

“*Kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu*”: In-school Adolescent Girls’ Experiences of *Umqasho* and Transactional Sex in a Rural Sub-District of Northern KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

This study examined the intersecting impact of structural inequalities and transactional sex on in-school adolescent girls’ risk of pregnancy and poor educational outcomes in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. In this article, we understand structural inequalities as providing a basis for transactional relationships between adolescent girls and older men. Participatory visual research methods were employed with 18- and 19-year-old girls and boys to examine multiple systems of oppression and inequalities experienced by in-school rural adolescent girls, focusing particularly on their vulnerability to transactional sex, pregnancy and poor educational outcomes. In this context, moralising discourses on transactional sexual relationships are unhelpful if structural barriers placing girls at risk are not addressed.

Keywords: in-school adolescent girls; structural inequality; transactional sex; health and educational outcomes; South Africa

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Introduction

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Its structural inequalities are reflected in unequal distribution of power and resources along parameters of race, social class, gender and geographic location (Reddy and Moletsane 2009; The World Bank 2022). For many rural South African communities, high levels of inequality are highlighted in areas such as access to education, quality healthcare services, infrastructure and poverty. For girls and women, inequalities are further exacerbated by unequal gender norms. In a rural community of northern KwaZulu-Natal, where the study analysed in this article was conducted, schools have limited resources, infrastructure and boarding facilities, compelling many adolescents to live and fend for themselves in rented lodgings (*umqasho*). Thus, in efforts to improve prospects of attaining a good matric (high school exiting certificate), adolescent girls and boys leave their families to live closer to well-performing high schools. Living in rented lodgings in close proximity to schools is considered advantageous as committed educators conduct additional classes during after-school hours to ensure the success of their students in the national matric examinations. However, the displacement of adolescents from their families brings certain vulnerabilities as they seek to survive in their new environment. Against the backdrop of economic deprivation, older men become the support system that secures in-school adolescent girls' economic and social survival. For girls, gender power disparities in transactional relationships impact sexual and reproductive decision-making (Hunter 2002). The girls' inability to negotiate safe sexual practices within transactional relationships increases their risk of pregnancies and contracting sexually transmitted diseases. In this study, we use the term "adolescents" to refer to girls and boys between the ages of 15 and 19 years, consistent with the World Health Organization's definition of late adolescence (WHO and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2017).

Understanding Transactional Sex

Stoebenau et al. (2016) define transactional sex as non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits. In transactional sexual relationships, the exchange of gifts, money or other benefits occurs in complex romantic relationships, often with men as providers and girls or women as beneficiaries. However, transactional relationships where women fulfil the provider role and men are recipients also exist (Brouard and Crewe 2012; Kuate-Defo 2004; Masenya 2017). With this broad understanding, transactional sexual relationships may be age-disparate, intergenerational and may even occur among partners of similar ages (Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Stoebenau et al. 2016). In a cross-sectional survey conducted in six districts in South Africa among adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 years, 11.2% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years reported engaging in transactional sex (oral, anal and vaginal sex) with the expectation of receiving money or goods (Duby et al. 2021). Much concern about transactional sex stems from the difficulty to negotiate safe sexual practices and the well-documented link to HIV infection and gender-based violence (Dellar, Dlamini, and

Karim 2015; Dunkle et al. 2004; Dunkle et al. 2007; Gregson et al. 2002; Jewkes et al. 2001; Kelly et al. 2003; Pettifor et al. 2005; Wamoyi et al. 2016). Girls who engage in transactional sexual relationships are also 30% more likely to become pregnant (Austrian et al. 2019). While considerable similarities exist, scholars conceptually distinguish transactional sex from commercial sex work. In the latter, the price is negotiated more explicitly, and sexual exchange and remuneration are often immediate. Furthermore, sex workers and their clients do not construct themselves along romantic notions ascribed to transactional relationships (Hunter 2002; Stoebenau et al. 2016). However, these distinctions can be murky as some transactional sexual relationships can be as short term as sex work, with the sole motivation being financial gain (Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Factors Influencing Transactional Sex—A Paradigmatic Account

Social science literature offers some understandings on factors influencing girls' and young women's (aged 15–24 years) engagement in transactional relationships. In their review of studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, Stoebenau et al. (2016) conceive the motives and practice of transactional sex along three paradigms. These are 1) sex for basic needs, 2) sex for improved social status, and 3) sex and material expression of love, with three continua—deprivation, women's agency, and the instrumentality of sex, across these paradigms. The sex for basic needs or “sex for subsistence” (Hunter 2002) paradigm positions girls and women as vulnerable victims of structural inequalities and gendered poverty. Women's economic dependence on men compels them to resort to transactional sex for survival. The sex for improved social status paradigm describes transactional sex that occurs against the backdrop of rising economic inequality and a high value on consumerism (Leclerc-Madlala 2003). In this paradigm, girls and women are positioned as sexual agents who exploit their partners for economic and social mobility (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001). However, with women's relative economic deprivation, some scholars suggest that women tend to operate as both agent and victim in this paradigm (Brouard and Crewe 2012; Stoebenau et al. 2016).

The sex and material expressions of love paradigm draws attention to the exchange of gifts and material goods in emotionally intimate relationships. Societal norms ascribe men the role of provider in romantic and marital relationships, and men assume the right to sex by virtue of being providers (Hunter 2002; Jewkes et al. 2012). Transactional sex can be an extension of that norm. Dunkle et al. (2007) argue for a distinction between transactional sexual relationships and love relationships that involve the exchange of gifts. For them, the latter involves the exchange of gifts as material or monetary transfers whose primary intention is to express affection in a relationship. They define transactional exchanges as primarily motivated (from the giver's side) by a desire to secure sexual access, and (from the receiver's side) to generate resources (Dunkle et al. 2007). For these scholars, this distinction between gifts and transactions is critical, as the former often form an important expression of care in romantic relationships and marriage, and yet may not be the underlying motivation for sexual relations therein

(Dunkle et al. 2007; Hunter 2002; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004). However, transactional relationships are complex, and there might be multiple motivations that cannot be reduced to fit these paradigms.

