

The Socio-environmental Determinants of Students' Sexual Risk Behaviour and HIV Prevention at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT This article explores the socio-environmental factors to students' sexual risk-taking behaviour at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. The research was conducted with both male and female students selected from two UKZN Campuses. In total, 96 in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions were conducted with an equal representation between male and female students. One of the objectives of the study was to explore the socio-environmental factors that instigate students' sexual risk behaviour on campuses. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the research sought to provide insight into the socio-environmental that instigate students' sexual risk behaviour and to ascertain how they position themselves in relation to the HIV epidemic. More significantly, we sought to comprehend the socio-environmental factors against a backdrop of students having been exposed to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign prevention messages. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, and the themes identified formed the basis for discussion in this article. Students' discussions pointed to the need to address risky sexual behaviour being given precedence over health and safety. The article concludes with suggestions to address the socio-environmental factors that encourage sexual risk behaviour as one way to curb the HIV epidemic.

INTRODUCTION

The link between HIV infection and sexual risk behaviour in heterosexual relationships has been long established in sub-Saharan Africa. Several factors such as community environment (Harris et al. 2006; Parker et al. 2007; Lungiswa et al. 2009; Peltzer et al. 2009), poverty (Hallman 2004; SAS 2007; SANAC 2010), home environment (Hunter 2004; Green et al. 2009), drug abuse (Myer et al. 2004; Harrison 2009) and others have been identified as instigators of sexual risk behaviour and more recently, have been linked to the spread of HIV in South Africa.

Literature on students' sexual risk behaviour in South African universities is sparse. Consequently, little is known why students engage in sexual risk behaviour on campuses. Breier (2010) found that violence in relationships,

the fear of being discarded by a partner and the need to prove manhood/womanhood instigates students' sexual risk behaviour. Mulwo (2009) argues that students arrived at university with little financial support for food and fees, and lack of disposable income encourages risky behaviour. A study by Lengwe (2009) found that desire to experiment with sex and drug abuse influence students' sexual risk behaviour while Eleazar (2009: 120) argues that living with parents or guardians with unregulated sexual attitudes encourage students to engage in sexual risk behaviour. Pule (2009) identified the conceptualisation of masculinity and femininity as instigators of students' sexual risk behaviour. A study by Leclerc-Madladla (2004) found that pursuit of modernity make students susceptible to HIV infection.

The prevalence of sexual risk behaviour among students is 68 percent in heterosexual relationships (HEAIDS 2010). The HIV prevalence rate is at 4 percent and behaviour that makes students susceptible to HIV infection is widespread and it takes place at all universities (Mulwo 2009; HEAIDS 2010). Lengwe's (2009) study found that the HIV prevalence amongst

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students increases sharply with age as they progress from their late teens to early 20s and even more so after the 25-year mark.

This article reports research which investigated students' sexual risk behaviour in relation to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign prevention programme held on campuses in South African universities. The study used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to engage students on their perceptions of their sexual risk behaviour and the Scrutinise Campus Campaign in addressing their perceived sexual risk behaviour on campuses. The purpose of this article is to provide insights into the socio-environmental influence to students' sexual risk behaviour and to ascertain how they positioned themselves in relation to the HIV epidemic. More significantly, the researcher sought to comprehend these behaviours against a background of students having been exposed to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign. The Scrutinise Campus Campaign was created to support the Scrutinise Campaign created in partnership with United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Johns Hopkins Health Education in South Africa (JHHESA), and designer jeans label Levi. The aims of the Scrutinise Campaign are to encourage and equip young people to take responsibility to reduce their risk of HIV infection (Spina 2009). The campaign, which was launched in 2008, involves a series of short animated commercials known as animerts. It uses animated township characters who illustrate daily life encounters that place young people at risk of HIV infection. The animerts, which are intended for 18-32 year-olds in South Africa, aim to equip viewers with a HIV insight to help them examine their own risky behaviours and beliefs. The main topics addressed by the series are perceptions of risk, multiple and concurrent partnerships, faithfulness, condom use and safety, transactional intergenerational sex, and alcohol and sex (Facilitator and Community Action Guide 2009). The animerts are broadcast on national television and are used to stimulate discussions in a series of organised youth conversations. The campaign focuses on youth in South Africa's black urban townships, because their research found that they engage in multiple and concurrent partners making the spread of HIV/AIDS endemic (Spina 2009).

