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SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN DEBARK, NORTH WEST ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To assess the prevalence, outcome and awareness of sexual violence among high school female students.

Design: A school-based cross-sectional survey.

Setting: Debark Town, north-west Ethiopia.

Subjects: Two hundred and sixteen female high school students, grade 9-11 were included for the quantitative study. For the qualitative data, 16 individuals for the focus group discussion (10 well-recognised female figures in the town and six high school students) and head of the police department for in-depth interview were enrolled.

Results: Sixty two per cent of the respondents had heard of sexual violence committed on young females. Sexual violence was reported by 65.3% of the respondents. The prevalence of performed and attempted rape were 8.8% and 11.5%, respectively. The age range of performed rape victims was between 12 and 21 years. Of the 19 (8.8%) who reported rape being performed on them, unwanted pregnancy, suicide attempt, vaginal discharge and abortion were the consequences in 21%, 15.8%, 10.5% and 5.3%, respectively.

Conclusion: Sexual violence is a major public health problem with high rates of under-reporting. Sex education should be given on a regular basis and policy making bodies and the police be well aware of this high magnitude and take strong measures to reduce it.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is perhaps the most pervasive, but the least recognised human right abuse in the world. It is also a profound health problem sapping women's physical and emotional vitality. The increase of domestic violence and sexual abuse against women in most countries is of serious concern(1). Experts in victimology generally believe that western culture and socialisation processes sanction abuse and violence as a way of life(2). Women are most frequently the target of sexual violence which almost always leads to different degrees of emotional and/or physical trauma forcing the victim to be isolated from social activities(2, 3). Victims of sexual assault are significantly more likely than non-victims to be diagnosed as having mental disorders(4). There are evidences of growing international concern on violence against women. In 1992 Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) sponsored an international conference on the same issue. Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and OAU placed violence on the agenda for the meeting of African Ministers. In 1993 the UN General Assembly passed a declaration on eradication of violence against women(5).

Violence against women is a major health problem around the world. It often goes unnoticed and undocumented, partly due to its taboo nature. As any issue similarly under-reported and fraught with problems of measurement, driving and accurate statistics on violence against women represents a great challenge. Worldwide studies show that women are remarkably willing and eager to share their experience(6).

It is documented that most violence is predominantly perpetuated by men against women(7). It is revealed that one in five to one in seven women in US will be victims of a completed rape in their life time(8). Prevalence studies in USA in 1992 showed that at least 20% of adult women, 15% of college women and 12% of adolescents had experienced sexual abuse or assault during their lifetime(9). In a study conducted in Uganda, of 400 primary school students, 49% of sexually active girls were reported to have had forced sex(10).

There are very few published reports on sexual violence in Ethiopia other than releases through the mass media. According to one study that was carried out in Ethiopia in 1998, it was found that among 1401 female high school students in Addis Ababa and western Shewa, 15% were victims of performed and attempted rape. Rape outcomes like unwanted pregnancy, abortion and fear were also high(11). The objective of this study was to assess awareness, prevalence and outcome of sexual violence among female high school students. It is anticipated that the results of this study will help in designing intervention. With the current consensus on the issue of female empowerment as a key to development, it was felt that the results of the study will be useful for political decision-making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A school-based cross-sectional survey on sexual violence in a high school in Debark town, Debark district was conducted in 1999. Debark town is found 100 km away from Gondar town

in the Amhara region, north-west Ethiopia. The district has an estimated total population of 135, 645 with 65, 932 females and 69, 713 males. Almost all the inhabitants of the district are orthodox Christians. There is one health centre, four health stations and three health posts. The health coverage of the district was 55.2%, while the family planning coverage was 9.4%.

The study population comprised all female high school students of grades 9, 10, and 11. Two focus group discussions (FGD) were also conducted, to provide information on sensitive areas, among 10 well-recognised female figures in the town and among six high school students. A FGD guide was developed that contained a list of questions that were supposed to be explored for the purpose of the study. The discussion was led by a moderator and assisted by a recorder who took notes. The group discussion was transcribed completely in Amharic, fully translated in English and analysed. Data from the police were also collected by interviewing the police head and reviewing their records.

A structured questionnaire for the survey was prepared first in English and translated to Amharic, and finally translated to English to ensure consistency. The questionnaire thus prepared was pre-tested in one high school which is found in Dabat, about 25 km from Debarq town. Appropriate modifications were made based on the findings of the pre-test. Socio-demographic variables like age, residence, educational status, marital status, religion and ethnicity were included. Sexual violence and reported outcomes were considered as outcome variables.

Each respondent was made to sit separately and properly briefed on the study and definition of important terms. Their consent was obtained and to ensure confidentiality, the names of the respondents were excluded from the questionnaires. Each questionnaire was then filled and the data were entered into Epi Info version 6.02 and analysed with the same software.