The role structural inequalities play in contributing to transactional sex cannot be underestimated, particularly in resource-constrained settings. For example, in post-conflict Liberia, in-school adolescent girls aged 13–19 years engaged in transactional sexual relationships with adult men who could provide cash, food, clothing, Western commodities, and school fees (Atwood et al. 2011). The inter-relationship between transactional sex and adolescent pregnancy has also been described in resource-constrained settings. A study conducted in Cape Town townships and informal settlements found that 21.1% of pregnant adolescent girls reported having sex for money or gifts (Jewkes et al. 2001). Similarly, 21% of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics in Soweto reported engaging in transactional sex for material gain (Dunkle et al. 2004). Brouard and Crewe (2012) suggest that it is socio-economic inequality and consumerism, exacerbated by unequal gender norms that drive sex between young women and older men. For them, only when conditions that make adolescent girls and young women vulnerable to transactional relationships are addressed can young women not seek financial security in exchange for sex (Brouard and Crewe 2012). Yet girls and young women may not see themselves as victims in transactional relationships as they take on emphasised or pariah femininity (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007).

Theoretical Underpinning: Intersectionality

This article seeks to highlight the intersecting impacts of structural inequalities and transactional sex on adolescent girls' risks of pregnancy and poor educational outcomes in a rural community of northern KwaZulu-Natal. We use intersectionality as an analytical tool to examine how intersecting power relations across parameters of race, class, gender and age influence adolescent girls (Collins and Bilge 2020). Intersectionality is the brainchild of feminist, legal scholar and critical race theorist, Kimberly Crenshaw, who developed the concept in 1989 to explain how race, class and gender intersect to oppress African American women's lives (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality supports the idea that people experience life (and sometimes discrimination) based on their different identities and helps to bring understanding to multiple and interrelated forms of inequalities or systems of oppression that simultaneously impact individual lives, institutions and communities (Collins 2015). Thus, discrimination and oppression can happen on multiple levels based on race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity and age concurrently, as these categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather compound themselves in individual lives (Collins and Bilge 2020). In framing social problems through the prism of intersectionality, we gain a deeper understanding of how problems play out in society and people's lives.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at three primary healthcare clinics and a local high school in Jozini municipality, a rural sub-district of uMkhanyakude district. UMkhanyakude district is one of the most socio-economically deprived districts in South Africa, with 90% of the average income received from social grants (Stats SA 2016). Statistics South Africa's *Community Survey 2016* (Stats SA 2016) depicts uMkhanyakude's population as youthful, with 50.7% (349 279) of the population younger than 18 years, which is approximately 20% higher than the provincial demographic profile. Pregnancies and childbearing remain high among adolescent girls in KwaZulu-Natal, with the province demonstrating an in-facility delivery rate of 16.3% among adolescent girls aged 10–19 years, well above the national average of 13.2% (Massyn et al. 2020, 11). In 2019, 20.1% of births in uMkhanyakude district occurred among adolescent girls aged 10–19 years (Massyn et al. 2020, 15). Relevant to this article is data from the South African national birth registry, which demonstrates that KwaZulu-Natal had the highest percentage of much older partners fathering children born to adolescent mothers (Mkwanzani 2017). This reflects the prevalence of intergenerational relationships and the contribution older men make to high fertility rates among adolescent girls in KwaZulu-Natal.

Methodology

This study is located within the critical research paradigm and is framed within a larger research question, which seeks to understand the dynamics of adolescent fertility in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. Informed by the critical paradigm, feminist methodology was employed to address the research question. Feminist methodology explicitly engages in social research on gendered lives in the hope of transforming unjust gender relations (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Participatory visual research methods (PVMs) were used to generate and analyse data with participants. PVM entails the production and interpretation of images and includes visual, arts-based methods such as photo-voice, drawings and cellphilm-making (Prosser 2007). PVMs are deemed more suitable when working with young people or vulnerable populations and with sensitive topics where participants may find it difficult to express their ideas verbally (Lomax 2012).

Participant Selection

Participant selection entailed purposive sampling of 18- and 19-year-old adolescents attending a primary healthcare (PHC) facility and high school in Jozini municipality. Nine adolescent girls presenting for antenatal care, adolescent and youth friendly services, and baby wellness clinic were recruited from the PHC facility through the use of research posters. Twelve adolescent girls and 10 adolescent boys were recruited from the Grade 12 Life Orientation class at a local high school. Criteria for participating in the study included: adolescent boys and girls who are 18–19 years old, interested in issues of adolescent sexuality and fertility, keen to use visual tools to share their

perspectives, and willingness to participate in focus group discussions. Participant selection and data generation occurred between August 2019 and June 2021.

Data Generation¹

Two focus group discussions were initially conducted at the local PHC facility with nine adolescent girls. During these focus group discussions, the authors became aware of the dynamics of rented lodgings (*umqasho*) for the purpose of accessing schooling, and its potential impact on in-school adolescent girls. To gain an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon, in subsequent data-generation sessions, the research team engaged in-school adolescents in a series of participatory visual methods workshops that took place over a four-week period. During these workshops, data generation utilised two participatory visual research methods: drawings and cellphilms. Drawings are an effective participatory visual method used widely in community-based research and psychology, particularly with children, adolescents and adults who battle expressing themselves in language or have limited literacy skills (Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane 2018). Drawings facilitate the expression of one's ideas, experiences, and communicate conscious and unconscious issues (Mitchell et al. 2011). Cellphilms, pioneered by Dockney and Tomaselli (2009), where participants use cellphones to create short films, were also used to generate data. Cellphilms are an innovative participatory visual methodology used in community-based research for social change and activism (MacEntee, Burkholder, and Schwab-Cartas 2016).

