

Sexual violence and girls' education in South Africa

Kelly Hallman, Population Council, New York
khallman@popcouncil.org

Introduction

Sexual violence is reported to be a large problem in South Africa; official statistics show rates of rape to be among the highest in the world. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2001 report, "Scared at School," described overall and sexual violence as common in many South African schools. A recent study by Jeejeboy and Bott (2003) finds that many of the forced sexual experiences of young women globally are by someone the girl was already acquainted with and in a familiar setting, such as the home or school. Besides the psychological trauma and social stigma these encounters bring, the potential health risks of pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs may be large since a condom is seldom involved. Interviews with girls by HRW (2001) also indicate that school-aged rape survivors found it harder to concentrate on school-work after the assault; some lost interest in school, transferred schools, or left school altogether. While these findings are important, the effects that such experiences have on girls' progression through school and ultimate educational attainment have not been measured or quantified to any extent.

South Africa has gender-balanced and high enrollment rates compared with other sub-Saharan African countries, but school delays are a large problem and many young people progress through school slowly. In 1999, only thirty-six percent of 20-24 year-olds nationally had achieved a matriculation certificate (Statistics South Africa, 2001). Only recently have data become available to examine school delay causes and patterns and gender differences therein in South Africa. The *Transitions to Adulthood in the Context of AIDS* study of young people aged 14–24 years residing in KwaZulu-Natal in 2001 collected a complete educational history for all respondents. Using these data, Hallman and Grant (2004) report that gender is an important determinant of the prevalence and timing of school delays. Although girls advance more quickly than boys through primary school, girls' performance begins to falter during secondary school. At age 14-15, 45 percent of males versus 35 percent of females have had school delay. By age 20-22, however, 56 percent of males and 57 percent of females report having experienced at least one school delay. (A delay is defined as a year of non-advancement because of either not having enrolled at all during a particular year but having eventually returned to school, withdrawal during a year, or repeating a grade because of poor performance during the previous year.) Among young people who have had a delay, the major set of factors reported are economic constraints. Lack of interest and poor performance is another leading cause for both girls and boys. Among females, a considerable percentage who have had delays report them as being pregnancy-related. (Adolescent childbearing in South Africa is high: in 1998, thirty-five percent of 19 year-olds had been pregnant and thirty percent were already mothers [South Africa Department of Health 1999].) While trauma from sexual violence was not available as a choice in the survey as a cause of school delays, this may in fact underlie some of the delays which are reported as due to lack of interest/poor performance and pregnancy-related causes.

In a review of nonconsensual sexual experiences of young people in developing countries, Jeejeebhoy and Bott (2003) estimate that 15 to 30 percent of first female sexual experiences were forced. A recent national survey of young people in South Africa (Pettifor et al. 2004) shows that 98 percent of young men reported they "really wanted" or "wanted" to have sex their first time, versus only 71 percent of young women. Campbell (2003) reports that rape and emotional pressure are common in young people's first sexual experiences in a mining community outside of Johannesburg, South Africa. Using

the *Transitions* data from KwaZulu-Natal, Hallman (2004) reports that only 55 percent of females versus 94 percent of males age 14-24 who have had sex report themselves as having been “willing” at their first sexual encounter (versus those who were persuaded, tricked, forced, or raped), and among females, those from poorer households were the least likely to report their first sex as willing.

Physical violence is also documented as common within on-going sexual relationships of young people in South Africa (Varga 1997). Research by Wood and Jewkes (1997) among young African women in a South African township reveals that 60 percent have had sex against their wishes; many viewed sexual coercion as a routine part of a relationship. Other studies report that young women’s attempts to discuss condoms or HIV/AIDS before a sexual encounter may lead to rape or violence (Varga and Makubalo 1996; Wood and Jewkes 1997). In MacPhail and Campbell’s (2001) research in South Africa, young women reported that if they do not willingly provide sex, their boyfriends would demand it as proof of their love. Hallman (2004) reports that 9 percent of all 20-24 year-old women in KwaZulu-Natal report ever experiencing forced sex, and that poverty significantly increases its likelihood (12 percent among the lowest two wealth quintiles versus 5 percent among the highest two wealth quintiles).

The *Transitions* data offer a unique opportunity to explore the relationships between forced sexual experiences and girls’ school attendance and educational attainment. A better understanding of these interactions will not only elucidate a potentially important cause of slow school advancement among South African girls, but also point to an area of potential program and policy intervention, since rape prevention and survivor services in South Africa do not currently address the impact of these experiences on girls’ school attendance and performance.

Data and Methods

The data are from the 2001 survey of the “Transitions to Adulthood in the Context of AIDS in South Africa” study from KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa (Magnani et al. 2003; Hallman 2004). The overall KwaZulu-Natal environment is characterized by conservative cultural values with regard to gender roles, high HIV prevalence, and high rates of poverty and inequality. KwaZulu-Natal Province has the largest population in South Africa, about half of whom reside in urban areas (as classified by the South African Census Bureau); Zulu speakers comprise the majority of the population (82 percent), with Indians making up another 9 percent, and whites and coloreds together comprising the final 9 percent.

Two districts within KwaZulu-Natal province were purposively chosen for the study site, Durban Metro and Mtunzini Magisterial District, as they represented urban, transitional and rural areas of the province. A modified stratified, multi-stage cluster sampling method (Turner et al. 1996) was used with census enumeration areas from the 1996 census serving as the primary sampling unit. Interviews were conducted with all willing young people aged 14–24 years within each census enumeration area.

