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**Abstract** | This study explored how young women from African refugee and migrant backgrounds understand and experience sexual coercion and violence. Data was gathered from young women from African backgrounds and a wide range of agencies in two Australian states, Western Australia and South Australia, to better understand the extent of their awareness of and concern about sexual coercion and assault and document how agencies respond to these issues. The paper concludes it is necessary to improve policy, practice, professional development and training to better respond to the sexual violence experienced by these young women, and raise awareness of the issue in their communities in a culturally sensitive way.

## Preventing sexual violence against young women from African backgrounds

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Young women report the highest rates of sexual coercion and violence; however, little is known about the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse young women in Australia. This exploratory study investigated the understanding and experiences of sexual coercion and violence by young women from African refugee and migrant backgrounds. It is a response to reports by service providers of increasing numbers of young African women accessing unplanned pregnancy and relationship services, and concerns about domestic violence and relationship breakdown. For some of these young women pregnancy has led to family and community conflict, resulting in cultural and social isolation.

In order to gain an understanding of the extent of concern about sexual coercion and assault and to document emerging agency responses to the issues, the study involved gathering data from young women from African backgrounds and a wide range of agencies in two Australian states.

The research identified factors that allowed young women to disclose sexual violence and access support, or those factors preventing them from doing so. The paper's recommendations centre on improving policy, practice, professional development and training to better respond to sexual violence experienced by young adult women from African refugee or migrant backgrounds.



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## Background

Addressing sexual violence experienced by young adult women from an African migrant or refugee background living in Australia is a challenge. Research involving African women has tended to focus on their experiences of sexual violence as refugees and its effects prior to settlement in Australia. There has been some research into how adult African women (including refugees and migrants) experience male violence following settlement in Australia which has focused primarily on domestic violence, with some reference to sexual abuse (Fisher 2013; Rees & Pease 2007; Zannettino 2012). Recent research about the experiences of African migrants and refugees' experiences is consistent with the increase in the number of Australian residents from African nations and those whose parents were born in African nations over the past 10 years (ABS 2008). It is important to increase our understanding of young African women, as research consistently indicates young women experience the highest rates of sexual violence victimisation but are least likely to report violence to the authorities (ABS 2013; Kogan 2004). It is therefore timely to gain an understanding of the perspectives, knowledge and experiences of sexual violence of young women from African backgrounds and service provider responses to these to inform future best-practice responses. Understanding how sexual violence is viewed and understood by young women is central. An awareness of current community attitudes to and perceptions of sexual violence is also important to understand how young victim-survivors, their families and their respective communities make sense of sexual violence.

In developing effective responses it is acknowledged that, for women from minority groups, help-seeking and disclosure is culturally mediated by a number of factors (Rees & Pease 2006; Bent-Goodley 2009). These include:

- individual, family and community shame (Dasgupta 1998, Gill 2006, Zannettino 2012); the precedence of family and community over the individual and normalisation of violence (Rees and Pease 2006);
- language and cultural barriers and the fear that investigations will perpetuate negative cultural stereotypes (Razack 1994; Bent-Goodley 2005; Burman and Chantler 2005; Jiwani 2005; Dimopoulos 2010; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria 2013);
- the uncertain legal status of immigrant women;
- unemployment;
- a lack of access to financial resources (Dasgupta 1998, Menjívar and Salcido 2002); and
- social isolation (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria 2013).

There is no substantive Australian research about women from culturally and racially diverse groups and sexual violence. This research addresses this specific area by examining how young women from African communities understand and deal with experiences of sexual coercion and violence, and the types of responses by Australian agencies to this group of young women.

This exploratory study used a mixed-method design combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). It included a scoping exercise that informed an online survey of services; individual interviews and focus groups with young women from African backgrounds; and focus groups with service providers in Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA).

## Methodology

### Scoping exercise and agency questionnaire

A comprehensive scoping exercise was conducted across Western Australia and South Australia to identify agencies that provide support and/or information on sexual violence and emerging responses. From this scoping exercise, a sampling frame of available services was developed.

The scoping exercise identified 50 government and not-for-profit agencies in each state. A representative from each of these services was invited to complete the online questionnaire which sought information about the number of young adult women of African background that accessed their service, what support they were offered or received, and any perceived gaps in service provision. These services included legal support agencies, police, sexual health agencies, sexual assault centres, women's health services, community development services, emergency accommodation services, youth services and specialist multicultural services. These services were sampled because they were deemed those most likely to respond to the effects of sexual violence.

