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“Sexual Violence in the Public Sphere: Myths, Facts and Responses”.

**Acceptance of Violence
Amongst Female Learners in
Rural High Schools of Kwazulu
Natal (KZN).**

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Abstract

An important finding in our understanding of the nature, scope and impact of HIV/AIDS on individuals, communities and societies around the world and the key role that gender issues play in the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Gender is a culture-specific construct, and the unequal power balance in gender relations that favors males has been shown to be associated with the transmission of HIV/AIDS. This qualitative study explored the views of female high school learners in KZN about gender and sexual relations. Despite the South African Constitution offering equal rights for women, young females perceive males as in control, with the right to make decisions about relationships and sexual practices.

Key words: *young females, female learners, family*

Introduction:

By the end of 2003, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 19.2 million women were living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. South Africa has a population of more than 44.8 million, 79% of whom are Black Africans (Statistics South Africa 2001). The Department of Health (DoH) (2001) estimated that there were 4.7 million people living with HIV in South Africa of whom 56% were women. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa is among the most severe in the world and continues to increase at an alarming pace. In Kwa-Zulu Natal DoH (2004) reported that 40.7% of women attending antenatal care were HIV positive. Heterosexual intercourse is the primary mode of HIV infection worldwide, (Johnson 1988). WHO's World Report on Violence and Health notes that one of the most common forms of violence against women is that performed by a husband or male partner. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection because of the interplay of biological, cultural and socio-economic factors, with women between the ages of 15-29yrs predominantly at risk, (DoH, 2004). Women's low socio-economic status and poverty, low educational levels, subordination to men especially in sexual decision-making - as well as their traditional roles within the family and community expose them to a greater risk of HIV infection. Violence against women plays a crucial and devastating role in increasing the risk to women of HIV infection, (Jewkes 2002). An understanding of gender and sexuality is crucial due to the dynamic nature of these concepts because they are constructed by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic forces that determine the distribution of power. It is important to know the context and dynamics influencing the behaviour of young women. Women witness gender disparities from an early age, and experience that young males are valued; preferred, encouraged and better prepared better for careers than are females. Males are also admired as independent, demanding, aggressive, good problem-solvers, and this goes on and on (Gazda, et al 1991). According to Johnson et al (1981) men are expected and prepared to strive for superiority. Women are expected to serve others, to sacrifice their ambitions and personal needs in order to please and care for others. Further, in many cultures, it is a matter of shame for a woman to produce a baby girl, particularly if she has not produced a son, (Johnson, 1981). These contextual disparities in gender disparities

highlight that the role of men in sexual decision making has not been emphasized sufficiently in AIDS prevention approaches. As a result, the heterosexual epidemic for women continues unabated because of lack of attention to the behavior of their male sex partners. Women are more likely to be physically assaulted or murdered by someone they know, often a family member or intimate partner, (Morrison et al, 2004). These gender inequities are initiated at an early age and the family, which claims to be a source of love and a school for ethical virtue, often manifests and perpetuates these injustices, (Moller,1995).

Definition:

Gender violence is defined as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

The aim and objectives of the study:

The aim of this study was to explore the views of female learners about gender and the influences of family and community on their sexual relationships.

The objectives were to explore the mother- father relationships within the family, male-female relations in the community, boy-girlfriend relationships and how it all relates to sexual decisions.

Methodology: data collection

This descriptive study used qualitative methods and four focus group discussions were conducted with woman between the ages of 15 -24 years. Each group consisted of 8 to 10 persons. Participants were randomly selected from four high schools in the Scottburgh circuit in KwaZulu Natal. In each school one grade 11 class was randomly selected. From each class 10 female participants were randomly selected using the class register.

Informed consent letters were given to parents of learners who would be participating in the focus groups. After parents had given their permission, the learners were also given informed consent letters to sign if they wished to participate in the study. The focus

groups were conducted on the school premises during break. The moderator was a young black female selected with the intention of creating a conducive environment for the discussions, given the fact that some of the questions explored love and sexual issues. The moderator was trained and experienced in qualitative data collection. The discussions were held in a private place within the school premises.

Data collection instrument: The interview schedule was formulated and provided a framework for the moderator to follow. The questions were open-ended questions in order to create debate and conversation. The focus groups were conducted in the home language of the learners (Zulu) and the moderator used probes where necessary to elicit information about community, family and partner influences about gender and their love relationships. The discussions were tape recorded with the permission of respondents, and the tapes were transcribed and translated by the moderator.

