

Patterns and Dynamics of Sexual Violence among Married Adolescents in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Getting married in adolescence is common in most parts of Africa. It has in many cases salient direct links with sexual violence among adolescents. Sexual violence and the vulnerabilities of adolescents have been reported in literature. However, the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents are not known or have not been fully studied. The purpose of this study was to explore the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents. A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was used in the study. A total of 15 married adolescents were recruited through purposive snowball sampling in one rural district of Zimbabwe. Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework was used for data analysis. Three major themes emerged, namely sexual control, rape, and forced marriage. Each theme had three sub-themes. The study confirms what has already been reported in the literature that marriage at a young age has a correlation with sexual violence. There is therefore a need to strengthen family education on the effects of early marriages.

Keywords: dynamics of married adolescents; patterns of sexual violence; sexual violence

Introduction

Child marriage remains a menace despite legislation prohibiting its practice globally; each day, about 39 000 girls are married off before their 18th birthday while some are even being given out in marriage before the age of 15 (Kidman 2016; UNICEF 2014; 2017). It has been projected that if the current trend of child marriage continues, about 15.1 million girls will be in marriage before 18 years between 2021 and 2030 meaning 25 000 cases every day (Kamal et al. 2015; UNFPA 2012). The highest prevalence of

these practices occurs in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2014; 2017). Generally, in Africa, women are faced with discrimination based on gender from birth through childhood to adolescence and even after marriage (Nasrullah and Bhatti 2012). Child marriage is associated with cultural beliefs, social norms, religion and gender inequality (Jain and Kurz 2007; Svanemyr et al. 2015).

However, poverty and economic gain are currently regarded as the major causes of child marriages (Nour 2009; Walker 2012). Child brides are given away or sold by their families for economic security (Bicchieri, Jiang, and Lindemans 2014). Moreover, payment of dowry serves as an incentive for poor families to marry off their daughters early without consideration of the children's consent, welfare, and consequences of such actions (Bicchieri, Jiang, and Lindemans 2014). Early marriages put adolescents at risk and disadvantage, as the girls are married when they are not properly prepared to handle and negotiate marital roles (Erulkar 2013; Güler and Küçüker 2010). Married adolescents are also at high risk of sexual and intimate partner violence because of their age and marital status (Nasrullah and Bhatti 2012; Speizer and Pearson 2011). These adolescents are usually married to men far older than themselves, experienced in life matters and already settled in life spheres such as work and education hence have power and authority over them. The WHO (2014) defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work". Sexual violence, in general, is a global ill and a major public health concern as it occurs in most countries and transcends all socio-economic classes (Lundgren and Amin 2015). However, some studies have reported that it is more common among poor and vulnerable groups like those staying in slums and hostels. Married adolescents' exposure to sexual violence is also a result of limited knowledge of their rights (Indupalli and Giri 2014). Some societal norms exacerbate the belief that sexual abuse is a foreign concept and that it is the right of a man to have sexual relations with his spouse at any time he so wishes. These norms have made sexual violence acceptable in many societies.

In Zimbabwe, adolescent marriages are a common occurrence, especially in rural settings. Studies reported that married adolescents suffer many consequences, the most important being that their husbands control their sexual and reproductive lives (Azende 2016; Braimah 2014). The girls are young, have no power and no experiences in issues of sexuality. This control disrupts their education, makes them dependant on their spouses even in decision-making for issues such as access to health and sexual consensus. This places them at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and having unwanted pregnancies (Kim 2001). Past and recent researchers in the field of gender-based violence among adolescent have indicated an urgent need for the liberation of these adolescents (Narayanawamy 2016; Santhya et al. 2010). The

current study purports to respond to this need by exploring the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents.

Methods

This study was part of a larger study that explored the influences of feminist cultural practices on married adolescent girls' sexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS. A qualitative approach was employed as the authors aimed at learning about the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents. Qualitative research allows participants to express themselves freely uninhibited by structure (Bryman and Becker 2012). A feminist framework was used as the basis for the study. The framework allowed the researchers to concentrate on adolescent girls to the exclusion of their spouses.

Participants

A total of 15 married adolescents were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling. The married adolescents were identified and recruited with the assistance of two village health workers and the nursing administrator at the pre- and post-baby clinic. Only adolescents who met the inclusion criteria were selected after a detailed explanation of the study purpose. Those who agreed to participate were given the consent form to sign if they were 18 and 19 years old and those younger were given the consent form to give to their spouses to sign on their behalf. Nine adolescents were recruited through the clinic while seven were recruited through snowball sampling. To participate in the study the adolescents had to have been married for a minimum of six months, residing in the rural district where the study was conducted and aged between 15 and 19 years.