The agency survey collected qualitative data from open-ended questions; open-ended questions were asked because there was no other extant information from agencies about their experiences of working with this group of young women. Some examples of open-ended questions included:

- In your experience, what currently are some of the good practice responses to sexual violence available to people in your area?
- In your experience, have sexual coercion and sexual violence been issues that were identified amongst young women from African refugee and immigrant communities that you work with?

### In-depth interviews and focus groups

Twelve in-depth interviews were held with young women from African backgrounds, as well as one focus group of six young women. The interview questions explored in detail how they understood sexual violence, including the behaviours that constitute it; what they considered the impact of sexual violence is for victims; who they would seek support from (if they sought support at all); what they considered would constitute good practice in terms of a formal response and the barriers to seeking support from services. Young women were recruited through the researchers' networks, referrals from agencies and snowball sampling. The young women self-selected to participate in the focus group and interviews. A young African woman performed an invaluable role as research assistant in recruiting both agency representatives and young women to the study.

Eighteen young women from African backgrounds aged 18–25 years, with an average age of 22 years, participated in a focus group or were interviewed for the study. The South Australian focus group participants were part of an existing group of young women and agreed to be interviewed as a group, but were reluctant to be interviewed individually. Of the 18 participants, 10 were combining work and study, seven were students and one was employed full time. Not all participants provided information on how long they had been resident in Australia; however, all had attended school in Australia and most had been resident for about 10 years. Participants were born in African nations including Zimbabwe (5), Kenya (8), Sierra Leone (3) and South Sudan (2). The young women's brief descriptions of their cultural backgrounds highlighted their differences and how the impact of forced migration has influenced these; for example, five of the eight participants who were born in Kenya were of Southern Sudanese heritage.

## Focus groups with practitioners

Focus groups were held with expert practitioners in the area of sexual violence and/or from other relevant agencies including multicultural, health, child safety, homelessness, community and criminal justice, legal and policing agencies. The focus groups identified:

- key issues for young adult women from an African background;
- the strengths of and gaps in responses to these women; and
- what barriers the young women perceived to accessing the services.

Examples of good practice were drawn from the focus group discussions, which built on information from the survey. These examples were compared with information from the in-depth interviews and focus groups with young women, regarding their perceptions of a good practice response to sexual violence.

## Surveys and focus groups with service providers

A total of 81 service providers from the health, social, multicultural, housing, domestic violence, youth, law enforcement and legal sectors in Western Australia and South Australia completed the online questionnaires. Three focus groups were conducted (two in WA and one in SA), bringing together 23 professionals from a range of services. A total of 13 individuals participated in WA and 10 in SA. Focus groups participants were worked directly with young women from African backgrounds and/or provided support for those affected by sexual violence.

## Data analysis

In-depth interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim to allow thematic analysis of data using constant comparison, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Data analysis was inductive and interpretation proceeded through multiple levels of coding. In the initial coding, individual transcripts were read closely line-by-line to examine the data in detail. This initial coding identified important concepts in the data and, through a continuous iterative and cyclical process, codes were grouped into categories as explanatory and conceptual patterns were identified. The properties and labels of individual categories were continually refined and linked together through a process of constant comparison as the analysis proceeded. Each of the researchers contributed to coding and comparing interpretations during data analysis to ensure interrater reliability. Categories were grouped and abstracted to identify themes that patterned the data. The survey data generated descriptive statistics and some cross-tabulations.

## Findings

The key themes identified in the interviews were that:

- women were becoming increasingly aware of sexual violence and coercion and how common it is;
- women faced community and practical barriers to seeking help;
- contacting police is often the only known response and a last resort; and
- more culturally appropriate community development information, education and service responses are needed.

## Interviews and focus groups with young women

The findings indicate there was no common understanding among the young women about what constitutes sexual violence. The young women were aware of various forms of sexual coercion; however, the term 'sexual violence' was associated solely with stranger rape. All of the young women described becoming more aware of issues surrounding sexual violence as they grew up in Australia. Participants argued that the taboos associated with speaking publicly about both sex and sexual violence inhibited community awareness-raising for young people. Consequently, knowledge of the laws concerning sexual violence and available support services was limited. Some participants reported that a young woman who discloses sexual violence has much to lose, such as living with judgement and potentially being shunned by the community. They did not describe any similar shunning for men who were known to perpetrate sexual violence.