RESULTS

A total of 216 female high school students were included in the study from which 189 (87.5%) were from Debarq town. Seven (3.2%) were from around the town. The mean age of respondents was (16.4 ± 1.47 years) with an age range of 12-21 years. A hundred and fifty eight (73.1%) were from 9th grade. Fourteen (6.5%) were married and only four (1.9%) were living alone (Table 1).

One hundred and fifty three (70.8%) respondents believed that sexual violence is a major health problem. According to them, young women and students are the major victims, 112 (51.9%) and 88 (40.7%), respectively. Only 13 (6.0%) respondents related it to low socio-economic status. Seventy three (33.8%) thought that fellow students commit sexual violence. Eighty eight (40.7%) indicated that females can provoke males towards sexual violence, but 98 (45.4%) claimed otherwise. According to the respondents the major crimes committed on the females were rape 135 (62.5%) and instrumental threats 76 (35.2%). If they had experienced sexual violence, 98 (45.4%) said they would tell their parents, whereas 69 (31.9%) would report to the police. When asked whether this issue was given due attention by the Government, 75 (34.7%) said no. One hundred and seventy nine (82.9%) said that this problem can be reduced or put under control.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of female high school students, (n=216)

Characteristics	No. (%)
<i>Residence</i>	
Debarq	189 (87.5)
Outside Debarq	7 (3.2)
Not reported	20 (9.3)
<i>Age in years</i>	
12-14	14 (6.5)
15-17	163 (75.5)
18-21	39 (18.0)
<i>Educational status</i>	
9th grade	158 (73.2)
10th grade	24 (11.1)
11th grade	34 (15.7)
<i>Religion</i>	
Orthodox Christian	197 (91.2)
Muslim	13 (6.0)
Protestant	4 (1.9)
Catholic	2 (0.9)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Not married	191 (88.4)
Married	14 (6.5)
Engaged	8 (3.7)
Divorced	3 (1.4)
<i>Currently living with:</i>	
Both parents	149 (68.9)
Mother only	36 (16.7)
Relatives	13 (6.0)
Husband	10 (4.6)
Father only	4 (1.9)
Alone	4 (1.9)

One hundred and thirty five (62.5%) of the respondents had heard of some type of sexual violence being committed on young females. Out of these, 40 (29.6%) had heard about a girl on whom rape was attempted, 84 (62.2%) about a girl being raped and 69 (51.1%) about a girl being abducted. One hundred and ten (81.5%) claimed that they knew the victim.

There were a total of 141 episodes of sexual violence committed upon the female high school students. Nineteen (8.8%) of the respondents reported being raped. For 15 (78.9%) of the rape victims, this incidence was their first sexual intercourse. Physical abuse, attempted rape and attempted abduction was reported by 48 (22.2%), 25 (11.6%) and 26 (12%) of the respondents, respectively (Table 2). The prevalence of both attempted and performed rape was 20.4%. Out of the 141 episodes of sexual violence, 60 (42.5%) took place on the roads and 41 (29.1%) of the criminals were strangers to the victims. Most of the sexual violence, 77 (54.6%), took place in broad daylight.

Table 3 shows the proportion of performed rape by socio-demographic status. The age range of those in whom actual rape was between 12-21 years, while 11 (57.9%) of the victims were below 18 years of age. Rape was committed by the victims' boyfriends in nine (47.4%) and by strangers in three (15.8%) of the cases (Table 4). Twelve (63.2%) of the victims revealed this incidence only to their girlfriends, while five (26.3%) of the cases were reported to the police.

Table 2

Distribution of sexual violence committed upon female high school students

Characteristic	No. (%)
Hit by males	48 (22.2)
Both attempted and performed rape	44 (20.4)
Attempted abduction	26 (12.0)
Attempted rape	25 (11.6)
Performed rape	19 (8.8)
Instrumental threats	17 (7.9)
Performed abduction	6 (2.8)

Table 3

Socio-demographic characteristics of female high school students on whom rape had been performed (n=19)

Characteristic	No. (%)
<i>Residence</i>	
Debarak	15 (78.9)
Outside Debarak	2 (10.5)
Not reported	2 (10.5)
<i>Age in years</i>	
12-14	1 (5.3)
15-17	10 (52.6)
18-21	8 (42.1)
<i>Educational status</i>	
9th grade	12 (63.2)
10th grade	4 (21.1)
11th grade	3 (15.8)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Not married	12 (63.2)
Married	7 (36.8)
<i>Currently living with:</i>	
Both parents	12 (63.2)
Mother only	3 (15.8)
Relatives	2 (10.5)
Husband	2 (10.5)

