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Predictors of sexual coercion among a cohort of Medunsa undergraduate students

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Abstract

Background: Sexual coercion is a well-documented area of research in developed countries. However, this problem is not adequately addressed South Africa, particularly in settings like colleges and university campuses. The study aimed to investigate the predictors of sexual coercion among female undergraduate students at the University of Limpopo; Medunsa Campus, South Africa.

Methods: This is a cross-sectional descriptive study using the Sexual Experience Survey (SES) tool administered to 335 female students registered for the 2010 academic year.

Results: Almost a third (28.7%) of the students experienced sexual coercion which is slightly closer to the international prevalence of 25%. Types of sexual coercion acts included attempted verbal coercion, verbal coercion, date rape, attempted rape, and rape. Date rape was the least unwanted sexual act (2%) experienced by respondents and the highest was rape at 10.7%. Sample mean age was 21 years with the age of 17 to 47 years was more than expected because of the MBCHB program (min period 7yrs). In this study majority of perpetrators of rape were not intimate partners and we found age was not associated with sexual coercion at Medunsa Campus both within the past 12 months and since the age of 14 years. For the students who reside on campus, the odds of being a victim of attempted verbal coercion was 2.085 compared to those students who reside off campus.

Conclusion: Sexual assaults in the university campuses are endemic. Attention needs to be given to rape as it is the most frequent unwanted sexual act experienced by female undergraduate students at Medunsa Campus.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual coercion is a well-documented area of research in the USA and in most parts of the world however; the rationale to debate on this phenomenon is to bridge the gap between research and practice as this problem is not adequately addressed at a national level in South Africa [1,2]. Studies show that young people are most at risk of experiencing sexual coercion [3-6]. Women most vulnerable to sexual coercion are those younger than 35 years of age, especially adolescents [4,7]. Adolescents are not mature enough to negotiate safe sex and may encounter difficulty in communicating

their feelings, intentions, and wants. Furthermore, adolescent females who have experienced sexual coercion exhibit diminished ability to communicate on sexuality and contraception [8].

South Africa has many laws that protect the rights of women and children; however there is a high prevalence of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual victimisation and assault. According to White & Smith [5] witnessing domestic violence as a child, being a victim of parental physical punishment, and experiencing childhood sexual abuse (CSA) increase the likelihood of men being perpetrators of sexual

coercion during their adolescent years and in intimate adult relationships. Young girls who experience CSA generally experience psychological problems. Low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, feelings of hopelessness, and helplessness make them vulnerable to repeated violation during the adolescent and adulthood years [7]. For example, low self-esteem, low levels of assertiveness, alcohol use are not only outcomes of sexual victimization, but are also antecedents observed with poor mental health correlated with early sexual debut among university students[6,8,9,11,13].

Little is known about the current social dynamics on college and university campuses across South Africa. The study aimed to investigate predictors of sexual coercion among female undergraduate students at the University of Limpopo: Medunsa Campus. Younger females are more at risk; and once they experience sexual coercion their risk further increases and hence the study hypothesized that younger students will display higher rates of sexual coercion at Medunsa. This paper has a potential to contribute to knowledge of understanding of sexual coercion and could also be an impetus for further research and interventions [14].

METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study which used self-administered questionnaires for data collection among female undergraduate students at the Medunsa Campus of University of Limpopo was conducted.

The study population was 1648 undergraduate, female students, registered for the 2010 academic year. The study setting was at the Medunsa campus of the University of Limpopo. Due to its rural positioning in Ga-Rankuwa, a township north-west of the capital, Pretoria, the majority of the students in the university is Black South Africans. From a population size $N=1648$, the sample size was calculated using Epi-Info version 6 software. The expected frequency was 50%, and the worst acceptable result of 55%, which yielded the largest sample size at the 95% confidence interval, and the sample size amounted to $n=312$. The sample size was further increased by 15% to $n=360$ to improve extrapolation to the study population. Systematic sampling was initially applied using probability proportion to size. Proportion to size also applied to year of study. With a sampling frame of 1648, and a sample size of 360, every fourth student was selected, resulting with a sampling ratio of 0.25.

The second author collected data in the lecture halls at the end of class sessions from female students in the departments of Medicine, Dentistry, Dental Therapy, Oral Hygiene, Physiotherapy, Speech Language and Audiology, Human Nutrition, and Occupational

Therapy.

Data collection tools

The Sexual Experience Survey (SES) standardized instrument which was adapted from a validated and reliability-tested instrument was used for data collection [7]. Content validity and test retest reliability was assessed before collecting the data. Data was collected during September and October of 2010. A total of 360 close-ended questionnaires were handed out; 335 were returned; yielding a response rate of 93%.

Ethical clearance

The Medunsa Research Ethics Committee of the University of Limpopo granted ethical approval for the study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Dean of School of Health Care Sciences and the academic heads of departments. Participation in the study was voluntary, and an informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to completion of the self-administered questionnaire. The ethical approval had provision for referral to a clinical psychologist because of the sensitive nature of the research topic.

Study variables

Demographic characteristics and sexual orientation are the independent variables which confirm vulnerability to sexual coercion in this study. Other variables of interest that were added during content adaptation of the instrument were years spent at Medunsa, sexual orientation and a question on date rape.

RESULTS

After data collection, the questionnaires were coded for data entry and cleaning. Data was analysed using Stata version 8 Software. Analysis included frequency distributions of demographics and sexual orientation of the sample, incidence of sexual coercion, and the gender of perpetrators of sexual violence. The inclusion of demographic characteristics and sexual orientation as independent variables was intended to highlight who is most vulnerable.