In contrast, participants were well aware that abuse by a male partner or boyfriend was common. Importantly, the young women explained there was no single type or group of men who were violent or sexually coercive, and a range of men perpetrated such behaviours, making it difficult for women to identify who would be likely to be abusive in a relationship. One participant said:

Abusive relationships are common among adolescent girls...all of my friends were in those abusive relationships.

[Other young women] are in relationships that are quite toxic and destructive and can be violent, or emotionally abusive...young women get caught in this whole like 'but that's passionate love', by that idea of love.

Ideas about abusive or controlling behaviour being a sign of romantic love and the sanctity of marriage prevented young women from identifying their experiences as abusive and/or disclosing that abuse (Volpe et al 2014; Chung 2005). Participants were aware of many young women who were forced into non-consensual sexual acts. Participants thought young women felt they had no power to stop this because they had been raised to believe a husband has rights over his wife's body. Young women therefore thought marital rape or sexual violence within intimate relationships or marriage was not generally acknowledged.

In addition to the community barriers faced by young women who had experienced sexual violence, there were also considerable practical barriers to seeking help such as language, transport, caring responsibilities, work and study commitments and other settlement issues. These are a hindrance to seeking help and, more generally, prevent young women from participating fully in the community. Participants explained that young women often believe they can change the attitudes and behaviours of young men and, therefore, maintain the relationship in the hope that the man will eventually change and cease his violence and abuse. This hope that the perpetrator will change, the violence end and the relationship continue is consistent with other studies of women's descriptions of remaining in relationships where the male partner is violent (Copp et al. 2015; Kearney 2001).

The police were the most commonly known and accessed source of help to stop violence and male partner abuse. However, it was strongly emphasised that, for many women, this was when the physical violence was considered extreme and potentially fatal.

They're tending just to access police and that's only in cases of severe (physical) violence, when they run out of other options.

Young women considered that the pressure to stay married or reconcile prevents women seeking anything other than emergency police help, leaving the woman continuing to hold an unequal position relative to her husband or male partner. A young woman who works with her community described a situation that was handled badly:

We've had cases before where women come to seek help and their idea of seeking help is 'Make him stop, that's what I want, I just want him to stop, change him'. They don't understand the fact what once you go through the process, there can be convictions made on the part of the police. The man can be made to forcibly leave the home. So we've had cases where this is happening and the woman's been left with nothing, she couldn't drive. She couldn't speak English well. No-one to drive their kids and her around or get the shopping for her, do things and she's like, 'I want to take it back, I didn't want this to happen'. And got really upset by the situation, so then if other people find out about that or hear that story, which I'm sure they will, then when it happens to them they won't get help.

Counselling was not a well-known or valued option as it was considered inappropriate to discuss an intimate relationship with a professional third party. Participants most commonly thought there needed to be more education about sexual violence and coercion and domestic violence specifically tailored to support African communities and take account of specific African communities' experiences of dispossession and trauma associated with forced migration. The perception was that, while information exists, it is largely targeted at white Western English speakers and therefore not culturally relevant or applicable to the circumstances of other cultural groups. Mainstream approaches had raised young women's awareness of the problem when they attended Australian high schools; however, they did not see the advice or responses advocated as particularly relevant to their circumstances nor think that such information would be influential with adults from African communities. Awareness-raising media such as flyers and pamphlets were not considered suitable for people who come from oral traditions and value relationships with individuals. Face-to-face engagement and education was preferred over paper resources, particularly community-based approaches that, rather than targeting people who were thought to be victims or perpetrators, instead worked alongside communities to raise awareness and develop local responses.

### **Agency survey and focus groups with service providers**

The agency survey and focus groups with agency staff found that young women may disclose experiences of sexual violence in a range of agency settings but that no one service is specifically targeted to their needs. It appears that it is typically older married women who present to services with domestic violence issues, rather than younger unmarried women or women who live with a partner reporting violence. The agency data showed a strong trend to indicate that sexual violence and coercion remains a highly taboo topic.



Fifty-eight of the 81 agencies reported they had contact with young women from African communities. Thirty of the respondents were able to estimate the number of young women from African backgrounds who sought assistance in relation to sexual violence and sexual coercion. This ranged from estimates of two per year up to 60 per year. Agency respondents noted that sexual violence was rarely ever the presenting issue for service use. The primary reasons for seeking services were homelessness (often due to unplanned pregnancy, family conflict and male partner violence), a need for counselling about life experiences, a need for support with parenting/children and health or medical appointments.