Many aspects of transitions to adulthood were covered in the survey, including schooling, paid and unpaid work, sexual and reproductive health behavior, HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitudes, childbearing, marriage, and perceptions of social connectedness and safety. The study also includes interviews with heads of youth households, mainly parents, about household demographic composition, living conditions, economic status and shocks, and HIV/AIDS issues; community surveys examining infrastructure, services, and safety; and interviews with secondary school principals to assess the extent of coverage of the school-based life-skills curriculum and its impact on youth HIV knowledge, attitudes, and sexual risk-taking behaviors. The survey is beginning to fill important gaps

in knowledge about adolescent lives in an environment characterized by a history of political and personal violence, high HIV prevalence, and unequal access to opportunities and services, including schooling, employment, and health care.

Sexual behaviors, experiences, and reproductive health outcomes were collected using verbal face-to-face interviews by local enumerators of the same ethnicity, gender, and general age as the respondents. Informed consent was given by all respondents and parental consent was given for respondents who were legal minors. Given the sensitive nature of many of the questions, an effort was made to conduct interviews of young people within a discrete setting of the household area (e.g. out of earshot of parents) if the young person so desired. Respondents were asked whether at their first sexual encounter they were “willing” versus having been persuaded, tricked, forced, or raped. Respondents were also asked if they have ever had sexual intercourse when somebody was physically forcing, hurting, or threatening them.

In addition to standard questions regarding schooling and educational attainment, the Transitions survey collected a complete educational history for all respondents, beginning with the year that the respondent first enrolled in school and ending with their most recent year of enrollment. For each year, the respondent reported whether he or she did not enroll at all during that particular school year (but eventually returned to school), withdrew during the school year, or repeated the grade because of poor performance. Every time that the respondent reported a school withdrawal for all or part of a school year, he or she was asked why their education was interrupted. Since the majority of young people in South Africa have experienced some form of schooling delay or interruption, this level of detail provides a unique opportunity to track a respondent’s educational progress.

The education histories combined with the data on sexual experiences allow for a richer understanding of the relationship between sexual violence and school delays. In addition to describing patterns, bi- and multi-variate analysis will be used to explore how individual and household factors (including poverty and orphanhood) and school and community factors (such as a gender-hostile environment in the classroom) influence the likelihood that a young woman experiences a forced sexual encounter and how this affects her educational trajectory.

Results

Table 1 examines the sexual experiences of adolescent females by current school attendance status. Those who are still in school have much lower rates of having initiated sexually, ever been pregnant, or ever experienced a physically forced sexual encounter. Clearly, while the risk of sexual violence may be a very real concern within the school setting, those attending school are much less likely to report having been physically forced to have sex.

	Not in-school	In-school	Means test
Ever had sex	82%	27%	0.00
Ever pregnant	59%	7%	0.00
Ever forced to have sex	13%	3%	0.00
Ever forced to have sex, conditional on ever had sex	16%	11%	0.07
N	252	1230	

Looking at the other side of the coin, Table 2 presents school attendance and educational attainment levels by history of sexual experience. Young women who have initiated sexually have statistically much lower school attendance and educational attainment and a higher likelihood of having had a school delay. Similarly, those who have had a pregnancy have much lower attendance and grade attainment than those who have not. Young women who have ever experienced a physically forced sexual encounter are significantly less likely to be attending school, and have lower educational attainment and more school delays. To begin to get an idea of whether sexual experience in general or physically forced sexual encounters affect educational outcomes more, the three columns examine outcomes by physically forced sex conditional upon any sexual experience. Among the sexually initiated, those who have ever been physically forced have lower attendance and grade attainment.

Table 2. School attendance/educational attainment by ever had sex, ever been pregnant, and ever forced to have sex												
	Ever had sex=no	Ever had sex=yes	Means test	Ever pregnant=no	Ever pregnant=yes	Means test	Ever forced to have sex=no	Ever forced to have sex=yes	Means test	Ever forced to have sex=no, conditional on any sex	Ever forced to have sex=yes, conditional on any sex	Means test
AGE 14-19												
Currently attending	90%	54%	0.00	86%	32%	0.00	79%	46%	0.00	55%	46%	0.16
Ever had a school delay	35%	52%	0.00	40%	53%	0.00	41%	49%	0.19	53%	49%	0.57
N	941	541		1250	239		1413	69		472	69	
AGE 20-24												
Grade attainment	11.5	10.5	0.00	11.2	10.2	0.00	10.7	10.0	0.00	10.5	10.0	0.03
Has matric	70%	36%	0.00	58%	28%	0.00	43%	25%	0.01	37%	25%	0.09
Ever had a school delay	33%	61%	0.00	44%	66%	0.00	56%	62%	0.31	61%	63%	0.76
N	111	572		302	381		628	58		514	58	

Finally, the connection between physically forced sex and age at sexual initiation and any pregnancy are of interest. Table 3 indicates that conditional upon ever having sex, girls who have ever been forced to have sex debut earlier sexually. Among 20-24 year-old women, those who have experienced coerced sex have much higher rates of having ever been pregnant.

Table 3. Ever pregnant and age at first sex by forced sex (conditional on ever had sex)				
	Never forced to have sex	Forced to have sex	Means test	N
Age at first sex (age 14-24)	16.6	15.5	0.00	1118
Ever pregnant (age 14-19)	44%	42%	0.77	547
Ever pregnant (age 20-24)	65%	78%	0.05	577

These results indicate a connection between experience of physically forced sex, lower rates of school attendance, and reduced educational attainment for girls. Causal connections and multivariate determinants will be explored next.

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