Since Scrutinise Campaign messages were found to be influential, they were adapted to

inform the Scrutinise Campus Campaign taking place at higher education institutions in South Africa. It is a programme of performances and educational events held on campuses around the country. The campaign is aimed to support the Scrutinise Campaign and sought to reinforce its objectives by promoting abstinence and faithfulness and other prevention measures. The aim is also to encourage and equip students to take responsibility to reduce their risk of HIV infection. Thus, the campaign was designed to raise awareness about high risk sexual behaviour, provide opportunity to students to engage with their peers to unpack issues of risk and create learning moments for students to "scrutinise" their own behaviour in the context of risk (Delate 2009). The creation of the Scrutinise Campus campaign was a partnered project. DramAidE, as part of its Health Promoter project funded by JHHESA and supported by the Centre for HIV/AIDS Networking (HIVAN) created a toolkit for use by campus stakeholders. DramAidE then trained Health Promoters and peer educators to run arts and culture festivals around the key themes in conjunction with Scrutinise campaign (Spina 2009). The Scrutinise Campus campaign key themes included sexual risk, condom efficacy, faithfulness, early stage infection, sexual networks, alcohol, transactional sex, and intergenerational sex.

This study used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to engage the students on their sexual risk behaviour and the Scrutinise Campus Campaign. The purpose of this article is to provide insights into the socio-environmental factors that influence students' sexual risk behaviour and ascertain how they positioned themselves in relation to the HIV epidemic. More significantly, we sought to comprehend these behaviours against a background of students having been exposed to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign.

This study targets students for several reasons. Majority of students are adolescents. They are in a phase of discovery and experimentation tied in with a range of individual and social issues, including that of finding and asserting sexual identities. Lengwe (2009) emphasises that this phase is one in which power inequalities between men and women become more distinct. However, adolescence has been essentially ignored in terms of its dynamic significance in creating a pattern of healthy communication and

comfortable sexual relationships with intimate partners. Mulwo (2009) argues that students' effort to comprehend the meaning of their sexual feelings and their sexual orientation makes them to seek instant pleasure with little or no thought of the consequences. A study by Bhagwanjee (2006) and Breier (2010) found that although students became sexually active at a very early age before joining university, little is known about how they viewed sex and relationships. In an era of the HIV epidemic, it is important to investigate how students' socio-environmental conditions instigate their sexual risk behaviour.

Socio-environmental factors that instigate students' sexual risk behaviour are discussed under sub-headings including young people's educational background, community environments, sexual beliefs, social status, home environments, school environments, family processes, and others. The research account in this article forms part of the broad study on students' sexual risk behaviour at KwaZulu-Natal universities in relation to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign.

Understanding of Young People's Sexual Risk Behaviour

Our research was guided by the perspective that behaviour is influenced by socio-environmental factors based on the Problem Behaviour Theory that describes risky behaviour as resulting from an interaction of four risk domains; biological, personality, behavioural, and biological systems (Jessor 1991: 12). This article focuses on the socio-environmental domain as a contributor to students' sexual risk behaviour on campuses.

Variables underlying the perceived socio-environmental system or domain comprise the influence of the educational background, community environments, sexual beliefs, social status, school environments, and family processes (Jessor 1991: 35). The motivation for employing the Problem Behaviour Theory as a theoretical basis for the study on students' sexual risk behaviour arose from its portrayal of the complex and varied nature of young people's behaviour. The theory holds that no single component or domain of young people's behaviour can of itself explain or account for the behavioural influences that surround young people's activities (Jessor 1998). Problem

behaviour is conceived as an underlying syndrome or constellation of interrelated unconventional behaviour instigated by multisystemic factors that include socio-environmental conditions with young people taking central position within this constellation. Young people are the actors of the behaviour, and the recipient of the consequences resulting from the problematic covariation of the impact of risky behaviour.

The application of Problem Behaviour Theory is, therefore, primarily upon the motivation underlying young people's behaviour or actions; in this case the socio-environmental influence. The theoretical focus on this article is placed on the socio-environmental factors that influence young people's behaviour, without making any moral judgment about their personal attributes. Thus, young people's risky behaviour is understood from the perspective of determinants or purpose rather than as an indication of the 'goodness' or 'badness' of young people.

Young people who engage in potentially risky behaviour are not necessarily pathological, irrational or perverse. Rather, engaging in behaviour such as sexual activity and alcohol consumption are an indication of young people's desire to affirm their maturity and entry into adulthood (Jessor et al. 1995; Mulwo 2009). Thus, when a risky behaviour occurs at an age appropriate time and within the ordered context of a protective environment, it may be considered as normal and developmentally adaptive (Jessor et al. 1995). It becomes a problem when this type of behaviour is neither age appropriate nor cushioned by a protective environment, and consequently

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was used to investigate the socio-environmental factors to students' sexual behaviour in the context of the HIV scourge. KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is a hub of the HIV epidemic in South Africa with the prevalence percentage at 17.8 percent (UNAIDS 2010: 7). Also, this province boasts the largest population of 10 645 400 and is the poorest of the provinces in the country (Avert 2010: 3). In spite of urbanization, more than half the population lives in poor rural areas lacking access to resources such as electricity and health services.

