



## **Blaming Rape on Dressing: A mere scapegoat and persistent myth to justify deviant behaviour**

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Growing up in a society where women were in some instances mistreated in the name of cultural norms and beliefs, I appreciate the impact of adverse cultural practises. Even in the present day where most people embrace or at least recognise the existence of equal rights, patriarchy has taken new forms. Clothing or how one is dressed has been used as a justification for sexual violence, a scapegoat and stubborn myth that perpetrators turn to as an excuse for their heinous acts.

In the village, news spread fast and decisions can easily be arrived at, courtesy of the instantaneous nature at which communication is accomplished. Personal opinions can easily turn into attitudes, and attitudes into public opinions and those opinions into culture which might over time witness beliefs and norms that can be traced back to opinions of influential members of society. Such is the nature of a patriarchal society, especially in the rural areas where men dominate decision making positions and hence the ideology that guides how the people are expected to behave, dress and respect for peaceful co-existence. The same sentiments can be echoed even at a national level where men dominate the decision making positions. It is this very nature that promotes and perpetuates beliefs that are not only oppressive but retrogressive to the adoption of fresh and emancipatory ideas.

The topic of dressing has recently captured my attention. Fashion has afforded women a means to release the pressure after years of enduring muzzling of their opinions. Women were not afforded platforms to tell their side of the story for years. The system of patriarchy and misogyny has, unfortunately, spread its tentacles to fashion, misconstrued women's voices and shifted the blame of egocentric, barbaric sexual assault to women. Most societies have used dressing as a scapegoat to justify otherwise premeditated cases of rape, sexual assault and other forms of sexual harassment. In a report by RAU entitled, "*She probably asked for it!*" A Preliminary Study into Zimbabwean Societal Perceptions of Rape reveals that 61% of males and 63% female believe that the way a woman dresses could cause a man to rape her. The report also indicated that provocative dressing in which women who dress in a tight-fitting or short dress are viewed as soliciting for sex from men. Past research has however proved that it is a myth that [women are raped because they ask for it](#). Women are raped less for their physical appearance and more for their vulnerability. In this sense, rape becomes a crime of power rather than lust. The notion that women are raped for the manner in which they dress is tantamount to blaming the victim, rape should be [perceived as pure criminality that it is](#).

The media is awash with stories of men who rape for bizarre reasons most of them divorced from the victim's dress code. *The Herald* published on the 7th of February 2019 carried a story entitled *Man rapes minor in kraal*, in which a 58-year-old man dragged and raped an 11-year-

old girl while she was herding cattle to her father's kraal. In this case, there is no evidence that the minor was dressed in a suggestive manner. In fact, the implication is the man was on the hunt to satisfy his selfish sexual desires. In a different story published on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2019 entitled *Man rapes mental patient* by *Newsday* a 24 year dragged a mentally ill woman into a bush near her homestead and raped her. There are endless cases of men who rape some for ritual purposes and others for beliefs such as the commonly held misconception that if you rape a minor you will be healed of HIV/AIDS.

Some beliefs in society are only based on faulty misogynist perceptions of certain members of the society who peddle unsubstantiated norms which endanger vulnerable women. I salute all men who treat women with heartfelt respect and embrace equality in their day to day interactions with women. It is not enough to blame the victims of rape for the manner in which they dress, sexual assault is criminal and should be treated as such.

*This opinion piece was written by Raynold Musekiwa, a Communications Intern at Research and Advocacy Unit.*