Data Analysis:

Content analysis was done using QSR Nvivo 2.0 computer package. The data was categorized into themes, similarities and differences in respect of perceptions, attitudes, social influences and cultural lifestyles, and further categorized according to properties and dimensions.

Ethical Clearance:

Approval of the study was obtained from Nelson R Mandela medicines' Ethics Committee, Department of Education, Principals of the school, parents and Learners.

Results:

The results from the focus group discussions will be presented in respect of family and community influences in relation to gender and sexuality.

Demographic data:

In total 38 female learners participated, 2 were not present on the day of the focus groups, and the age of the learners ranged from 15 to 24 years with the majority being around 17 years.

Family Environment:

In all the focus group discussions female learners said that men are the heads of the family and it is both accepted and effective that way. The family environment influences young people's capabilities and skills and future livelihood. Within the home environment females learn their position in the family and their roles, and the family plays an influential role in shaping females' understanding of manhood. The father was deemed superior and the mother inferior and this context influences the development of attitudes, values, skills and knowledge amongst young people. The environment frequently informs young people's views of the world and their place within it. Families set the tone for children's future relationships. Father-daughter relationships are an important setting for young women to learn how to negotiate fairly and compromise appropriately. The female learners confirmed the gender disparities with males perceived as superior, in respect of their fathers, and also regarding younger males in their families.

- "...as a female you have to do some domestic chores. If *he (father)* talks everyone should listen, pay attention and he should always have the last word ... when he intervenes everyone must drop what they are doing and listen to him".
"We (females) talk to mothers... she takes that to dad", (17 & 19yrs).

"All in all the head of the house makes all the final decision, he decides what you do, where you go and if he decides otherwise you better make sure that you do not go against his word, including our mothers" (15 & 18yrs).

- "Boys have rights, they contribute to the decisions that are made at home and that gives them power over girls".

Fathers are not perceived as adults that females can talk to or with whom they can communicate their needs. The result is that young females see no need to communicate directly with their fathers because they feel that they do not listen to them, nor attend to their needs. Most females felt frustrated since there is no point trying to contribute their views because such were not going to be acknowledged. They felt that boys not girls are favored and this situation denies girls an opportunity of learning how to relate to males.

Community:

The community is made up of families, so gender relations within the families are reflected in how females and males in the community interact. There is a lack of respect for women's views and violence against women is condoned.

- “In the meetings that are usually held in the community, when the women speak, males will make noises and say” what does she know” but if a man is making a point everyone listens and no one makes rude noises” (18yrs)
- “In the community if the boy beats a girl old people do not intervene because they say that it is their matter and they should sort it out themselves. Old people will say you are finally getting what you deserve” (20yrs).

Manhood and role of males:

The understanding of what a man is and how he should be treated is defined by the family. The overall understanding was that to be a man means not caring nor loving too much. It also means not considering other people's feelings. Since males are perceived to have the power and authority females cannot negotiate about when and how they want sex, and as a result of their upbringing females support a macho approach.

General perceptions of man:

- “Males **demand** to be respected because they know that they can easily beat us and we will not do anything about it” (19yrs).

Role of fathers:

- “Males feel that it is not their full responsibility to look after their children and fathers are closer to their sons and mothers are closer to their daughters... As girls we do not have guts to talk to our fathers.
“Men are superior and they are the heads of the family, this is how it is and it will always be like that”, (22yrs).

Role of boyfriends:

- * “He makes rules for you about when and how you should see each other... they just want you to agree on everything they say... Males are praised for having more than one partner because it is a common thing so it is not shocking at all... I think it is a male’s responsibility to make all the rules in a relationship” (22yrs).
- * “I will never go out with a sweet guy, it will make me feel like I am going out with another girl”.

A “sweet guy” was defined as:

- a) “A man forgives you no matter how much you have wronged him.
- b) He will not beat you even if you cheated on him... and,
- c) guys should not cry”.

Young people’s relationship:

In all the focus group discussions young female learners indicated that females are beaten in their community and most females expect to be punished when they misbehave. In their responses the female learners confirmed that they do not expect to be full partners in their current or future relationships. It was notable that their relationships consist of both

emotional and physical abuse. Beating was considered justified to inculcate discipline and such violence was perceived as acceptable behaviour.

- * “Boys pressure you to go home with them if he wants to have sex with you and he will *pressure* you till you agree to have sex with him, but he can see that you do not want to...” (17yrs).
- * Sometimes if your boyfriend finds out that you have other partners then he has a right to beat you then”, (23yrs).
- * “Beating builds a relationship because you will not do wrong things because you know very well that you will be beaten”, (16yrs).