Six workshop sessions, lasting two to three hours each, took place in classrooms at the local high school. Participants were separated into mixed-sex groups and introduced to the idea of drawings and cellphilm-making (using materials and cellphones provided by the research team). Visual artefacts (drawings and cellphilms) were used as entry points into focus group discussions (see Table 1). Participatory visual methods workshop sessions and focus group discussions were conducted in isiZulu, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim in isiZulu.

¹ The first author, aided by a male and female isiZulu-speaking research assistants, was responsible for data generation and interactions with participants. Co-authors were involved in the third phase of data analysis and editing the manuscript.

Table 1: The drawing and cellphilm-making process

Drawings:	The drawing-making process involved participants working on their own within a group setting.
Part 1	Researchers provided the prompt: <i>Make a drawing that helps us understand the life of adolescents living in rented lodgings (emqashweni) in your community.</i> Participants were given 15 minutes to generate their individual drawings and hang them up as part of a mini exhibition.
Part 2	The group gathered around the exhibition, and each participant explained and reflected on their drawing.
Part 3	Researchers and other participants were allowed to ask questions regarding the drawing and explanations given.
Part 4	Focus group discussions were facilitated using drawings as a point of departure.
Cellphilms:	Participants worked in groups to role play and video-record a particular issue they sought to highlight based on the prompt given.
Part 1	Researchers provided the prompt: <i>Create a 2–3 minute film (cellphilm) that helps us understand the life of adolescents living in rented lodgings (emqashweni) in your community.</i> Prior to filming, a discussion took place among participants regarding the prompt given (brainstorming).
Part 2	Participants were given 30 minutes to develop their cellphilms. Each group planned and created a storyboard for the short film. The storyboard was a planning device that participants used to discuss their storyline and the sequence of their shots.
Part 3	Participants were given 30 minutes to film their story, and this took place within the research context.
Part 4	Each group screened their cellphilm to the whole group of research participants and the research team, and reflected on what inspired them to create their particular film.
Part 5	The research team and other participants were allowed to comment and ask questions about ideas and insights emerging from the cellphilms and film-makers' explanations about the film, with the researcher facilitating the discussion.

Data Analysis

The critical paradigm underpinned the analysis of the arts and digital artefacts generated from drawings and cellphilms data. In keeping with qualitative participatory enquiry, data analysis was an ongoing process that commenced during data generation. Following the convention of participatory research, drawings and cellphilms were analysed first by the participants who made them. This involved writing a caption for the drawing and verbally explaining their own drawing or cellphilm to the group. The second phase of analysis involved the audience (other participants) commenting and enquiring about the ideas emerging from drawings or cellphilms, and the creators' explanations of them. In the third phase of data analysis, the researcher (first author)

and the research supervisors (co-authors) analysed the drawings and cellphilms and the possible ideas that were being communicated. Through this iterative process, understandings emerging from the analysis were confirmed with the participants to assess whether true meanings of their ideas have been captured. Furthermore, in the analysis of cellphilms, the short films were transcribed in the form of a play. These were read and themes emanating from the video-making process were identified. Drawings and cellphilms were also used as prompts for focus group discussions with participants to gain deeper insights of emerging ideas, allowing for further analyses to take place.

A three-step process was employed to manually analyse data from the focus group discussions. Firstly, transcripts from the focus group discussion were read in IsiZulu, and major themes and sub-themes were identified through the development of a coding system by the researcher (first author). Secondly, a comparison between the different themes was done, which were further grouped into coherent categories. Lastly, the iterative nature of the analytic process involved participants in validating data through member checking.

Findings

This article examined rural adolescents' experiences of living in rented lodgings (*emqashweni*) in order to access schooling in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Participants in this study articulated their understandings of life in rented lodgings and the consequence thereof for in-school adolescent girls. Four major themes were identified from the data: 1) transactional sex—the impact of structural inequalities, 2) transactional sex for basic needs and social mobility, 3) gender power disparities—“*Kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu,*” and 4) adverse health and educational outcomes.

Transactional Sex—The Impact of Structural Inequalities

In the context of limited educational and boarding facilities, rural adolescent girls pursuing a high school education leave their families to live in rented lodgings close to high schools. Adolescents living in rented lodgings incur additional expenses for already economically strained households. Thus, to reduce living expenses, it is common for three or four adolescent girls to share a room and split the boarding fee of R750–R900 (50–60 USD) per month. Even with this strategy, entering into a relationship with an older man offers far more than what struggling families can afford. In efforts to meet basic living expenses such as food, a bed, a fridge and boarding fee, adolescent girls become romantically involved with much older men (referred to as “blessers”). As 18-year-old Thandi explained:

We don't date children our own age, old men come and seduce us with money. Blessers tell you they will do everything for you. When you look around your rented room there is nothing! I don't have a bed—I sleep on the floor; I don't have a fridge; I carry a small Alcatel whereas my friends who came here a long time ago have iPhones and Samsungs. You end up going out with this old man because he has promised you many things they cannot do for you at home. (Thandi)

According to participants, transactional relationships are common among in-school adolescent girls and men in their 30s, or much older men with families, or government workers (educators, traffic police officers, municipal officials and healthcare workers) who intentionally seek out transactional relationships with adolescent girls. In government workers, adolescents identified an opportunity to tap into a stable, consistent income. This was confirmed during a focus group discussion where participants indicated the importance of clinging to a partner with a persal number, which is the central Personal and Salary System (PERSAL) identifier used for the administration of the public service payroll.