Table 4

Relationship between the person who had performed rape and the victim among female high school students (n=19)

Relation with victim	No. (%)
Boy friend	9 (47.4)
Neighbour	4 (21.0)
Unidentified (a stranger)	3 (15.8)
Other	3 (15.8)

Table 5

Reported outcomes of performed rape among female high school students

Reported outcome	No. (%)
Fear and anguish	5 (26.3)
Examination failure	4 (21.1)
Unwanted pregnancy	4 (21.1)
Suicide ideation	4 (21.1)
Suicide attempt	3 (15.8)
Bodily injury	3 (15.8)
Hopelessness	2 (10.5)
Vaginal discharge	2 (10.5)
Quitting school	2 (10.5)
Self-blame	2 (10.5)
Abortion	1 (5.3)
Nothing	6 (31.6)

Unwanted pregnancies and abortion were reported by four (21.1%) and one (5.3%) of the rape victims, respectively. Fear and examination failure were also their main complaints; five (26.3%) and four (21.1%), respectively (Table 5).

The information obtained from police and focus group discussants showed that sexual violence is a major health problem with rape and physical abuse being the major ones. The common victims of rape, according to them were between 13-15 years. Most of this took place at social gatherings, public holiday and other's houses and usually during daytime. Both groups agreed that sexual violence is increasing in prevalence, and the main reasons for this were the lightness of the punishments and poor police support. All believed that it can be reduced or controlled. They also believe that there is a high rate of under-reporting.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that most of the respondents believe sexual violence is a major health problem because of consequences such as unwanted pregnancy, abortion, STDs (including HIV/AIDS) and physical and mental trauma, all of which could contribute to the high rate of female drop-outs from schools.

Among all the female students, rape is believed to be a major problem by 70.8% of them. This shows that it is a deep rooted problem but due to its social stigma it is not talked about in public. The prevalence rate of completed rape among female high school students was 8.8%, which was comparable to a study in America and Finland which reported a prevalence of 6.2% and 7%, respectively (12,13). Attempted and completed rape reported in 20.4% of our study was comparable to a study in Canada, Korea, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States of America which reported a prevalence rate of 17-27% (8).

Most respondents considered the following as serious crimes: performed/attempted rape, instrumental threatening and being hit by males. Surprisingly, none considered abduction as a major problem, even though the prevalence of attempted and performed abduction was 14.8%.

Rape was committed by the victim's boyfriend in 47.4%. This might be explained by exposure to an environment which predisposes them to such offences, and this is supported by the finding that 68.4% of the perpetrators are individuals known to them. This finding shows that rape is common among those who have intimate relationships, which signifies less responsible sexual decision-making among partners. Among the rape victims, 57.9% were under 18 years of age. This is child abuse according to the convention of the right of the child (14).

The study also exposes the health consequence of rape. Among the rape victims the proportion of unwanted pregnancy was 21.1% which was higher than the Canadian advisory council estimates of 12% (15), and the Bangkok Thailand study of 15-18% (6). Though no specific causes

were determined, 10.5% of victims reported vaginal discharge after rape which might imply transmission of STD including HIV. The psychological impact of rape is reported in a significant proportion of victims. Suicide ideation, reported in 15.8% of the victims was less compared to the American study where 20% of suicide ideation was reported(4).

More than half of the respondents thought that the problem is given due attention by the Government because they have seen and heard of assailants being punished for their crimes either by imprisonment or fines. The rest insisted that even if punishments are present, they are either too light relative to the trauma and misery of the victims or the punishment is rather inappropriate. For example, the assailant is made to marry the victim. In other words, the assailant is left unpunished and all the punishment is received by the victim who is forced to marry a criminal just to cover up the whole incidences.

Participants of the two focus group discussions believed that sexual violence is a common problem amongst female high school students and is occurring in elementary schools. They also said the problem is sustained and aggravated because of poor support from law-enforcing authorities, insufficient punishment, the criminals may be recognised social figures (such as teachers and Government employees) and the victim may find it difficult to take such assailants to court. In addition the discussants believed that there was a significant under-reporting of rape. The police head stressed that more than half of the reported cases tend to drop-out from the legal process at various points and shift to the local elderly's court. A study done in the USA showed that only about 20% of rape is reported to the police.

The study has shown what would really be done with regard to this challenging public health problem. We also believe that this is what the public, police and policy making bodies and other involved authorities should do. We strongly recommend the following: that sex education should be included in the school curriculum, the police should handle cases of sexual violence very strictly, a special body should be founded with its major task being following court cases strictly and looking after the well-being of victims of sexual violence and the policy making

bodies should be made aware about the prevalence and outcomes of sexual violence so that it would pass stiff sentences and punishment against the assailants.

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