UKZN was formed in 2004 after the merger between the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville. It has five campuses: Howard College Campus, Westville Campus, Pietermaritzburg Campus, Edgewood Campus, and the Nelson Mandela Medical School, and hosts about 40,000 students. The demographics of the campuses vary. They are multi-cultural campuses comprising of black African students, students of Indian origin, Coloureds, and Whites. Students come from within South Africa, other African countries, Asia, Europe and the United States of America. Some live on campus, while others are day students. Some students live in rented houses outside the campus in neighbourhoods that are closely-joined with at times different racial lines in socialisation.

For the purpose of this study, two campuses were selected at random, the Howard College Campus and Pietermaritzburg Campus. Due to financial and technical constraints, it was impossible for the researcher to cover all the campuses. Forty-eight interview respondents from each of the campuses were purposively selected. Each of the four levels of study, that is, first year, second year, third year and all post graduate levels, were represented by 24 respondents. The sample was also distributed to reflect the racial diversities among the study population. In total, 96 in-depth interviews and four focus groups discussions were conducted with students. Our objective was best served by eliciting diverse data from both male and female students on their perceptions of the influence of socio-environmental factors on their sexual risk-taking behaviour. The rationale of using in-depth interviews is because they enable the researcher to elicit individual opinions, perspectives, beliefs, ideas, nuance, interpretations, and address sensitive topics.

The primary researcher of the study was also able to observe group dynamics, ascertain individual and group thinking and obtain some ideas about normative behaviour of students on campuses. He was the primary data collector for the study. During the course of this study, he immersed himself in the lives of the students by spending time at students' residences and in the surrounding area frequented by students, such as volleyball and netball courts, gymnasiums, football fields, and sports halls. He also spent time at students' preferred eating and drinking places, attended students' evening

parties to forge relationships. The second author is a lecturer in the faculty of humanities with more than 10 years' experience teaching and working with students on sexual risk reduction programmes and guided the reflexive process during the analysis process and write-up of the study.

Focus group discussions, which consisted of eight students each, were conducted with each session lasting about one hour. Data was transcribed few hours after collection when the researcher's memory was still fresh. We employed focus group discussions for several reasons. Focus groups discussions use interaction between researchers and participants to generate data. As suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999), the dynamic nature of interaction enables the generation of insights which provides comprehension of how people view a situation. Higgs (2001: 6) emphasize the use of focus groups to unpack the social construction of sensitive issues, unearth layers of discourse and group unmentionables or taboos, and the routine silencing of certain views and experiences. An additional advantage mentioned by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and relevant to our objective, is that focus group discussions afford the researcher privileged access to in-group conversations which often include every-day language and home-grown terms, uncovering variety, group dynamics, and stimulating conversations and reactions.

Following the stages of thematic analysis suggested by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), we identified patterns of similarities and differences in participant responses and catalogued these into themes and sub-themes consistent with the objective of our study. These themes form the starting point for discussion in this article. Ethical clearance for the study was provided by UKZN Ethics Research Committee.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents examples of common themes that emerged across the campuses on the socio-environmental factors that encourage students' sexual risk behaviour. Jessor's (1991) theoretical framework, in particular, the socio-environmental domain is used to guide data presentation and discussion. Jessor (1991) elucidates that socio-environmental factors contribute to the onset and maintenance of risky behaviour. Like other factors that influence risky

behaviour, they exert their influence in the context of a complex and dynamic multi-factor system. Jessor (1991: 45) expounds that socio-environmental risk factors include young people's educational background, community environments, sexual beliefs, social status, school environments and family processes. Thus, this section is a descriptive and explorative discussion on what encourages students' sexual risk behaviour using the socio-environmental domain from the Problem Behaviour Theory as a theoretical lens.

Our general observation is that students across the campuses engaged with the research themes easily. This is attributed to the fact that the primary researcher was also a student therefore participants were cognisant of him and felt at ease to participate.

Experience of Coming from Rural Backgrounds and Single Sex Schools

In exploring the socio-environmental causes of students' sexual risk behaviour, this study found that 60 out of the 96 respondents (62.5 percent) mentioned that coming from rural backgrounds and single-sex schools makes them engage in sexual risk behaviour because they tend to be naïve. Respondents said that in their naivety they yielded to pressure of having unprotected sex with senior students and older partners. Those from rural areas and schools also lacked exposure to 'modern life' and therefore they were easily excited and influenced into sexual risk-taking behaviour. The majority of the respondents argued that some students were immature and got carried away easily with life on campus.

Phumulo, a postgraduate black female student from Howard College Campus and from a rural area explained:

Some of us in this university come from rural backgrounds. When we come to the university we change in order to fit into the so-called campus life. One stupid thing I have observed is that we do not want to look grungy for fear of being called names like ibhinca or villager (other participants laughed in agreement). So we quickly but unskillfully adapt to campus life without fully understanding what it entails just to find that we are engaging in risky sexual activities for financial reasons which most of us regret months after coming to understand campus life better.

