

## Researcher studies why gender-based violence persists in Namibia

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Image taken from the autumn issue of Signs: "The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent" (Triptych), 1998, by South African artist Judith Mason.

When the Parliament of Namibia passed the Combating of Rape Act in 2000, it was seen as progressive legislation to combat gender-based violence in a nation scarred by the effects of war in the shadow of apartheid.

Yet, more than a decade after its passage, the law's tough stance on rape and [sexual violence](#) hasn't produced its intended effect.

"We still have very high levels of gender-based [violence](#) in the region and also in Namibia in particular," said Hannah Britton, a University of

Kansas associate professor of women, gender & sexuality studies and political science.

In an academic article published in the journal *Signs*, Britton and KU graduate student Lindsey Shook concluded that Namibian leaders should do more to address social attitudes surrounding rape and to provide more support services for victims.

"Failure to enforce progressive laws is not a reason to abandon legal strategies for social transformation, but the law must be supplemented with other mechanisms to change popular assumptions, discourses and everyday practices," the researchers wrote in the study. "Innovative legislation may be a necessary step, but it is not a sufficient means to eliminate sexual violence."

The article "'I Need to Hurt You More': Namibia's Fight to End Gender-Based Violence" appears in the autumn edition of *Signs*, published by The University of Chicago Press. It examines the gap between the legislation and social transformation in Namibia.

"The creation and enforcement of laws, particularly laws meant to address gender-based violence, are really complex processes," Shook said. "People in any society can have progressive goals and still have a hard time breaking the pervasive assumptions that hurt progress."

In fact, in interviews for the study, Namibian social workers and police described sexual violence as becoming more gruesome, horrific and graphic, and several participants believed increased brutality of the sex crimes was a backlash against advancement of women to higher positions in the newer Namibian government in the recent decade. One anti-rape activist said the message seemed to be about control and that perpetrators seemed to be saying: "I need to hurt you more," which was used for the article's title.

Britton said context in Namibia is important because rape was used as a tool for enforcing racial hierarchies under both colonial rule and apartheid in Namibia. The nation gained independence from South Africa in 1990. During the country's war for independence both the former Namibian government and South African forces used sexual violence against the opposition, and opposition forces also employed this brand of violence to control women soldiers within their own ranks.

As Namibia established its independence, it led to a commitment to combat gender-based violence, and the 2000 Combating of Rape Act became known as one of the world's most progressive rape laws. It expanded the definition of rape, and it lacked gender-specific identifiers for victims and perpetrators. It also included detailed descriptions of coercive circumstances, prohibited marital rape and limited the use of survivor's sexual history in criminal trials.

However, Britton said Namibia faces bureaucratic challenges at enforcing the strict law, including in helping survivors. A national hotline for survivors is understaffed, and support centers talked about inadequate staffing. Police training related to collecting evidence for sexual assaults and domestic violence also lags behind.

"There are some significant resource deficits," she said. "There are also deficits in terms of ways of thinking and patterns that have been set in the apartheid regime."

She said the interviews for the study also revealed attitudes that stemmed from the [apartheid](#) regime that some people continued to hold beliefs that blame the victims for their abuse.

"I think one of the things is that we're finding a pattern across the world is that there's this notion of an ideal rape victim," Britton said. "So that's something that we're trying to fight against. There are some victims who

are seen by members of [parliament](#) as more deserving of protection. What does that mean for someone who may not fit the model?"

The researchers said they hoped the study would help broaden the conversation about gender-based violence beyond the southern African region.

"This is not necessarily an African problem. This is a problem of patterns of violence that continue to get perpetrated. This is an issue of the subordination of women that crosses across borders," Britton said. "And the issue of using [rape](#) as a tool to check people's power and check people's status and upward mobility."

**More information:** The article is available online:  
[www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086 ... 4&sid=21105083478623](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086 ... 4&sid=21105083478623)

Provided by University of Kansas

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