Sample characteristics

A total of $n=335$ female undergraduate students participated in this cross-sectional study. The mean age was 21.86 years ($SD= 3.54$) and ranged from 17 years to 46 years. Just over 70% of the respondents fell in the 17-22 years age categories. Six (6) respondents did not fill in the age category. Missing data could not be controlled for and was mainly due to the sensitivity of the topic and in order to ensure confidentiality during

data collection. The results show that 96 (28.7%) out of 335 students experienced sexual coercion. There was no statistical significance association between sexual coercion and age (OR=1.01, CI: 0.949-1.083, p=0.680).

Age as a predictor of sexual coercion

The mean age difference between victims and non-victims of sexual coercion in the past 12 months and since age 14 was determined using the two-sample unpaired t-test. The results show that there was no statistical significance in ages for attempted rape (p=0.655, CI: 2.192- 1.379), for verbal coercion (p=0.497, CI: 1.135-2.335), and for attempted verbal coercion (p=0.871, CI: 1.355-1.5997).

Place of residence as a predictor of sexual coercion

Place of residence was dichotomous, either residing on or off campus. Association between place of residence and sexual coercion within the past 12 months was only determined for second year students and above as first year students would have only attended university for 9 or 10 months. A total of 13 respondents did not complete this question. The results show that there was no statistical significance for reported rape between students residing on and off campus ($\chi^2=0.04$, p=0.84). However the was statistically significance for attempted verbal coercion between on campus and off

campus students ($\chi^2=7.87$, p=0.005). Since an association between place of residence and attempted verbal coercion is evident logistic regressions was calculated and on campus students were two times likely to be subjected to attempted verbal coercion than off campus students (OR=2.085, CI: 1.251-1.427, p=0.001)

Sexual Orientation as a predictor of sexual coercion

Sexual orientation was categorized into heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual but for analysis it was dichotomized to heterosexual and homosexual. Twenty six (26) respondents failed to indicate their sexual orientation, resulting in (n=309) being used to assess possible associations.

Present for past 12 months The results show that there was no association between The results show that there was no statistical significance of association between sexual coercion and sexual orientation (p=0.815, CI: 2.192- 1.379), for verbal coercion (p=0.497, CI: .515-2.323), and for attempted verbal coercion (p=0.871, CI: 1.355 - 1.5997).

There was also no statistical significance (p=0.286, CI: 0.2799812 - 1.456546) between sexual orientation and sexual coercion since age 14.

Table 1. Students demographic characteristics by sexual coercion

Variables		No		Yes		p-value
		n†	%	n‡	%	
Age Category						0.861
17-22	1	168	53.8	67	0.21	
23-28	2	57	18.2	24	0.077	
29-34	3	4	0.01	3	0.01	
35-40	4	4	0.01	1	0.01	
41-46	5	1	0.003	0	0	
						0.283
		164	0.525	76	0.243	
		30	0.096	8	25	
Sexual coercion by residence type						0.01
		166	532	81	259	
		22	70	13	0.041	
Sexual coercion by years at Medunsa						0.145
		≤ 3yrs	164	52.56	72	23.07
		> 3 yrs ≤ 6yrs	64	20.51	21	6.07
		> 6rs	4	0.01	2	0.01

DISCUSSION

Almost a third (28.9%) of the female university students reported to have experienced sexual coercion. The study also showed that women experienced various acts of sexual coercion. Rape was the leading (10.7%) act of sexual coercion in the campus followed by attempted rape (6%), verbal coercion (5.3%), attempted verbal coercion (4.5%) and the least unwanted sexual coercion act was date rape (2%).

The sample mean age was 21 years and the age range of 17 to 47 years was more than expected probably because of the medical program (MBCHB) which is seven years long compared to most program which are three to four years long.

In line with other literature the results of this study show that sexual coercion continues to be endemic, especially on college campuses [10,14]. Dating and sexual relationships increase during this time making college women particularly susceptible to unwanted sexual experiences. White and Smith support this view by stating that it would be unusual to find a college female student who had not been a victim of some form of verbal aggression, and a substantial number who had not experienced physical or sexual aggression in intimate relationships.

There is consensus in the literature that the younger a woman is the more likely she is to be a victim of sexual coercion [3,4,6]. In our study we did not find this association, age was not associated with sexual coercion at Medunsa Campus both within the past 12 months and since the age of 14. Furthermore, the results show no differences in the mean ages for each act of sexual coercion (verbal coercion, attempted verbal coercion, and rape). This could be attributed to the way the age variable was collected, the study did not ask for the age of the sexual coercion incident but the current age of the respondents. The age range of the respondent in this study was 17- 47 years.

Residing on campus increases the likelihood of attempted verbal coercion twofold. Student residing on campus had less odds of being sexual coerced, this finding suggest that student residing on campus were more likely to be coerced by perpetrators on campus. However this study cannot account for this because the data did not collect information of the place of residence of the perpetrator.

Consistent with other findings [2,3,4,7], half of the respondents that were raped since age 14 were raped again within the past 12 months. We also found that female sexual coercion was commonly perpetrated by males. Similar findings were reported [1,13].

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the age of the student was not associated with all acts of sexual coercion. In addition, those students who reside on campus were vulnerable to attempted verbal coercion, which is a precursor for sexual coercion.

These results conclude that sexual orientation does not influence the likelihood of sexual coercion. Residing off campus is protective for attempted verbal coercion

Even though these results do not reach significance, it is important to note that the majority (more than 70%) of victims of rape and attempted rape in the past 12 months, and since the age of 14, were 21 years and older.

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