This view suggests that in wanting to look 'up-to-date' or 'cool' students engaged in risky sexual relationships in search for financial support to keep up appearances. Most of students tended to regret after compromising their health permanently by acquiring HIV.

The majority of the students reported that coming from single schools influence their sexual risk behaviour. Ayanda, a black female undergraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus said:

I feel for students who come from single-sex schools because when they join universities, they are excited by female and male students. Straightaway they get partners and before they know it they are already doing it (having sex). They are at high risk of contracting HIV than some of us who have been studying in co-education schools throughout our lives and we cannot be deceived like doves and fooled.

Deducing from respondents' reports, coming from rural areas and single-sex schools are strong underlying factors to students' sexual risk practices. Our finding builds on Lengwe's (2009: 78) study that found that many young people when they join university get exposed to 'new life' and naively pursue sexual images and ideas largely created by the media and globalisation (see also Breier 2010).

Students' responses also suggest that they engage in sexual risk behaviour because campus life introduces them into life where sexual moral behaviour is defined differently from what they know in rural areas. This finding proposes that when students join the university they are suddenly hit by a culture that extols sexual risk behaviour and eventually risky sexual practices become normal behaviour to them. Ayanda's response above seems to hint that the effect of what students encounter when they come to the university from rural areas disorients their sexual behaviour. On campuses, students are exposed to cultural differences such that their values are challenged because they meet people with very different views of sex practices from theirs. Deducing from students' responses and Lengwe's (2009) study, students seem to be shocked and distressed to find that their fellow students on campus do not share some of their mostly deeply appreciated sexual ideas for instance of abstinence and having one sexual partner.

The majority of the respondents reported that students from rural background engage in

sexual risk behaviour because they come to the university taking their core values and beliefs for granted, and assume they are universally held. The culture shock that students experience disturbs their ability to discern and adopt the new campus culture without really understanding how parts of campus culture fit in a coherent whole. Lack of understanding of campus life makes them fail to see how campus environment encourages sexual risk behaviour. The majority of the respondents come to realise how risky the campus environment is after they have already compromised their sexual values and others are infected with HIV.

Perception That 'Real Men' Have Sex

Findings from both campuses revealed that 70 percent male students believed that, having sex was associated with manhood. The pressure to prove manhood takes precedence over the need to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Contrary to findings from Breier's (2010) study where females were considered as main carriers of HIV/AIDS, students in this study acknowledged the role played by men. Sibili, a black female postgraduate student from Howard College said:

It is the guys you know, they are so used to sex they can't live without it. They want it (sex) flesh on flesh. They say condoms are a disturbance (other students laughed). Guys like playing with girls and sleep with them because they feel they are real men when they are on top of a girl and that is how they spread this virus.

Inferring from Sibili's response, it is reasonable to argue that the majority of the students on campuses seem to be aware of how masculinity is interpreted. That it, is the degree to which male students can have sex with many females, and without using a condom. It seems masculinity on campuses is rooted in the social or rather student's gender rather than the biological or student's sex. The majority (76 percent) of the male respondents said that having sex with many females or having unprotected sex is what being a real man means. From a sociological perspective, our study is suggesting that gender identity on campuses involves all the meanings that are applied to students on the basis of their gender identification. In turn, these self-meanings are a source of motivation for gender-related sexual risk behaviour. This insinuates that

students with masculine identity are expected to act more masculine, that is, engage in sex with many sexual partners, or have sex without using a condom. It seems it is not male students' engagement in sex with many partners, and without a condom that are important, but the meanings implied by these sexual behaviours.

Pamela, an Indian female postgraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus, said that: *guys tend to have many girlfriends on campus and even boast about it. They openly tell each other that I had live sex (sex without using a condom) with this and that girl (the majority of male students laughed in agreement).* It seems male students' gender attitudes make them speak proudly about having many sexual partners, and having sex without a condom demonstrating the meanings they attribute to themselves as masculine. Clearly, students' responses show that male students' interpretation of masculinity does indeed contribute to the spread of HIV on campuses. Students' perceptions that they cannot live without sex, and that condoms are obstacles to sexual enjoyment, present much cause for concern. The expression 'playing with the girls' positions male students as having the power to manipulate female students to satisfy their own sexual desires. Similar to findings by Mulwo (2009) and Lengwe (2009), the comments highlight the notion of unmanaged male sexuality that leads to having multiple sexual partners and HIV infection.