Nonto: Government workers are the ones who come with money.

Participants in unison: They say, "You must never let go of someone with a persal number!"

Researcher: How so?

Nonto: Because they are like ATMs and have a stable income.

According to 18-year-old Musa, men hold and garner power in transactional relationships through their socio-economic position and are conscious that the girl cannot survive without them. Thus, older men engage in transactional relationships to attain control of a girl, who lacks resources and power in the relationship due to her need to survive. Musa explains:

If you are dating an older man, his aim is to control you. If he says, "jump," you will ask, "How high?" He knows that you have nothing, so what will you gain if you leave him? You can't survive without him. (Musa)

In addition to socio-economic and gender inequalities, Musa further holds cultural practices and religion liable for transactional relationships between girls and older men in this community. His argument is, if Zulu culture permits traditional leaders to take girls or virgin maidens as wives at the Reed Dance,² other men will feel entitled to do the same. Musa elaborates:

Sometimes it is culture because some men are influenced by practices of traditional leaders at the Reed Dance, where traditional leaders can take girls and young women as wives. If traditional leaders and prominent men are allowed to choose young girls, then

² The Reed Dance (*Umkhosi woMhlanga*) is an annual traditional ceremony hosted by the Zulu King at the royal palace in Nongoma, KwaZulu-Natal. During the four-day event, thousands of virgin maidens attend from various communities of KwaZulu-Natal and are taught about appropriate behaviour, Zulu culture and common social issues such as preventing adolescent pregnancies and HIV/AIDS. The main motive of the Zulu Reed Dance is to preserve girls' virginity and promote abstinence from sexual activity until marriage. Attending the Reed Dance is a great honour and source of pride for young women, their families and communities. This celebration is marked by a jubilant procession of virgin maidens singing and dancing bare-breasted before the king and other traditional leaders. Each maiden carries a long reed cut by the riverbed, symbolic of a connection to the original Zulu ancestor who emerged from a reed bed. According to Zulu tradition, if a young woman takes part in the Reed Dance and she is not a virgin, her reed will break, humiliating her and her family.

why not us ordinary men? And churches such as Shembe, they also permit much older men to take girls and young women as wives. (Musa)

This theme highlights the influence of structural inequalities on transactional relationships between adolescent girls and older men. In a context of limited resources, poverty, and gender inequality, older men leverage their socio-economic and gender-privileged position to enter into transactional relationships with in-school adolescent girls. This is compounded by certain cultural and religious practices that permit intergenerational relationships.

Transactional Sex for Basic Needs and Social Mobility

Transactional relationships in this study seem to initially be motivated by survival; however, they rapidly become a means for social mobility and attaining consumer goods. Older male partners who provide rent money and groceries also bought cellphones, designer clothing, picked her up in a fancy car, and drove her to hotels and parties. For one participant, the improved social status among peers concealed poverty-induced shame. For her, the social experience of poverty reflects negatively not only on her, but her family as well. The need to overcome economic deprivation and to be socially accepted by peers seems to outweigh the perceived risk of pregnancy and HIV infection associated with dating older men. According to 19-year-old Akhona:

For it to seem as if pregnancies are increasing and we end up getting diseases, we are trying to get something to eat, to wear, to look like other people. We are trying to hide our family's shame. (Akhona)

Cognisant of the benefits of transactional relationships, some girls find it difficult to resist blessers and avoid dating boys their age. For 19-year-old Thobeka, it seemed foolish for an adolescent girl to date a high school boy who has very little to offer. She explained her reasoning as follows:

A student has one rand, you go and buy one vetkoek [*igwinya*] which you still have to share. What is your problem anyway? (Thobeka)

With three or four girls sharing a rented room, adolescent girls with experience in dating older men influence roommates to initiate transactional relationships. This enables each girl to contribute to living expenses and social ascent of the collective. Despite the exploitative nature of transactional relationships, men who are providers are constructed as “good” men. As 19-year-old Nonku, an adolescent mother who has a child with a much older man articulated:

When we live in rented rooms, let's say I am the one who has a good man, he brings us food and other girls end up complaining that your family does not give you money. You also have to get someone who will bring us food and things. So I end up agreeing to date him. (Nonku)

It is common for adolescent girls to meet blessers at the mall, parties or via friends. Based on a drawing she generated (Figure 1 below), 18-year-old Nonto expanded on this during the description of her drawing:

We live *emqashweni* and come from different families. People here wear nice clothes and you envy them. One day you meet this older man at the mall who starts buying you things. You are happy, thinking you found love. He buys you clothes and food. When he calls you to come with your friends there is no way you say no because he does everything for you. You go to MJaiks in his Polo. There you dance, drink Flying Fish, there is even a braai. You are enjoying, but you can never drink a man's alcohol and it ends there. At taverns you find blessers that spike your drink. By the time you wake up that man has run away; you are now left pregnant and heartbroken. (Nonto)

