

Hello, and welcome back to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, we go to a refugee camp in Uganda. The United Nations has sent a traveling court there to urge victims of rape and violence at home to seek justice...

"So one of the main reasons for this court is to try and encourage people to report more, so that we can find out all of the cases within the community..."

But first, our South Africa correspondent Anita Powell looks at what is causing widespread and increasing cases of rape in Africa...

"The nation was recently shocked by an especially brutal rape and murder of a teenager in the Western Cape."

Activists: Rape in Africa Driven by Inequality and Weak Prosecution

Rape is considered an epidemic in Africa. That is true even in countries with progressive legal systems like South Africa. VOA's correspondent in Johannesburg Anita Powell looks at the numbers and examines some of the cultural roots and legal problems facing people trying to help stop rape in Africa.

South African police say 64,000 rapes were reported in the country last year. This happened in a nation that is often called "the rape capital of the world."

But activists say the problem with this number is that it is probably wrong. And it is not just wrong by a small amount -- the activists say it may be wrong by a large amount.

In early November, a top South African organization questioned the police department's math. The group said the police used old, lower population numbers in producing its yearly crime report. They say the result makes it appear that there is more improvement in the number of crimes than has actually taken place.

And there is more cause for concern. A recent study by the Medical Research Council found that only one in 25 women reports rape in Gauteng, the province with the largest population.

Gender rights activist Shireen Motara says this lack of reporting is the first big problem. Women in South Africa often do not report rape because of the reaction they get. That is true even though the nation's laws are among the most progressive in the world.

Ms. Motara is executive director of the Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Center, based in Johannesburg. The center helps women who are victims of violence. She says South Africa's violent culture and widespread lack of respect for women often go against its progressive laws.

"We put the burden on women to say, you have to dress appropriately, you have to act appropriately so that, you know, you don't get raped. And if you do get raped, the first question that gets asked was, 'What did you say?' or 'Were you drunk?' or 'How were you dressed?' So, it for me, it links back to that broader conversation that we're having about gender inequality in, in our society in general."

The nation was recently shocked by an especially brutal rape and murder of a teenager in the Western Cape. On November 1st, a South African court sentenced her rapist to two life sentences, the strongest possible punishment.

Bianca Valentine is a lawyer with the Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Center. She says this recent case is a rare example of justice being done.

“I think that overall, unless you have extensive media coverage or you have victims who are being assisted by a, a well-structured and well-financed organization who is able to push the legal system, victims of sexual violence do not receive adequate and effective justice through the criminal justice system.”

That is especially clear in other places on the continent. In Eastern Congo, both rebels and government forces have been accused of raping civilians in groups, as well as stealing and destroying property. Yet few rape cases are ever heard in a courtroom. Victims say the loss of respect unjustly suffered by the victims prevents them from reporting the crime.

Ms. Motara says it is important to change the outdated beliefs that affect not just South Africa, but all of Africa. She says the trauma of rape is keeping Africa from the success it deserves.

“We continue to live on a continent where, where women are second-class citizens, where what women do in a society is not valued, where violence against women, you know, is seen as, as par for the course -- it’s almost seen as normal. The bigger part of that problem, I think, for me, is that our leaders are not speaking up against the extent of the violence on the continent.”

Experts say changing the status of women will take time. That change will come too late for some women: In the time it has taken you to listen to this report, as many as ten South African women or girls were raped.

I’m Anita Powell, VOA News, Johannesburg.

You are listening to As It Is, from The Voice of America.

I’m Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Justice for Rape Victims in Ugandan Refugee Camps

This year, the United Nations refugee agency opened its first mobile court program for refugees in Uganda. The traveling court was set up to help victims of rape and domestic violence seek justice. But many of the cultural barriers to punishing the attackers remain.

Life in a refugee camp is hard. But trying to get help from the law can be even harder. Refugees can have trouble understanding foreign legal systems. And, the camps are often far from the courthouse.

That is why in Uganda, the United Nations refugee agency -- the UNHCR -- decided to bring the courts to the refugees. Lucy Beck works for the agency.

“We set up these mobile courts as a result of refugees -- and some of the local Ugandans -- having to wait very long times before they had access to justice, or having to travel very long distances to reach the government courts.”

The court that travels to the Nakivale refugee settlement has held two meetings since it was established in May. The Ugandan

government provides lawyers. There are similar courts in camps in Kenya and Zambia. But the Nakivale court is Uganda's first.

All the cases -- until now -- have involved minor crimes. The UNHCR, however, plans to bring in a high court judge soon to hear 50 serious cases. Lucy Beck says most will be cases of rape.

Seventy-five percent of refugees in southwestern Uganda are from the nearby Democratic Republic of Congo. Rape is often used as a weapon of war in the DRC. The country is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman.

The UNCHR has found that poverty and high unemployment rates among refugees make women more likely to be targets of rape.

Philbert Murungi of the American Refugee Committee works with rape victims. He says even a woman's day-to-day activities can put her at risk.

"Some of them are attacked on their way toward the water point. Some of them are attacked on their way towards collecting firewood for fuel and domestic use."

He says women can suffer both social and physical harm from rape. He says the blame that is placed on rape victims can be crushing. The victims often are rejected by their families and blamed by their communities.

Mr. Murungi says there are what are called "safe houses" available for rape victims. He hopes that these places and the mobile courts will make it easier for women to report rape. But he adds that if they are unwilling to do so, there is only so much any court can do.

The mobile court can offer only so much help. Lucy Beck says more than 70 percent of rapes among Congolese refugees happened in the DRC. She says that makes it almost impossible to try the suspected attackers in Uganda.

For these women, justice may always remain out of reach.

And that's our program for today.

I'm Christopher Cruise reporting from VOA Learning English headquarters in Washington.



Contact information for VOA Learning English:

Postal address:

**VOA Learning English
Room 3400
330 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20237
United States of America**

Email us at: LearningEnglish@voanews.com

Or go to our website -- learningenglish.voanews.com -- and click
"Contact Us."

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<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/>