Students' responses further suggest that the identity of male students on campuses is defined through their sexual ability and accomplishment. This finding is confirmed by Kelly (2001: 12) who argues that within the collective peer identity of male students, part of striving for masculinity included boasting about sexual performance. Students' perception that male students who cannot handle several women are not real men may be reinforced, as pointed out by our study. In the light of the above findings, it is worth noting that the survey by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS 2010: 11) documented that among 15-24 year olds 32 percent of male students reported that they had multiple partners as compared to 12 percent of the female students. It is therefore founded to state that students' multiple partnerships create social networks defined by the sexual relationships among students and facilitate the transmission of HIV infection.

While female students' subordination to males increases their risk of HIV infection, researchers such as Hunter (2004) draw attention to the fact that men also experience harmful gender norms. For instance, perceptions of manhood require that men behave in ways that heighten their risk of HIV infection. A major concern, according to Hunter (2004: 12) is that studies repeatedly show that 'men who adhere to rigid notions of manhood, who equate masculinity with risk-taking, dominance and sexual conquest, and who view health seeking behaviour as a sign of weakness experienced a range of poor health outcomes.' Kelly (2001) points to young people being trapped within the confines of heteronormity.

Our findings shows that students tend to overlook the fact that unhealthy attitudes and behaviour on the part of male students affect them and their partners. About 76 percent of the male students in the sample said that sex on campuses often occurred in an emotional vacuum and is not linked to intimacy, between the male and female students:

Most of us engage in casual sex as a pastime and not essentially as a lifetime choice. The chances on campuses are good that it is easy to get in a relationship just to service our sexual desire without being intimate (Sabelo, male undergraduate student at Pietermaritzburg Campus).

This response seems to suggest that competition amongst male students to demonstrate sexual prowess exceeded their fear of HIV infection, demonstrating that risky behaviour is indeed a hallmark of masculinity. This interaction brings to the fore several aspects regarding male identity. First, the purpose of having a girlfriend is to have sex. Second, male students find it hard to resist sex and for them immediate sexual gratification is important. Third, sexual performance is a significant marker of masculine success and male peer group positioning.

In this regard, our study shows that sexuality is influenced by a complex set of factors nested with certain social and cultural realities. It emphasises that levels of sexual coercion and male students' domination in sexual relationships ensure that female students are not in a position to abstain.

Culture of 'Gold Rush' on Campuses

Discussions in all focus groups show that students engage in sexual risk behaviour because of a culture called 'gold rush'. This is a

practice whereby when first-year female students join universities, senior students rush into relationships with them:

Immediately I joined varsity I had several advances from senior students promising me true love. But soon I realised that guys who were rushing to me had other girlfriends and wanted to take advantage of my naivety of campus life to rip off my sexual innocence and purity (Sindisiwe, black female undergraduate student at Howard College).

Respondents explained that senior students either dump their partners for the 'gold' new students or date both concurrently:

The old-fashioned beliefs of one-guy-one-girl relationship are long gone. Here we get-as many freshers as you can immediately they join varsity. The theory of and practice of free love with first years reigns supreme on campuses (Schaba, black female undergraduate student at Pietermaritzburg Campus).

Students who are not able to get new sexual partners at the beginning of the academic year are branded as religious fanatics.

Fifty-eight respondents out of the 96 mentioned that students engage in gold rush because the sex composition of the student body has a constant effect on sexual relationships experiences. This finding is depicted during the researcher's observation. During a meal at a restaurant at Howard College, the researcher listened to a male student complain about his girlfriend to a friend. He compared female students to cars and he said that:

If she doesn't open her legs for you think about it this way dude, just get a new model. Trade her in for a new one, BMW, Mercedes Benz, Audi, Chrysler or Jaguar. We have many female students on campuses than males for you to be able to make a better choice, why starve yourself?

This conversation confirms 78 percent of female students who said that they were less likely to expect much from men and reported that their relationships do not work because they are few men on campuses. Students' responses seem to imply that there are more female than male students on campuses. This imbalance implies that male students are more likely to have more than one sexual partner than those in campuses with balanced gender ratios. On the other hand, it makes females also compete for few males.

Students' responses indicate that new female students are 'rushed to' by senior male students

and seem to have no problem with having boyfriends who have other sexual partners. This finding seems to evoke that new female students are influenced to engage in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships because it is difficult to find men who want to engage in monogamous relationships. On the basis of the above, one can argue that, male student shortage can be viewed as a factor that makes both new female and male students to accept multiple and concurrent sexual relationships as normal.

The phenomenon of unbalanced sex ratios increases the bargaining power of male students and reduces female students' in sexual relationships. This is because it reduces the available alternative relationships for new female students. The 'gold rush' also increases the available alternative relationships for male students. Competition among female students reduces the cost for male students to have sexual partnerships with females, while the cost for females to have sexual partnerships with males becomes minimal. Thus, students' responses suggest that the culture of 'gold rush' is also instigated by the sexual ratio factor. This means that male students can only exclusively date one female student (typically) but they have sex with many of them making themselves susceptible to HIV infection. To a certain extent, the perception of unbalanced students' ratios on campuses contributes to the risky sexual climate on campuses.