Setting

The study took place in a rural government hospital in the western part of Zimbabwe. It is 235 kilometres from the city of Bulawayo and 50 kilometres from the Nkayi District Hospital, the latter being a referral hospital for the village that was used for the study. The health centre is surrounded by smaller clinics that are run by the rural district council. About 20 kilometres south-west of this village is a mission hospital. The two hospitals complement each other. Thursday is the day dedicated for postnatal care and it is therefore a very busy day at the health centre. According to statistics at the health centre, it is estimated that there are about five married adolescent girls per ward out of a total of six wards.

Data Collection

The first author collected semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews were collected in Ndebele, the local language of the district where the study was conducted. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Translation of the transcripts was done by

the first and second author independent of each other. The transcripts were translated back into Ndebele to check for loss of meaning.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic framework was used to analyse the data from the interviews with adolescents. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of data analysis begins with data familiarisation where transcripts were read numerous times by the researchers to get full understanding of what the participants said about the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence. Open coding was done. The three authors coded simultaneously and then collated and verified. This led to theme generation, which were then reviewed and named. These themes were used to explain the opportunities and dynamics of sexual violence for married adolescents.

Ethical Consideration

Permission was sought and granted by the Department of Health Studies Higher Degree Committee of the University of South Africa (Ref. HSHDC/548/2016). The Zimbabwe Ethics Review Council also granted ethical clearance (Ref. MRCZ/A/2220). The district where the study was conducted also gave permission. Informed consent was explained to the participants and the informed consent forms were signed by them before the data collection. The sensitivity of the topic was considered all the time and a counsellor from the clinic was involved in the study to offer counselling should there be a need.

Results

The participants in the study were aged between 15 and 19 years and were mostly married at the age of 14 years. Eleven out of the 15 participants lived in the same compound with their in-laws. Table 1 shows their demographic characteristics in detail.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

| Participant | Age | Age at marriage | Education level | Years in marriage | Living arrangements | Employed | Family planning |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 19 | 16 | Grade 7 | 3 | With in-laws | No | Yes |
| 2 | 19 | 15 | Form 2 | 4 | With in-laws | Partner employed | Yes |
| 3 | 17 | 16 | Form 2 | 1 | With in-laws | No | Yes |
| 4 | 16 | 14 | Form 3 | 2 | With in-laws | No | Yes |
| 5 | 17 | 14 | Grade 7 | 3 | With spouse | No | Yes |
| 6 | 15 | 14 | Grade 7 | 1 | With in-laws | Partner employed | Yes |
| 7 | 18 | 14 | Grade 7 | 4 | In-laws’ inherited home | No | No |
| 8 | 17 | 14 | None | 3 | With spouse | No | Yes |
| 9 | 15 | 13 | Grade 3 | 2 | With in-laws | Partner | Yes |

| Participant | Age | Age at marriage | Education level | Years in marriage | Living arrangements | Employed | Family planning |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | | | | | | employed | |
| 10 | 15 | 13 | Grade 2 | 2 | With in-laws | Partner employed | Yes |
| 11 | 17 | 15 | None | 2 | With in-laws | Partner employed | No |
| 12 | 16 | 14 | None | 2 | With in-laws | Partner employed | Yes |
| 13 | 18 | 16 | Grade 6 | 2 | With in-laws | Partner employed | No |
| 14 | 18 | 14 | Grade 6 | 4 | With spouse | NO | No |
| 15 | 19 | 14 | Grade 7 | 5 | With spouse | Family business | No |

Thematic Findings

Three themes and nine subthemes emerged from the analysis. The major themes were sexual control, rape and forced marriage. The subthemes were merged under the major themes. Table 2 shows the themes and subthemes.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|-----------------|--|
| Sexual control | Cultural expectations Respect of ones' vows Ownership |
| Forced marriage | Economic gain Denial of childhood Lack of independence(decision-making and finances) |
| Rape | Forced sex Insensitivity to sexual needs Assault |

Sexual Control

The participants mentioned sexual control as a theme that defines the dynamics of their marriage.