Beating was perceived as an acknowledged form of punishment since:

- “At home if you do something wrong your mother will beat you to show you that what you are doing is not right”, (21yrs).

The above responses give an indication of how young females think of themselves, believing that males are entitled to punish females as they see fit. The risky sexual perceptions and behaviors are evident.

Male dominance and sexuality:

In many societies there is a culture of silence that surrounds sex that dictates that “good” women are expected to be ignorant about sex and passive in sexual interactions, (UNAIDS, 2005).

- “The only time a women can make a decision on her own is when the male no longer exist in the house...Boys beat you if you disagree with them on certain things; they just want you to agree to everything they say” (20yrs).
- “Parents have the cheek to ask you to stay up so that you can open the door for him (brother) but if it was me (girl) who did that I would be beaten. They can either tell one to go back where one came from or let one sleep outside” (16 yrs).

Male dominance was emphasized by one of the learners who explained that this reduces women's ability to protect themselves.

- “We (males and females) are not equal because sometimes even if you have the knowledge actually practicing it might not be easy because that will anger males” (17yrs).

Family influence and love relationships:

Female learners saw nothing wrong with being beaten because it was how they have been raised; their understanding was that if someone loves you they are allowed to beat you. Females cannot beat a man, but is acceptable for a man can hit a woman, and this provides a picture of the context, how women perceive themselves, and their position in the relationship.

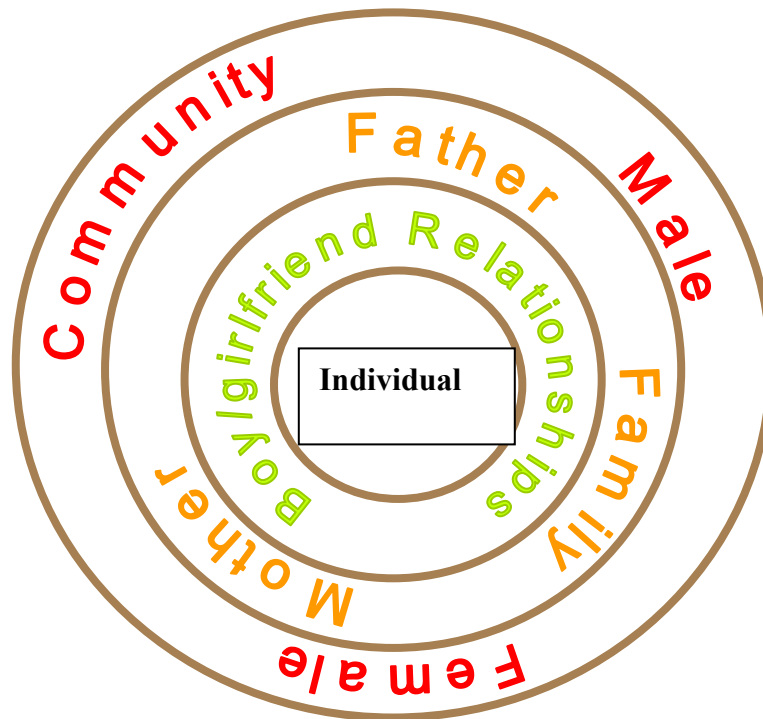
- * “Why should I not expect my boyfriend to beat me because even at home if I do something wrong my father or mother will beat me, not because they hate me but because they love me and they want to see me succeed in life” (16yrs).

The financial rewards from relationships with older men were described.

- Some girls are in love relationships with old men and some are even 70 years of age...as long as they give them money they (girls) continue... our fathers do not give us love so we might as well get it from somewhere else”, (19yrs).

The figure below contextualizes the comments of the female high school learners during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in KZN, and represents the influence of community and family on the perceptions of young females and their sexual relationships.

Diagram: Circle of Relationships and relationship with HIV/AIDS.



The above diagram was formulated using the data collected. Starting from the outer circle the diagram aims to illustrate that in the community males and females relate in a manner that is not different from what females observe at home. In both these arenas the female is inferior to males and females are not involved in decision making. In their love relationships females therefore expect male dominance because they have been accustomed to believe that males should lead. The diagram aims to show that the pattern of gender relations observed in the community and at home influences the individual's behaviour. The family and community environment encourage imbalanced relationships, since in relationships females accept that they cannot negotiate and be full partners in a relationship, especially when it comes to sexual issues. This situation results in women having sex without their consent, and encourages unsafe sex.