The finding on the 'gold rush' also suggests that the sexual ratio on campuses is an appropriate and useful approach to understanding sexual risk behaviour on campuses. It validates Jessor's (1998: 34) argument that socio-environmental factors influence young people's risky behaviour. Some studies that have explored students' sexual relationships ignore campus environments and how they shape sexual relationships (Eleazar 2009; Pretorius and Rajmakers 2006). These studies treat students as actors whose decisions have no bearing on the decisions of other students, but this is not the case. As Jessor (1991: 23) posits, campuses are also environments and social systems, and students' behaviour is conditioned by their characteristics.

Further, our study shows that university authorities play a critical role of 'campus brokers.' They structure the campus environments by their decisions regarding campus policies and who to admit such that there are sexual ratio imbalances. Essentially, the finding supports Mulwo's (2009) argument that there is

need to pay attention to socio-environmental context because it instigates risky behaviour among young people.

Stigmatisation of Virginity

This study found that 62 percent of students who had not engaged in sex prior to joining university had their sexual initiation during their first year of study at the university. This finding is also supported by Mulwo (2009) and Lengwe (2009) who found that the average age at sexual debut at 17, the average age of the majority of first year respondents in this study. Our study shows that students are under enormous pressure from their peers to engage in sexual activities. Thabo, a black male undergraduate student at Howard College, who has been engaging in sex with many partners since he joined university in 2005, explained:

One reason we have sex especially as boys is that we tend to talk about our girlfriends ok, maybe someone says, hey dude, I was doing it with my girlfriend last night and you know what, it was thrilling. Such stuff you see, make us want to have something to talk about with our friends, ok, and I have to go and sleep with my girl so that I have something to talk about with my friends. That is how challenges start and you end up losing your virginity because you feel it is not something to keep.

Responses such as this one suggest that students perceive sex as 'cool' hence those who abstain from sex are socially unpopular as they are considered 'backward'. Thus, some students indulge in sex in order to gain social acceptance by proving that they are also 'cool'. This is in agreement with Jessor's (1991: 89) argument that beliefs, norms and culture instigate risky behaviour. Findings in our study suggest that sex is a practice through which students are initiated into a new culture, where they are able to openly talk about having sex with peers:

It is not cool to be a virgin here in campus. If you are a virgin, you are perceived like a creature from space and people tend to be distant. We believe that students of this time and age, should be having sex because that is what is cool...it is basically not in fashion to be a virgin (Sithole, black male postgraduate student from Howard College).

This account indicates that students value sex and often link being a virgin with being outdated. The problem appears to lie both on

campus environments and in students. The majority of students said that while on campus they are pressured into fulfilling their sexual gender roles by friends. Once they have gone against the campus 'norms' that favour sex they are ridiculed by their friends as archaic. Thandiwe, a black female undergraduate student at Pietermaritzburg Campus, said:

Sex?.....yeah, it is great and I enjoy it because it makes me be who I am, a sexually alive person. So when you are ready for it...and while some guys are interested, go for it, it is your life, not someone's. You are taking the lead to be yourself, and not following others who think it is a crime to have sex.

This response suggests that some students engage in sex as a way of asserting themselves. Interestingly, female students who are not approached by males are considered to be unattractive. Close to 75 percent of the female students reported that they engage in sex, and 26 percent lost their virginity in order to prove to their peers that they are also attractive to males. This seems to suggest that female students are expected to be attractive. If male students do not approach them then they do not feel attractive, like others who get more attention. This perception encourages female students to make themselves sexually available to prove that they are also capable of charming men: *It is difficult to be proud of your virginity here....it haunts you and makes you feel there is something wrong about it* (Khumalo, female postgraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus). Khumalo's response implicitly suggests that stigmatisation of virginity is detrimental to the HIV/AIDS interventions promoting abstinence on campuses. Stigmatisation of virginity makes students internalise the stigma of 'being virgins'. It encourages students to lose their virginity as they are made to feel that their virginity is worthless. Stigmatisation of virginity seems to reinforce students' denial of their virginity and lack of courage to openly talk about it.

Seventy two percent of the students reported that stigmatisation of virginity engenders a feeling of being outdated in those perceived to be virgins. Some students suspected of being virgins or have disclosed that they are virgins are isolated by those who are engaging in sex, and consequently are subjected to prejudice or made fun of. Some girls are given names such as 'nuns', 'virgin Marys' while males are called 'rabbis' or 'gurus':

Fellow students make fun of you on campus for being a virgin and call you all sorts of silly names such as monk or nun, guru or chief priest or rabbi just because you are a virgin and so you end up spending time in solitude and feel insecure of being a virgin (Thandiwe, a black female undergraduate student at Howard College).