Ten out of the 15 participants believed that having sex with your spouse at the time and place he wants is a cultural expectation. He bought the right to have sexual control by paying the bride price. Participants in the extracts below best captured this:

I have been told during my marital counselling that I should never refuse my husband coital relationship, my body is now his and so I never refuse him even if I do not want

to have sex at the time. It is what is expected of me. (19-year-old with 5 years in marriage)

He chooses when and how we must have sex even doing things that I may not like [looks down] I have to comply it is his right. (15-year-old with 2 years in marriage)

Respect for one's vows was also a subtheme under sexual control. In this subtheme, the participants seem to think that being controlled is part of the vows they have undertaken. When the researcher explored what it is they said when they took their vows, they mentioned, "honour and obey" as a reflection of sexual control. One of the participants said this about the respect of one's vows:

I will not think of refusing him, even if I am menstruating I promised that I will respect him all the time, he is now my father, and I have to listen to him. (17-year-old with 2 years in marriage)

When there was a follow-up question on whether the husband also listens to her, the participant laughed and said:

Men are the ones that control when to have sex, is part of our culture. Asking for sex will show him that I do not have any manners. I cannot do it; it is never done in our culture, it is taboo. Even if I want sex, I just keep quiet and suffer in silence. I have never tried to ask for sex from my husband. (17-year-old with 2 years in marriage)

Other participants expressed these sentiments as well. It was a general feeling that they are being owned by their spouses with the spousal word being final. This was a pattern throughout the interviews.

Forced Marriage

Marriage before the age of 18 is a global phenomenon that ultimately becomes a social problem because of their consequences. Ten of the 15 adolescents were married off at the tender age of 14 years. Many of them said their parents give their children off to rich adult males for economic gain. They pointed out as follows:

I come from a very poor family. Being asked to marry my husband was good for my family because his family paid a good dowry and promised to continue supporting my parents financially. (18-year-old with 4 years in marriage)

One of the respondent said she was given out in marriage because of her immoral act of falling pregnant out of wedlock:

I am not sure because now I regret getting pregnant and being forced to get married because I was pregnant. I tried to resist, but I was told that he is the only one that can support me and his baby, I was left with no choice but to marry him. (19-year-old with 5 years in marriage)

Some of the girls are now regretting ever marrying young and having no career. After getting married, their husbands no longer relate to them as when they did before marriage. This was espoused by the following quotes:

Life was easier before we got married. Marriage changed even the way we relate to each other.

You know, he used to come to our place and without my parents looking he will give me \$10. Now he is the one who buys even my sanitary pads and does not give me anything. I once asked him and he said he takes care of my needs. (19-year-old with 4 years in marriage)

Another challenge raised by the participants in this study is the lack of independence in decision-making. Most of these married adolescent girls stay with their in-laws because they are still too young to have homes of their own. They expressed the lack of freedom in decision-making on things like meals and bedtime. One of the participants felt it is just too much control by the in-laws that she does not feel married to her husband at all. She showed some bitterness but at the same time needing family support:

While I need my in-laws for support, I feel oppressed because I cannot decide when to go to bed, what to eat or just how to relate to my husband. I hope to have my own home so that we can better manage our marriage because as of now, we depend too much on other people's decisions. I feel that I am too much under the control of my in-laws, I never anticipated this before getting married, it seems I married the whole family. (19-year-old with 4 years in marriage)

Some of the girls do not have any source of income as most of them did not finish school, are not employed and are not enrolled in any vocational training. Some of them cannot even afford to buy sanitary wear. One participant puts it this way:

I have no money to buy sanitary wear and I use pieces of cloth which I later wash and pack though it's not really a good thing to do. (18-year-old with 4 years in marriage)

Rape

In this study, about 8 of the 15 adolescents had been subjected to forced sex by their husbands. Some of the participants expressed that their husbands do not consider their needs and their preparedness to have sex.

At times my husband use force to have sex with me, once he wants sex, he does not listen to excuses. (17-year-old with 3 years in marriage)

I didn't feel like having sex at that time, but he didn't listen to me and he forcefully did it. Even when am sick, he will have his way. (15-year-old with 2 years in marriage)

One of the adolescents was beaten for refusing sex, and some were threaten with divorce while others went through physical and emotional harassment:

My husband sometime threatens me ..., that he would not come to me anymore, if I refuse sex ... I am afraid of losing him to other women.

I feel bad when he forces me, but I don't want him to be angry with me; he can be aggressive when he is angry. (16-year-old with 2 years in marriage)

Discussion

This study highlights the patterns and dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents. The study reveals a culture of male control over sex in the adolescent marriage. The woman does not have any right regarding how and when to have sex with the husband and it is also morally wrong to refuse or demand sex herself. According to Biti (2016) and Kheswa and Hoho (2014), child brides expressed a lack of sexual control as sexual abuse and the lack of decision-making in sexual issues such as submission and inactive participation (Jesmin 2015). The married adolescent girl becomes a subject of the husband's sexual satisfaction. Most of the adolescents are in abusive marriages in which they are either beaten for refusing their husband's sexual advances, or threatened with abandonment or divorce for demanding dignified treatment from their spouses.