“Girls have sex because they are hoping that he will buy you something that you want desperately...A person who buys me all that I want and give me money how can I say I do not want to have sex with him” (18yrs).

Females feel that their needs are not met at home and love relationships become a way to get love and have their material needs met.

“Men are in control of relationships... girls feel obligated to have sex with a man in a relationship... boys tell you (girls) that if you want our relationship to be much stronger, we must have sex and you will tell yourself that once I sleep with him he will love me even more”.

“I feel that men are more controlling when it comes to sex, (17 yrs)”.

The subservient position that woman are placed in from the time they are born makes it incorrect for them to enquire about sex. Fathers could play a vital role in helping their female children understand male and female relationships and helping them look at this from a male’s perspective.

Discussion:

Females grow up in a family, within a community and observing the gender imbalance where males are deemed superior to females. This is perceived as a norm to and makes them believe that it is how things should be. The attitudes and perceptions they hold are developed and shaped within these contexts. The definition of who they are as females and what is their role in society emerges from these interactions. There is currently no medium to help them question this structure nor offers them ways on how to ensure that males respect their rights as women. In the family, females have a very poor relationship with their fathers; other females are afraid of them. Girls grow up playing or feeling second best to boys in the family and they do not believe that they are special and worthy of truthful and honest love. Gender relations are influenced by culture and this also makes it difficult to question something because that will be perceived as disrespectful.

A daughter's relationship with her father is usually her first male-female relationship. Her self-concept as a female person is largely shaped by this early relationship. What also emerged strongly from the discussions is that in the family females have no voice and this is also their position in the community. When daughters learn to communicate with their fathers, and trust that their opinion will count, they can develop self-assuredness which will allow them to be assertive and stand up for themselves. Self-respect is initially based upon respect received from others. Females are denied a platform where they can develop themselves psychologically and emotionally and when they get into love relationships they lack necessary skills to enable them to be full partners. The parent relationship that they observe at home provides a model and they thus have similar expectations from their love relationships.

Females expect the male to make all decisions in the relationship and this is also perpetuated by what they understand is meant by being a *Man*. The more demanding and forceful a man, the more attractive he is. These same demanding qualities however, deny females an opportunity to negotiate what they want or do not want in a relationship and boys use these qualities to force girls into having sex the way they (boys) prefer. Benjamin (1991) states that daughters identify with their mothers, and if their mothers were able to live under difficult conditions that they themselves now have to live under similar circumstances.

Since the relationship with their fathers is almost non-existent, females are more attached to their mothers. They see their mothers everyday persevering despite their fathers' treatment and this provides a role model as to how they are ought to live their lives as woman. The relationships that they view as normal deny them the freedom of negotiating and aspiring to greater opportunities in life. They know when they would not like to do something because the use of the phrase like "*he pressured me*", was used numerous times, indicating that the female learners did not want to agree, but she gave in because she believes that it was a loving thing for a female to do.

There are two factors that maintain these relationships, firstly, the fear of violence, of being beaten if she tries to challenge the males' decision or need. The second factor resulting in acceptance of this kind of conduct, and allowing themselves to be subjected to gender disparities regarding their position in the society. Sometimes women will avoid speaking their minds because they know that there is a possibility of being beaten.

Limitations:

The fact that the focus group discussions were held on the schools' premises may have limited learners' responses.

Divergent voices:

The paper has been written based on what most female learners said or agreed. There were female learners who disagreed with the way in which women are perceived or treated within the family and social arena. "***There should not be a difference between girls and boys... besides we all have rights now***". This group however is a minority and their social environment does not offer support for them to practice these beliefs since they are afraid to be outcasts. The main reason they gave was "***...where will one start to change this...(24yrs)***". Some of the women are aware of the fact that women have rights, but the biggest challenge is to exercise those rights in an environment which is totally against it. "***Women are strong because they now drive nice cars and they can do all things that a man can do...women excel in what they do***" (17yrs). They believe that they can also make it in life and that women now have opportunities to better their lives, but these young girls are split between two arenas, traditional culture and modern society. They are made to believe everyday that they are inferior to males but the opportunities granted to women in the wider world tell them a different story, suggesting a more promising future.

The high rates of HIV among young women emphasize the importance of targeting gender disparities. The high prevalence of teenage pregnancy confirms that many young women are sexually active and not practicing safe sex (refs). Programmes that aim to reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS must take cognizance of, and begin to address the gender disparities highlighted in this paper, that place females at risk of infection.

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