Similar findings were also noted in a recent national study among students conducted by HEAIDS (2010). What is significant in our study is that there are students who consider sex as cool and abstinence as abnormal, and those who consider sex outside marriage as uncalled for and abstinence as necessary. The second category is composed mainly of students who consider themselves religious or traditionalist or both. Thus, students who perceive sex as cool find it easy to have sex as they see no wrong in engaging in sex. This makes them susceptible to HIV infection as they take less precaution.

Social Status on Campuses

When students were asked what they thought were the underlying factors to their sexual risk behaviour, 67 percent of the respondents (64 out the 96) mentioned social status as a strong sexual risk factor. Social status on campuses is understood by students as the degree of honour attached to their positions among peers. Respondents reported that social stratification for male students is associated with the ability to have 'cash', beautiful sexual partners, and a car, as one male student put it:

For many students social status is dressing in those fancy clothes, going out with many girls, partying all the times, driving those fancy cars, and listening to rap and house music, really loud. It is weird status for spoiled students behaving like Bill Gates on campuses. Being well and showing off is one thing about many students campuses (Stephen, a white postgraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus).

Thus, for most male students, having more sexual partners, partying and driving latest cars is considered a sign of success. Thabo, a postgraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus said that male students' pride is in the number of sexual partners they have. They conceptualise for instance having many sexual relationships as competition or fun. Sex, to them, is seen as a game in which individuals compete on the basis of the number of women they have

sex with. Nelson's response advances an idea that students rarely talk about abstinence:

I am 21 years old and I am just wondering why it is such a big deal to some people that the physical act of sex must be reserved for legal marriage or other times. What happens if I don't want to get married till I am 30 years? So I should be just a 30 year old virgin? People are getting married later in this generation. So as long as you love and care about the person what does it matter? (White male undergraduate student from Howard College).

This further suggests that students think abstinence is outdated. They argue that times have changed, and older generations are the ones pushing for the promotion of abstinence. About 67 percent of the respondents said that abstinence is not realistic on campuses when many students are talking about how they enjoy sleeping with different partners: *Abstinence is a non start because having many sexual partners and sex is perceived as a competition where we have to outdo each other* (Musa, a black male undergraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus). This perception makes students vulnerable to HIV infection.

On campuses, the purpose of sexual relationships mainly informs an individual's decision to engage in sexual risk behaviour. The majority of the respondents explained that multiple partnerships are highly approved of and seen as a competition for superiority. For male students, faithfulness is not considered a desirable option since they are not in relationships for marital purposes or love, but because of the desire to prove their ability to have any number of girls they want. Engaging in sex so often and with many partners, for students is a source of delight. This is indicative of traditions in South Africa for instance among the Xhosas and Zulus where multiple sexual partnerships among men are celebrated as a symbol of success (Leclerc-Madladla 2005; Parker et al. 2007).

For most females, however, engagement in risky sexual relationship is not driven by competition, but by other factors, such as material needs and sexual experimentation. The majority of the respondents said that among female students social status is acquired through their access to the 'latest' items like phones, clothes, and the ability to go for outings, and eat nice food. The majority of students said that the pursuit of high-class lifestyles among female

students is influenced by a culture of consumerism. Thus, in wanting to acquire financial support for their 'luxuries', students end up engaging in sexual risk behaviour.

Freedom from Parental Control

The majority of the respondents said that they perceive freedom from parental control as one factor that encourages students' sexual risk behaviour. This confirms Jessor's (1991:12) finding that both 'perceived and experienced freedom' from parental or guardian control influence young people to engage in risky behaviour. Our study suggest that students, who felt that they did not enjoy the freedom to engage in sex due to parental control prior to joining university, indulged in sexual activities during their first year. Jenny, a third year White female student from Howard College said that engaging in sex for such students symbolically represented freedom from parental control:

When people come to university they are not involved in any way sexually but barely a month of being on campus they grow wings, a lot of things change such that they feel freedom to do things they were not able to do at home.

This finding seems to point out that it is not that students are merely irresponsible. Instead, campus lifestyles and educational change give students a hard time to adapt to university lifestyles. What many studies reviewed seems not to point out is that new students do not understand that university life is very different from high school life where they come from. At the university students have to learn to manage their time on their own. When they join university, they find that there are many new developments in their lives that make concentrating on academic work difficult such as being away from family, having boyfriends and girlfriends, and having parties. Thus, campus life seems to make students find self-discipline difficult such that they engage in sexual risk behaviour.