Child marriage is an act that endorses behaviours that promote gender inequality (Nasrullah et al. 2017). For instance, it is documented that women who marry early justify wife beating and find their husbands more domineering than those who marry later in life (Muyengwa 2014; Nasrullah et al. 2017). The findings from this study also show that the majority of the adolescents were married under 14 years of age despite Section 78 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 that states that a marriage with a younger girl should not be consummated until she is 18 years old (Mira 2015). These marriages were seen as a cultural expectation and girls that are married have pride and take marriage as an achievement. Some of the adolescents were given out in marriage for economic gain and a few were married out to save the family from the shame of sexual immorality and unwanted pregnancy out of wedlock. According to the married adolescent girls, getting married is an important aspect of their life. Should a girl reach the age of 18 years without being married, the aunts will start questioning why she cannot get a husband to marry her.

The cultural practice of early child marriage is common all over Africa, it was reported in other studies that girls are encouraged to marry immediately after their initiation or as soon as they start menstruating to prevent unwanted pregnancies and having children out of wedlock (Annan-Yao 2002; Hampton 2010). Most of the adolescents in the current study claimed not to have a choice in their marriage process, they were forced into the marriage when they were not physically, morally, psychologically and emotionally mature for such responsibilities. Varied reasons have

been accorded to forced marriage such as the preservation of girls' virginities in order to honour their families and their future husbands and the avoidance of immorality, which can happen through premarital sex if girls are not married off early enough (Annan-Yao 2002; Sibanda 2011).

Some studies on child marriages establish the issue of an adolescent being married because of pregnancy as the girl would still be sent away from home to the man who impregnated her (Mulumeoderhwa 2016; Tenkorang 2019). The most striking and disturbing trend in this study was the fact that some of the girls were married for financial benefit. This new aberration and undignified practice is fast spreading across the African continent and needs a collective effort to put an end to it. Poverty has become the major contributing factor of teenager marriages in Africa; many parents and families now use their daughters as resources to break away from poverty and economic depression, their daughters become legal tenders to pay debts or to obtain goods (Tenkorang 2019). Children who marry before turning 18 years are more vulnerable to physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional violence (Erulkar 2013; Sedziafa and Tenkorang 2016). The participants in this current study shared their experiences of forced sex, insensitivity to sexual needs and assault from their respective husbands at various stages of their marriages. A study in Ghana confirms the husband-domineering nature over the woman especially in patrilineal societies (Asiedu 2016). This domineering nature has been linked to sexual violence, marital abuse, forced sex assault and other abusive behaviour (Ackah 2012).

Another major finding of this study is the married adolescents' lack of financial independence in the marriage. Most of the girls were married before they could finish their education or acquire vocational training to serve as a means of personal income, hence they depend solely on the husband or the family for financial sustenance. This study confirms what previous studies found that the lack of financial freedom for married adolescent girls was due to the lack of careers. Marriage essentially cuts off education and career opportunities for the girls (Bryman and Becker 2012; Nasrullah, Zakar, and Zakar 2014). The majority of child brides are heavily dependent on their male spouses and sometimes their extended family networks (Batha 2015). Another challenge of these marriages is the adolescent girls' lack of autonomy and a culture of suffering in silence to endure the emotional distress. The above point is in line with previous reports that the reason for early marriages is to place the girl under male control (Hampton 2010). Another study reports that younger girls married to older men are unable to express themselves (Mulumeoderhwa 2016). The husband becomes the protector (Batha 2015). Although the Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013 condemns marriage before 18 years (Mira 2015), the marriage bill is still yet to be debated and passed as law in Parliament, which makes it very difficult to charge and punish offenders (Moyo 2018). The implication of this is seen in the current study as more girls will be pushed into child marriages at their prime ages of education, vocational training, and before they are physically, psychologically and financially ready for marital responsibilities.

Conclusion

The study confirms what is already known in literature that young age at marriage is correlated with sexual violence. The study supports the notion that sex education should be introduced at earlier grades before adolescents' transit into adulthood and before they reach menarche. This would empower them to make well-informed decisions. The study further recommends that the governments enact marriage laws that include adolescents so that they could serve as a safety net for the adolescents. The study further raises areas of new research, such as the views of men married to the adolescents on their understanding of the adolescents' sexual and reproductive health needs. Furthermore, another study can be carried out among traditional and religious leaders to assess their knowledge of statutory laws on child marriages versus culture.

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