Fifty participants identified the main issues confronting young women from African backgrounds. The responses fell into five main categories:

- resettlement and belonging to a cultural minority (n=31);
- issues of culture and gender (n=17);
- specific issues for young women from African backgrounds living in Australia (n=27),
- poverty and financial disadvantage (n=12); and
- services (n=7).

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Resettlement and being a member of a cultural and racial minority  | 31 |
| Language barriers  | 9  |
| Social isolation due to loss of family and displacement  | 7  |
| Racial discrimination  | 5  |
| Grief from traumatic experiences and loss  | 4  |
| Being part of a smaller community that can ostracise, isolate and reject individuals and families (this can establish a negative reputation for the women concerned) | 2  |
| Settlement being an ongoing process of change and learning   | 2  |
| Dominant Western culture's lack of acceptance of African cultures  | 2  |
| Culture and gender   | 17 |
| Traditional gender expectations and biases and patriarchal privilege   | 6  |
| Family conflict  | 4  |
| Violence against women within the African community  | 2  |
| Traditional parenting roles with women taking on the burden of all parenting   | 2  |
| Community pressure to marry and have children, so no career is established and women become financially dependent or have limited earnings                           | 1  |
| Specific harmful cultural practices of some groups (eg female genital mutilation, forced marriage)   | 1  |
| May not consider rape can exist in marriage  | 1  |
| Specific issues for young African women living in Australia  | 27 |
| Difficulty of living between two cultures: 'Clash in culture, wanting to be more Western but expected to remain loyal to own culture'                                | 6  |
| Lack of knowledge of legal rights and the law  | 5  |

**Table 1: Main issues for young women from African backgrounds (n) (continued)**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Violence within relationships, sexuality and sexual health are not considered socially acceptable topics for open discussion | 4  |
| Coerced into survival sex and, later, sex work   | 3  |
| Disclosure of male violence may cause shame or risk from the family, community and/or offender                               | 3  |
| To escape the perpetrator, young women must completely separate from their community and become homeless or couch-surf       | 3  |
| Young women and body image   | 1  |
| Unplanned pregnancy  | 1  |
| Support with homework and schooling to improve performance   | 1  |
| Poverty and financial disadvantage   | 12 |
| Lack of income and unemployment  | 4  |
| Financially struggling as sending money to relatives/family members  | 3  |
| Lack of transport  | 2  |
| Cost of services (eg medical)  | 1  |
| Lack of childcare  | 1  |
| Fathers who may have children with a number of women and who fail to pay child support                                       | 1  |
| Services   | 7  |
| Limited knowledge of support services or lack of trust in services.  | 4  |
| Barriers to service use: fear of using interpreters who may be elders or community leaders                                   | 1  |
| Limited diversity of service providers/practitioners   | 1  |
| Girls' fear of mandatory reporting prevents disclosure to services   | 1  |
| Culturally and Linguistically Diverse services are not accepted as a place to resolve family conflict                        | 1  |

Both the survey and the focus groups noted the taboo against open discussion of sexuality and sexual and domestic violence. Some agency participants spoke of the challenges of attempting to educate and raise the awareness of those who hold highly traditional notions of marriage and therefore frown on divorce. This occurs in a community where young women are confronted with varying forms of racism, some of which was expressed by agency participants during the survey:

[T]he way some of them dress and act makes them a target to people who may take advantage of them.

This written response clearly 'others' the young women and invokes the victim-blaming rape mythology that women make themselves targets for violence by their actions and choice of clothing—a view that overlooks the fact most sexual violence is perpetrated by a man known to the woman (ABS 2013). This attitude from a service provider whose role is to support young women is concerning.



Some focus group respondents raised the issue of the growth in illegal underage prostitution among young women from African backgrounds, aged 14 and over, which has been occurring since about 2008. While this issue is not unique to this group of young women, they were seen as particularly at risk due to their social and cultural isolation, and the economic status associated with forced migration. Awareness of this abuse of young women was described as common knowledge among service providers in some suburbs of one of the capital cities where many African communities reside. Respondents explained authorities have little evidence of the practice as people are unwilling to speak about it due to fear of reprisal, and that this is particularly difficult for African communities to address as it is largely underground and allegedly involves mostly older white men. Raising any such concerns could lead to further stigmatisation and racism towards their communities.

