1992:10).

'Don't fucking believe them when they say it doesn't happen. Rhodes men will rape you every chance they get. Ask around, rape was commonplace last year, why should ['93 be any different? Get mace, get a gun. The raped have stopped being kind. We are WAR, womyn against rape. Dead men don't rape!'

### **The student body had little confidence in the University's handling of sexual harassment and rape**

In 1995 Gender Forum, a student society, launched a campaign 'to combat violent attacks on campus' by selling mace and leading self-defence classes on campus. The press continued to report incidents of sexual violence and harassment ('more than five rape cases ... last year' (Gopal, 1995:14)). Subsequent years reflect a decline in comments, either because of fewer incidents or because of a dip in student activism post-1994, after a highly politicised and active period of resistance against apartheid. But criticism built up again from 1997 alongside frequent rumours of rape, and the Vice-Chancellor reassured students 'that there had been no reported rape cases on campus' (*Activate*, 1997:15). In 2000 *Activate*

featured a double page spread titled 'Shattering the Silence' on rape and date rape on campus, and noted:

'Rape as an issue on this campus has for too long been accorded phantom status. Official denials based on a lack of reported cases have left the question open and a maze of dead ends for anyone trying to investigate the realities of rape on campus' (*Activate*, 2000:4-5).

The Student Advisor and Assistant Dean of Students both confirmed that there were no official rape statistics and no central system to deal with rape. The survivor could go to the San, the student counselling service or to the Advisor, who admitted that Rhodes was not 'doing enough about rape' (*Activate*, 2000:4-5) and that he had dealt with four to five rape reports in 1999, adding: '[q]uite frankly, women are often at fault, because sometimes when they say no, they mean yes'. This comment elicited further outrage from students, including some men.

**'Women are often at fault, because sometimes when they say no, they mean yes'  
(Student Advisor)**

In 2000, a recommendation from the Board of Residences that free, direct access telephones be installed strategically on campus was not implemented (*Activate*, 2003:4), and demands for better safety, lighting and patrols in 2003 were ignored, despite the statement in the Senate minutes that 'the University sells itself as a safe and secure environment...and all should be done to ensure [this]'. By May 2004, the 'green route' system had been implemented, with increased guard presence along this route, but despite this progress, on August 15, 2004, during an annual inter-University sporting competition, Claire<sup>3</sup>, a first-year Rhodes student reported that she had been gang raped in the vicinity of the

Student Union Building (on the 'green route'). She was allegedly accosted, manhandled and threatened with weapons directly in front of the busy Union, and then taken to an overgrown area of the garden, where she was raped by three men (*Activate*, 2004:6).

Claire reported that directly after the rape a Campus Protection Unit guard was summoned, who contacted her Sub-Warden<sup>4</sup>, who transported her first to the Sanatorium, where staff insisted she be taken to hospital rather than be examined on site. The police were called and after a medical examination Claire accompanied the officer to the police station to give a detailed statement. It would appear that no one from the University was involved in securing either medical treatment or crisis counselling on the night. Claire lived in a University residence at the time, and reported that she received little support from either the wardening staff or the counselling centre. At no time did anyone from the University take a statement from Claire or ask her to submit a report on the incident.

Claire remains at Rhodes and is completing her undergraduate degree. She noted that initially the University was supportive, allowing her to take the time she needed to recover. However, as time passed, there was an increasing indifference to the long term psychological trauma caused by the assault and she reported what can only be described as institutional amnesia – an attempt, either intentional or coincidental, to rewrite history. She reports that in the months after the assault, her Warden became increasingly hostile, accusing her of causing controversy and upsetting other students, and as a result she moved to another residence. It now appears that there is an attempt to call into question the facts of the incident, with some staff members stating that the rape was unproven and 'did not in fact take place'. Holding back tears, Claire asked, 'How can they say nothing happened? There is a doctor's report, a police report! Do they think I just made it up for fun?'



Only after a protest march and petition did the University take action.

Despite being a high-profile event which attracted considerable media attention, both the University Prosecutor and the then Harassment Officer confirm that no statement was taken from the survivor and no official record of the incident exists.

The event led to unprecedented reactions from students, staff and administration, culminating in a 1 500-strong protest march against rape and violence which aimed to demand improved safety and security from the administration. The march was initiated by students (Joseph, 2004:6). A petition, signed by 1 300 students and staff, demanded real 'green routes', an increased guard presence, improved lighting and the installation of at least 20 emergency phones. The SRC also requested that an educative programme

be introduced regarding safety and rape, that the Harassment Officer role and post be re-evaluated and that alcohol abuse be addressed more seriously. For the first time, the staff publication (*Rhodos*) briefly touched on sexual harassment and issues of safety, and as a result, a concerned sector of academic staff criticised the way the rape had been handled by the administration.

A task team was convened as a result, comprising the Vice-Principal, the Registrar, one representative each from Council and Senate, the SRC President and a Grahamstown advocate, balanced as regards gender. It is important to note that this response was to the march and the ensuing bad publicity and pressure, and not to the gang rape.



Alcohol was a theme raised repeatedly by various staff in relation to the gang rape, despite the fact that whether the survivor had been drinking or not would not have affected the outcome – she was outnumbered and unarmed. A focus on alcohol implicitly blames the survivor for drinking and not being “responsible” enough, rather than the three men who took turns raping her. It also imputes the individual victim for not being responsible for her own safety, rather than the security system, supposedly designed to protect students and staff.