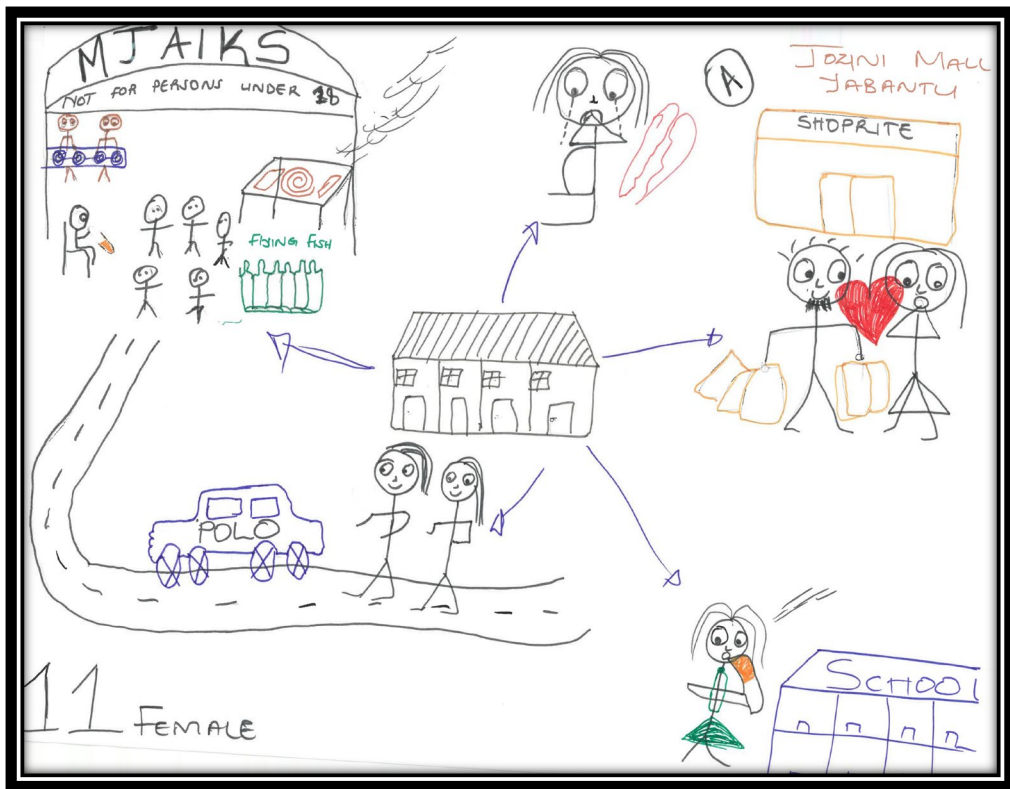


Figure 1: Meeting blessers

Gender Power Disparities—“*Kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu!*”

Transactional relationships in this study were conditional on the adolescent girl providing penetrative vaginal sex. This is premised on the notion that, if a man is going to provide “things,” he is going to want sex in return. In Figure 1 above, Nonto alludes to this expectation when a girl drinks alcohol purchased by her male suitor, and to the use of a date-rape drug to ensure sex takes place despite the girl being inebriated. Eighteen-year-old Musa explained the nature of the exchange with the phrase “*Kudliwa*

imali, kudliwe umuntu!” (the direct translation of which is “We spend the money, we devour the person!”). Musa elaborated:

Kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu! While at the mall, he buys her food and clothes. So, at that moment they are spending his money, and as she spends his money he is expecting sex in return. So now it’s time to devour the person. (Musa)

Thembi spoke of an older man who pursued her at the age of 16 when she started living *emqashweni*. He romanced her, bought her gifts, and even took her to a hotel in Durban where they had their first sexual encounter. Below she gives an account of how her blesser removed a condom during sexual intercourse without her consent.

When I got here I met an older man with money. He kept calling, so I ended up liking him. We started dating and he bought me a phone, clothes and food. He even booked us into a hotel in Durban, and that is where we started having sex. I asked him to use protection, he refused. I then refused to have sex with him, then he agreed. I asked him whether he knew his status. He said he knew it very well—he was negative and would have used protection if he did not trust me. I disagreed with that, and while we were having sex, he removed the condom. That really upset me and I kept thinking what if I have HIV? (Thembi)

While non-consensual condom removal is a form of sexual violence, Thembi found it difficult to report her blesser as he expected absolute loyalty from her. Unequal distribution of power in transactional relationships in this theme can succinctly be captured by the phrase “*Kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu*,” encapsulating men’s assumed right to sex by virtue of being providers.

Adverse Health and Educational Outcomes

Adolescent girls in this study identified sexual violence, condomless sex resulting in HIV infection and/or pregnancy, and poor school performance as disadvantages of transactional relationships. There was a common understanding among adolescent girls that blessers do not use condoms during sex. The myth that having penetrative vaginal sex with a virgin girl cures HIV infection is still reportedly prevalent in this community and may account for the lack of condom use among blessers. As participants elaborated during a focus group discussion:

Ndo: The advantage [of transactional relationships] is that you get all you want anytime, like money, clothes, junk food, etcetera. The disadvantage is that he may be sick, by the time it comes to sex he won’t say, “let’s use protection.”

Researcher: Why do they not want to use condoms?

Nonto: They believe that HIV is cured by having sex with a virgin.

In keeping with unequal gender power dynamics, sexual violence and unsafe sexual practices in transactional relationships, 19-year-old Bandile, 18-year-old Khoni, 19-year-old Sipho and 18-year-old Sbongile designed a storyboard, a pictorial illustration of a *blesser* sexually assaulting an adolescent girl living *emqashweni*.