The majority of respondents said that they engage in sexual risk behaviour because of huge blocks of unstructured time. They said that they attend lectures twelve to sixteen hours per week the rest of the time is their own to go to parties, or explore the new environment outside their campus fences, and make new sexual relationships. *The sudden experience of freedom from parental control after long years of being under*

lock and key hits us out of the way and what do you expect? (Nkune, black male undergraduate student from Pietermaritzburg Campus). This response seems to indicate that away from home and their parents' watchful eyes students tend to experiment with sleeping with their boyfriends and girlfriends, and drinking alcohol things parents would not approve.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FOR THE SCRUTINISE CAMPUS CAMPAIGN

In exploring the underlying factors of students' sexual risk behaviour at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in relation to the Scrutinise Campus Campaign, this article focused on the socio-environmental factors. The findings contribute to the understanding of the bigger picture on the underlying factors to students' sexual risk behaviour. The majority of students' responses during the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions demonstrated that socio-environmental factors play a significant role in influencing their sexual risk-taking behaviour on campuses.

Our study indicates that adolescence is an experimental period and students are likely to be susceptible to socio-environmental risk influences. In this regard, South African universities, which bring together diverse groups of students, offers an ideal site within which the socio-environmental factors to students' sexual risk behaviour can be highlighted and dealt with. Our study found that the Scrutinise Campus Campaign addresses the sexual risk caused by negative peer pressure, sexual harassment on campuses, living in different locations with sexual partners, gender and cultural scripts, and students' perception of sex as barter for basic needs.

On the other hand, sexual risk factors presented in this article such as the influence of age, early sexual debut, sexual fit, lack of good sex, physical beauty and health appearances, are not addressed. Sixty percent of the underlying socio-environmental factors to students' sexual risk behaviour identified in our study are not covered by the Scrutinise Campus Campaign. We recommend that the Scrutinise Campus Campaign and other HIV prevention initiatives must include educating students on the influence of socio-environmental risk factors discussed in this article. Such an approach may encourage students to protect themselves from several

sexual risk influences. In the same vein, the Campaign should have an ongoing study on students' understanding of the factors that influence their sexual risk behaviour. It will help the Scrutinise Campus Campaign to have a better understanding of the reasons students engage in sexual risk behaviour. Its research on students must use comprehensive models that take into account among other factors the socio-environmental influences and their combined effects on students' sexual risk-taking behaviour. HIV prevention messages that comprehensively address socio-environmental sexual risk factors are likely to be more effective in promoting desired behaviour change on campuses. Of concern to us is that, despite the identified need, more than half of risk factors identified in the study were reported not to be dealt with by the Scrutinise Campus Campaign messages.

The findings of our study clearly show that the risk of HIV infection is caused by contextual factors that include socio-environmental factors impacting strongly on students' sexual risk-taking behaviour but requiring an understanding of the role played by other factors in driving the HIV epidemic. The Scrutinise Campus Campaign must as well consider the role of socio-environmental factors such as age, early sexual debut, sexual fit, lack of good sex, physical beauty and health appearances in their content, design and implementation. Other HIV prevention messages such as condom promotion and abstinence must be accompanied by knowledge regarding prevailing influences of risk factors which form the context within which sexual decisions are made.

There is one point that we endorse: that the Scrutinise Campus Campaign must have messages that comprehensively address socio-environmental factors. Addressing these risk conditions is an important part of prevention. Given that HIV transmission and infection are inextricably bound to several influences, it is equally essential to focus on these risk factors which place students at risk for HIV.

In addition, many variables found to be related to students' sexual activity have not been studied with regards to sexual risk-taking behaviour on campuses. More research is needed to understand the role of these variables in promoting sexual risk or sexual safety. To this end, we emphasize the significance of the Scrutinise Campus Campaign administrators in

prioritizing socio-environmental risk influences to successfully curb the epidemic.

CONCLUSION

Our research aimed to draw attention to some of the socio-environmental factors that contribute to students' sexual risk behaviour on campuses. In recognition of other factors addressed by the Scrutinise Campus Campaign such as negative peer pressure, sexual harassment on campuses, living in different locations with sexual partners, gender and cultural scripts, and students' perception of sex as barter for basic needs, the findings of this research suggest that students' sexual risk behaviour on campuses is influenced by other socio-environmental factors such as age, early sexual debut, sexual fit, lack of good sex, physical beauty, and health appearances. These findings are not exhaustive in exploring factors that shape students' sexual risk behaviour. Nevertheless, it is critical to note that the Problem Behaviour Theory provides a good theoretical framework for understanding the key factors that encourage students' sexual risk-taking behaviour. It can form a strong conceptual basis for the Scrutinise Campus Campaign to address the factors that encourage sexual risk behaviour. The problem of not adequately addressing these socio-environmental risk factors is that they create fertile soil on campuses for students to engage in high-risk sexual behaviour. Addressing these factors may help the Scrutinise Campus Campaign to keep pace with the dynamics of the causes of students' sexual risk behaviour and effectively reduce the HIV epidemic.

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