### **A focus on alcohol explicitly blames the survivor for drinking**

The task team issued its report on August 31, 2004, based on written submissions from students, staff, wardens, and various committees such as the Gender Action Forum, and made several proposals, primarily focusing on the planning of events such as TriVarsity and safety issues. It recommended an adjustment of the portfolios of senior management to ‘provide for the comprehensive management and facilitation of a new and holistic approach to student welfare and services’, that would include education programmes relating to ‘gender issues, racist and sexist behaviour, harassment [and] alcohol abuse’ – an unprecedented response, which finally took issues surrounding subversive patriarchy seriously.

### **The present: an update**

And what has happened since then? A Safety and Events Committee has been instituted, 12 panic buttons have been installed, lighting has been up-graded in several areas and in 2005 the CPU began a student patrol of the new ‘blue’ routes at night. Also, with the retirement of the Dean of Students in 2006, the Division was reviewed and restructured, and from 2007 the new Dean

of Students’ portfolio encompasses a ‘holistic approach to student welfare and services’. A female Dean was appointed, and working closely with the Sanatorium, the Counselling Centre and committees such as GENACT, the Dean of Students Division has developed a fresh approach to how rape is treated on campus, starting with a Rape Awareness week early in 2007, focusing equally on male students as “partners not perpetrators”. Each time an alleged rape was reported (*there were three in the second term alone*), it was made public, in order to ensure awareness and vigilance, and students were reminded of the need to report incidents and assured that the University would provide confidential support.

But on May 6, 2007, Mandlakazi<sup>5</sup> reported to her Warden that she had been raped by another student the previous evening. She was accompanied by her Warden to the Sanatorium, where a doctor treated her for her injuries, and she was given Post Exposure Prophylaxis for STIs, HIV and pregnancy and was counselled by the emergency counsellor from the Rhodes Counselling Centre. Mandlakazi declined to press criminal charges but agreed to the University conducting its own investigation.

Subsequently, a charge of indecent assault was laid against the student and a disciplinary hearing took place (the assault occurred one week before the Constitutional Court ruling changed the definition of rape to include anal penetration, but because the judgement was not retroactive, the University couldn’t charge the perpetrator with rape).

The hearing before a female University Proctor lasted over 12 hours, spread over seven days. The accused was represented by a Grahamstown attorney, who cross-examined Mandlakazi for more than three hours. The perpetrator and a number of expert witnesses, including the attending medical doctor and a psychologist also gave evidence. It was revealed that the assault occurred in a men’s residence room during the early evening, when students are permitted to visit each other

(in terms of the Student Disciplinary Code). Mandlakazi visited the perpetrator to get academic help. She did not scream or call for help because of the intense psychological trauma she was experiencing. The expert psychologist explained that dissociation and disorientation of this kind is common, and is caused by shock and panic. The doctor testified that Mandlakazi had suffered considerable physical injury during the assault. The perpetrator emotionally manipulated Mandlakazi, brutally sexually assaulted her and subsequently tried to blame her, claiming she was jealous that he had a girlfriend. The defence attorney even suggested that she had injured herself deliberately in order to implicate the perpetrator. The Proctor noted that such allegations against Mandlakazi were wholly without merit, and noted that she accepted her testimony as fully credible.

The perpetrator was found guilty, but while the University argued for permanent exclusion, given the seriousness of the offence, the Proctor felt that students should be given every opportunity to reform, and excluded him from Rhodes for five years, as well as ordering him to pay all medical costs. He was given 24 hours to leave. A fairly detailed report of the judgement was issued to all staff and students of the University in an effort to demonstrate the University's commitment to follow up such cases and to educate students about the consequences of such assaults.

While the 2004 and 2007 cases differ in many respects, one can draw certain parallels:

- Both students were in residence at the time of the rape and but they received very different levels of support from their respective wardens.
- Both students had access to psychological services, but for Mandlakazi the counsellor was present throughout the initial medical examination and the hearing, affording her a higher level of support than Claire received<sup>6</sup>.
- Both incidents attracted media attention, but

in 2004 comments were reactive, and in 2007 the University was proactive in supplying details.

As a result of these incidents, the Dean of Students Division developed a 'Sexual Assault Protocol', which should be finalised before the end of the year. This protocol outlines what rape or other sexual assault survivors should do after they have been attacked, including who to go to, and how to preserve evidence and receive appropriate medical and psychological support. It details how to file a police report and a University report if the survivor wishes to do so, as well as providing definitions of concepts such as consent, coercion and submission, so that students will know exactly what to do after an assault.

### **The administration must challenge the sexist macho male ethos on campus**

While this account shows that there has been progress in how the University responds to rape, sexual assault is still prevalent, and further education and improved safety measures are vital. As stated in 2004, the administration must challenge the sexist macho male ethos on campus in order to stop the objectification and dehumanisation of women. This challenge was made by Dr Badat, the Vice-Chancellor in his inaugural speech in 2006:

'I am ...deeply committed to non-sexism. Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realisation of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to the development of our society. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that wreaks havoc in our country.'

With this statement, the Vice-Chancellor has signalled his intention to counteract rape and sexual violence from the top.

**Notes**

- 1 Of course, men are also raped by men, but in this article we deal solely with the rape of women by men, as this accounts for the vast majority of rapes.
- 2 An annual inter-university sporting competition between Fort Hare, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and Rhodes University.
- 3 Not her real name.
- 4 A student employed to assist in residence administration and student care.
- 5 Not her real name.
- 6 The emergency counselling service was implemented in 2006.

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