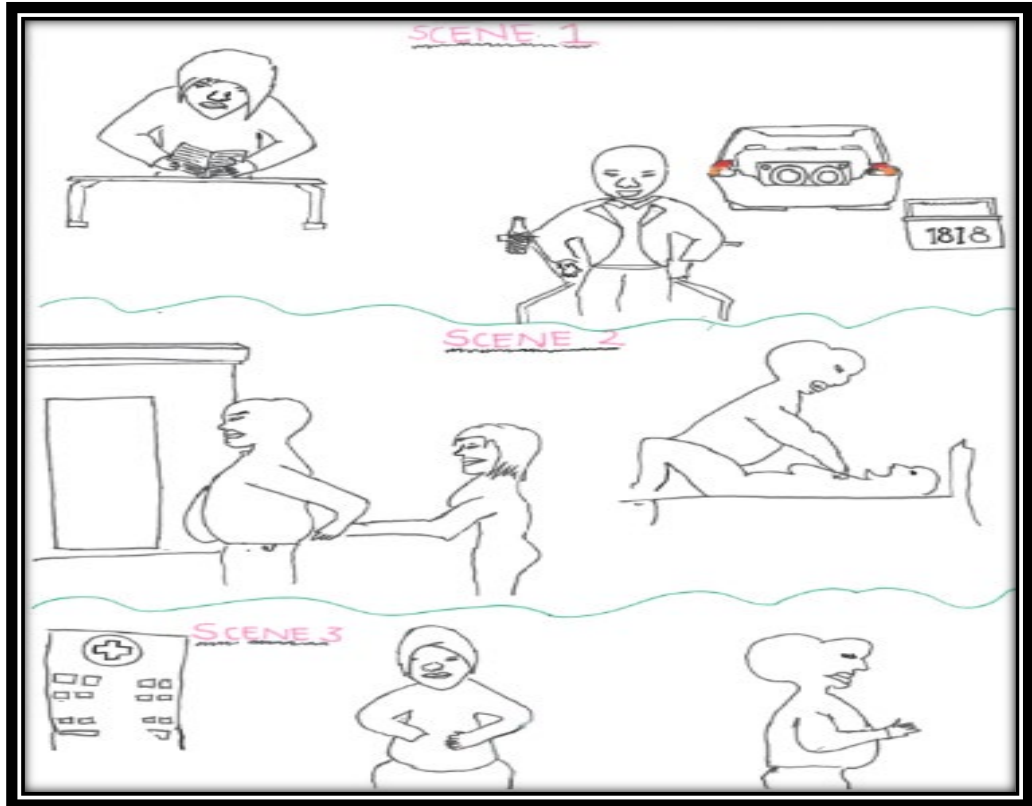


Figure 2: Storyboard—Life of adolescent girls living *emqashweni*

Table 2: Description of the storyboard on life *emqashweni*

Scene 1	This is life <i>emqashweni</i> . <i>Emqashweni</i> you try to study and people are partying and drinking alcohol. It is not easy because you have friends, and they influence one another. So this girl in scene 1 likes to study, but she has a friend who loves to party and is dating an older man who brings a friend so they can all have fun together.
Scene 2	The girl who was into her studies is now dating an older man. We see him with a big tummy, which is how we know he is a blesser. We see him holding the girl's hand and they go inside the room. When they get into the room we see him on top of her, but the girl is refusing because she is still a virgin and makes it difficult for him, but he presses her down.
Scene 3	We see her coming back from the clinic with a big tummy (pregnant) and the blesser does not want anything to do with her since she is pregnant, and runs away.

As illustrated in the storyboard, condomless sex and sexual violence in transactional relationships may result in pregnancies. According to participants, once a girl becomes pregnant, it is common for the blesser to demand and fund an abortion. As 18-year-old Hlengiwe explained, “When you tell him you are pregnant, he offers you money to get an abortion. During that time you are so stressed and cannot focus on school.” Pregnancy or a girl’s positive HIV status signify the end of the relationship, often without financial or emotional support. The emotional toll of dealing with the consequences of transactional entanglements makes it challenging to focus on school, resulting in poor school performance. Due to economic deprivation, lack of available opportunities and a high unemployment rate among rural youth, education is high stakes in this setting. There is a common understanding among adolescents that without education, one is unlikely to succeed in life and likely to become a disappointment to parents. Figure 3 below, a drawing by 18-year-old Sne, illustrates this:

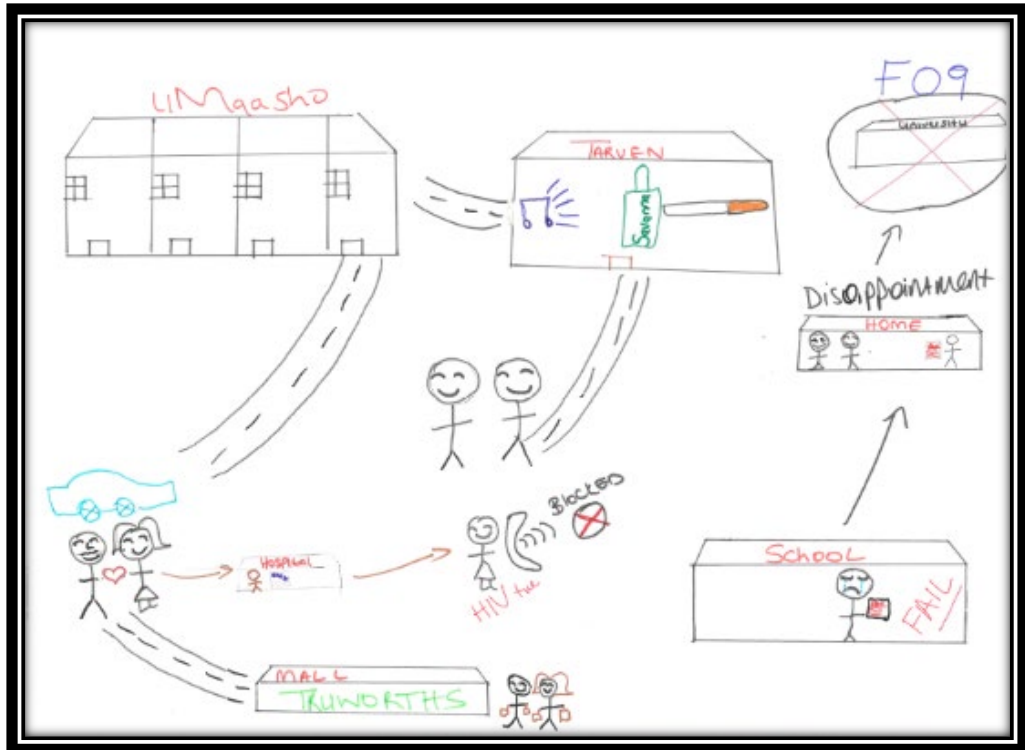


Figure 3: Life *emqashweni*

Explaining her drawing, Sne asserted the following:

Emqashweni we learn about different lifestyles and consequences of those actions. *Emqashweni* no one disciplines you. You go to the tavern and get alcohol, others are smoking and it is noisy. Others date old people who drive fancy cars, because they are after money and love material things. They go to the mall, the guy buys her things to keep her happy, but wants sex in return. After having sex with him, the girl finds out she is HIV positive. She fails to get hold of him, his number is now blocked. She wants to inform him and the partner doesn't care, he has moved on. Since she had many distractions and no time to study, she fails at school and is crying. She has to go home with a bad report written fail, and parents are disappointed because they sent her *emqashweni* to study. No university is going to accept her with her results. (Sne)

Despite the adverse health and educational outcomes of transactional relationships, some adolescents in this study perceived *umqasho* as a place of absolute freedom without parental control. The illusion of freedom where adolescents come and go as they please, with whomever, and the use of substances such as alcohol and tobacco are common. Thobeka, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, explained:

When we live *emqashweni*, you see paradise! It's a place where you do as you please. There is no one who tells you what to do. The boyfriend can come at 12 midnight, even

though you have to be at school at 06h30 in the morning. There is no one who will scold you because it is not home. When the landlord scolds you, you say, “Do you want rent money or do you want to control me?” (Thobeka, 18)

Ntandokazi (18) voiced her concerns about adolescents living by themselves *emqashweni* without adult guidance and protection. She further elaborates on premature adulting in the context of *umqasho*, where adolescents are compelled to make critical decisions that developmentally they might not be ready to make for themselves, often within unequal power structures and structural inequalities.

With no one looking after us, there is no guidance and you have to figure out how you want to live your life. Now this life is uncontrollable! It is like we are in charge of our own lives ahead of time. (Ntandokazi)

Participants in this study seldom interrogated the behaviour of blessers or held them responsible for transactional relationships. Girls often bore the blame, stigma and consequences of these relationships. However, 18-year-old Busani was the alternative voice and placed the blame for transactional relationships on the adults who pursue these alliances:

Adults who own things and are employed, they are using us. While growing up they prioritised their education, studied and succeeded. Now that they can afford it, they take you out to go drinking and are destroying you. (Busani)

Busani suggests that blessers exploit in-school adolescents by enticing them with money, gifts and alcohol while they are trying to get an education. The resulting distractions disrupt the development and future of adolescents. While they were young, blessers prioritised their own education and attained a professional qualification, which enabled them to secure employment. Blessers should accord adolescents the same opportunity to acquire an education and succeed in life.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest there are multiple intersecting forms of inequality and systems of oppression contributing to transactional relationships between adolescent girls and older men in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. With limited education and boarding facilities in the area, adolescent girls pursuing a high school education are often compelled to leave their families and live in rented lodgings (*umqasho*) close to available schools, creating a conducive environment for intergenerational transactional relationships. For adolescent girls in this study, transactional relationships are motivated by economic and social survival and ascent. The nature of the transaction dictates that men provide financial support, material goods, alcohol and trips to parties or hotels in exchange for condomless, penetrative vaginal sex, hence the phrase: *kudliwa imali, kudliwe umuntu!* (We spend the money, we devour the person!). However, with socio-economic and gender power asymmetries, as she transacts her sexual desirability in the

relationship, she loses reproductive negotiation power resulting in pregnancy, forced abortions and acquisition of HIV infection (Choudhry et al. 2015). These adverse health consequences, together with premature adulting associated with living *emqashweni*, further made it difficult for girls to focus on schooling, resulting in poor educational outcomes. We have diagrammatically presented the multiple intersecting systems of oppression and inequality contributing to transactional sex among adolescent girls in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. These intersecting oppressions in adolescent girls' lives function to sustain a complex matrix of domination and power structures (Collins 2002), while the inequalities reflect social power dynamics (Dhamoon 2011). Illustrated in Figure 4 below, the structures of domination, institutional systems and social processes intersect to impact on adolescent girls' lives and contribute to transactional sex.

