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Almost 20% of women report sexual assault

Staff Writer

Non-partner attacks significantly higher, with DRC the worst

ALMOST one in five women in southern sub-Saharan African countries, including South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, report being sexually assaulted at least once in their lives by someone other than an intimate partner.

Worldwide this figure was one in 14 women (7.2 percent) according to new research which was published in the medical journal *The Lancet*.

Southern sub-Saharan African countries had among the highest rates of sexual violence, at 17.4 percent, while sub-Saharan Africa had the highest rate, with the DRC reporting a rate of 21 percent.

Countries in the North Africa/Middle East region, including Turkey, and the South Asia region, including India and Bangladesh, reported the lowest rates.

The study looked at the prevalence of non-partner sexual violence – perpetrated by strangers, acquaintances, friends, colleagues, peers,

teachers, neighbours and family members – in 56 countries.

Naeemah Abrahams from the Gender and Health Research Unit of the SA Medical Research Council, based in Cape Town, led this research with colleagues from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the World Health Organisation.

The researchers looked at studies completed between 1998 and 2011 which contained data on sexual violence on women by anyone except intimate partners. They found 77 suitable studies, which resulted in 412 estimates of violence.

Abrahams said: “We found that sexual violence is a com-

mon experience for women worldwide, and in some regions is endemic, reaching more than 15 percent in four regions. However, regional variations need to be interpreted with caution because of differences in data availability and levels of disclosure.”

The researchers had found that this type of sexual assault was often more violent than that by known perpetrators.

“Findings indicated that rapes by strangers are more violent and have higher risk of involvement of weapons and injury than those by known perpetrators, but with the latter the betrayal of trust might greatly affect post-assault outcomes, including psychological functioning,” said Abrahams.

The authors noted that the data probably underestimated the true numbers of women who had been assaulted.

“Sexual violence is highly stigmatised in most settings. The fear of being blamed and a perceived lack of support from families, friends and services

leads to under-reporting and affects help-seeking behaviour,” read the study. There was also a lack of good-quality population-based data.

SMRC president Salim S Abdool Karimsaid: “Sexual violence is a serious public health and human rights problem in South Africa. Acknowledging and understanding the extent of this problem is an essential first step to dealing with the scourge of sexual violence in our society.”

The study’s results revealed a prevalence of non-partner sexual assault which was “unacceptably high on public health and human rights grounds”, said Kathryn M Yount from Emory University in the US, writing in a comment linked to the study.

“The data confirm that non-partner sexual violence is neither rare nor geographically isolated and, thus, that existing laws and systems of accountability remain inadequate. Effective responses will require widespread legal and institutional change,” she said.