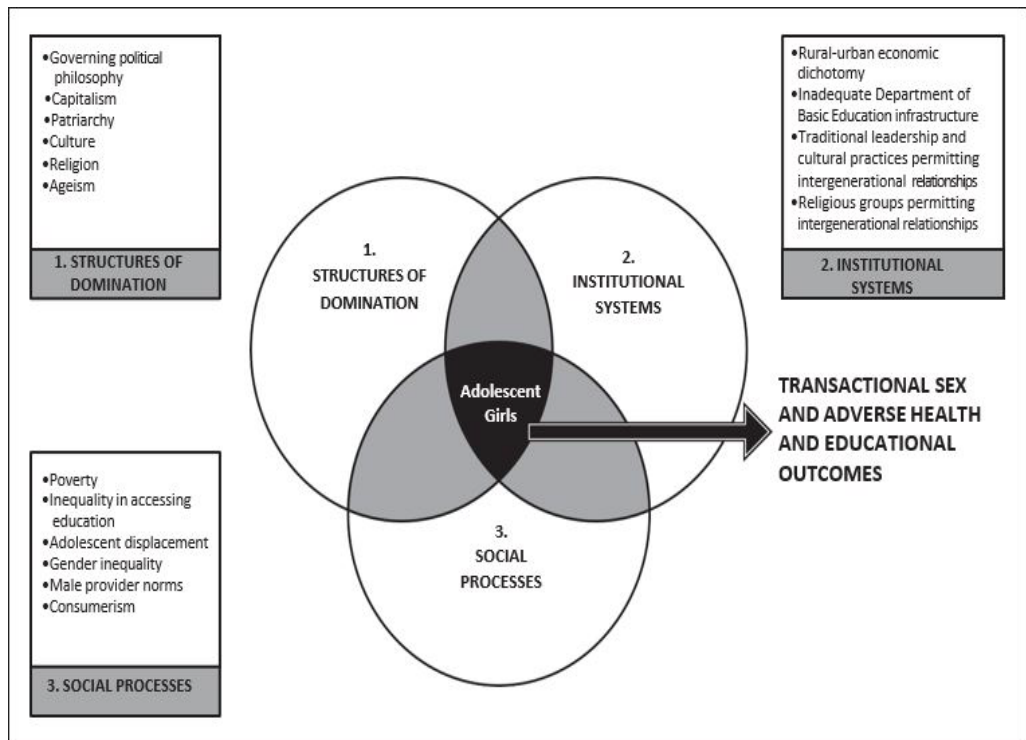


Figure 4: Multiple intersecting systems of oppression and inequality contributing to transactional sex in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. Adapted from Wesp et al. (2019)

The structures of domination (represented by governing political philosophy, patriarchy, capitalism and ageism) constitute power structures that impact institutional systems and social processes in shaping norms and sexual behaviours. Rural adolescent girls in this study experienced structural injustice rooted in the political legacies of apartheid and its capitalist endeavours, which deliberately under-resourced rural communities, resulting in the rural-urban economic dichotomy, inadequate school infrastructure and rurality-associated poverty. Even with the democratically elected government, corrupt governance has restricted optimum delivery of basic services, such as building new

schools or improving existing education facilities and infrastructure. These structural inequalities indicate that not everyone starts off in life with the same degree of opportunities (Burnett et al. 2018). This study illustrates the typical impact of socio-economic inequalities on the liberation of girls and women. In the context of poverty, how do girls resist transactional sex for basic needs, which secures shelter, food and schooling? Furthermore, economic policies in post-democratic South Africa have allowed for capitalism, free trade and open markets to thrive. With globalisation, this has resulted in a preoccupation with symbols of global beauty and success, such as branded clothing, hairstyles, cars and attending parties (Duby et al. 2021; Leclerc-Madlala 2013; Zembe et al. 2013). In keeping with these South African studies (Duby et al. 2021; Leclerc-Madlala 2013; Ranganathan et al. 2018; Zembe et al. 2013), aspirations for goods depicting a modern lifestyle promoted the consumer culture among adolescents in this community (Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Stoebenau et al. 2016). Outward appearance, carrying an expensive phone, attending parties and driving in a nice car were linked to social ascendancy and were important determining factors in peer acceptance in this study. With social ascendancy closely linked to peer approval, transactional relationships were not just a means of financial and material support, they were endorsed by peers and ensured collective survival and social mobility.

The findings of this study also illustrate the sanctioning of pariah femininity evidenced by sexual agency and narratives of financial exploitation embodied in statements such as, “Never let go of someone with a PERSAL number” and “They are like ATMs,” to ensure continued financial and material support to the benefit of adolescent girls. Schippers constructs pariah femininity as the “badass girls” who embody sexual agency, non-compliance to idealised girlhood or womanhood, toughness and a sexualised femininity (Schippers 2007). For adolescent girls in this study, the short-term gains of transactional relationships outweigh the perceived risks associated with dating blessers, and fundamentally speaks to what is valued—economic and social survival. For some girls, consumerism and social ascendancy conceal poverty-induced shame and are associated with living a life beyond what economically strained families can afford. However, it is the prevailing patriarchal attitudes and male provider norms that sanction older men’s sexual entitlement and assumed right to sexual intercourse with adolescent girls, and these men employed violence to secure sex where necessary. Men held power in transactional relationships through financial support, gifts and historical advantages afforded to them by society as the privileged gender. Brouard and Crewe (2012) note that patriarchy allows men to be better educated, employable, more financially secure and socio-culturally empowered. This is evident in the revelation by adolescents that government employees predominantly comprise blessers. In this study, patriarchy was further compounded by cultural and religious systems, which permit and enable intergenerational relationships.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate that adolescent girls in rural communities experience multiple forms of oppression and inequalities, placing them at risk of transactional sex, pregnancy, HIV infection and poor educational outcomes. These render them unable to exercise their choices regarding: 1) access to quality education, 2) when, with whom and how to engage in sexual activity, and 3) when and if to bear children. For girls to be empowered and attain financial freedom, they must be supported to pursue educational opportunities. Strategies are needed to empower in-school adolescents, build resilience in the face of difficult socio-economic contexts (Van der Heijden and Swartz 2014), and disrupt the systems of oppression and inequality that render them vulnerable to transactional relationships. Such strategies must involve communities, traditional and religious leaders, and schools in developing and implementing programmes that value and empower girls. While the interventions must be community-driven, the protection of adolescents requires multi-sectoral collaboration involving the Department of Health (DOH), the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ). This would allow for collective efforts and greater accountability (including legal prosecutions of perpetrators of statutory rape and sexual violence) aimed at securing adolescent girls' access to and success in education, good health and social outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Biomedical Research Ethics Committee, BREC Ref No. BE249/19. Gatekeeper permission was requested from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health, Bethesda Hospital Ethics Committee and the Department of Basic Education. Traditional leadership granted permission for the study to be conducted in the sub-district under their jurisdiction. Prior to data generation, participants completed and signed an informed consent form. The informed consent form outlined the participants' rights, expectations of participating in the study and that they could withdraw at any time, without negative consequences.

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