The findings made it clear the knowledge and experience of those survey participants working with young women from African backgrounds varied greatly. This reflects the wide range of agencies that participated in the survey: from mainstream to specialist cultural services. One aspect that stands out is that agency representatives made relatively few comments about how services are or are not responding to support young women from African backgrounds. Much of the emphasis was on the young women's issues, rather than on how policy or services could change their practices or workforce to more effectively support young women to live free from male violence.

When asked about existing service gaps, 28 percent of respondents reported their service currently meets the needs of young African women who have experienced sexualised violence. The remaining respondents described gaps in two major categories: the need for specialist responses by multicultural services and increased knowledge and training about sexual violence (n=25); and the limitations of mainstream services, such as the shortage of affordable and appropriate housing in Australia and gaps in addressing sexual violence against young women in their early teen years (n=19).

A dominant theme in the qualitative data was that future efforts should be directed towards education and awareness-raising about sexual violence and exploitation. This was associated with the importance of education promoting gender equality and independence for young women from African backgrounds, as they were thought to often occupy positions of unequal power relative to their boyfriends; this was considered to make them less likely to disclose violence and/or end the relationship. Consistent with the young women's perspectives, service providers also indicated that education and awareness-raising about sexual violence and coercion should be targeted at African communities generally, using culturally appropriate methods and sites, and that more specific strategies targeting young men and women should be adopted.

Participants identified two main areas for service development: increasing the cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of organisational and worker practices to increase their ability to work with young people from African backgrounds, and the importance of specialist sexual violence responses for younger women, especially those in their early teens for whom neither an adult service nor a child protection response is appropriate.

## Discussion and conclusions

Consistent with international research that shows perpetrators of child sexual exploitation take advantage of young people's economic, social, cognitive and emotional vulnerability (Hayes & Unwin 2016), some young women and service providers were very aware that young women experienced sexual coercion and pressure. However, given the prohibition about open discussions of sex, parental expectations of no sex before marriage, and fear of the consequences of speaking out, young women were unlikely to disclose and seek help. These are some of the reasons for the relative silence about sexualised violence and coercion. The traditional gendered roles assigned to some young women further obscure the problem of violence against women. Efforts towards ending sexual violence and the exploitation of young women from African backgrounds need to occur in tandem with responses that promote gender equality, while respecting cultural traditions and cohesiveness amongst recently settled communities. Young women from African backgrounds living in Australia traverse the cultural divides; they wish to have their views and bodies respected and to live free of violence and racism.

This exploratory research study has in some ways raised more questions than it has provided answers about the problem of sexual violence and coercion for young women from African backgrounds. The findings indicate that, in the states where research was conducted, young women and service providers know that sexual violence and exploitation is occurring but disclosure and reporting to services of any kind is very limited. To end violence against young women from African backgrounds there must be: culturally thoughtful community change, the promotion of gender equality to secure young women's futures, and specialist service delivery responses that can effectively engage with and support the needs of young women who seek help. At the preventive end of the continuum, strategies for working with African communities settled in Australia must be more inclusive, to shift taboos about the discussion of men's violence against women and move towards ending it in culturally responsive ways. Cultural responsiveness is critical in developing gendered policy and practice responses to the sexual exploitation of women and children (Coy 2016). Many of these young women experience the intersections of racism and sexism in their everyday lives while also confronting the harsh realities of living on limited incomes, which takes its toll on their capacity to attend services.

Sexual violence and coercion is rarely spoken about; it is narrowly defined as stranger rape and seen as primarily the woman's fault. Some young women were told not to dress 'like that' around older uncles. Young women respondents were able to describe a range of sexually inappropriate or violent behaviours, but spoke of how these were difficult to report formally or to their parents for fear that nothing would change or the situation would be made worse. These issues are not unique to young African women; this study alone cannot ascertain if and how the findings would differ for other young Australian women. Nonetheless, this finding resonates with UK literature that recognises the difficulties young women of minority ethnic background experience living within the boundaries of parental expectations that differ to their own (Ward & Patel 2006). Sexual violence and barriers to disclosure are experienced differently by those living in small new migrant communities with limited anonymity.

This study broadens our understanding of sexual exploitation and focuses on the experiences of young women from a minority ethnic background (Ward & Patel 2006). Its recommendations about future policy and practice are largely oriented towards crime prevention goals associated with awareness-raising and education, as well as enhancing the cultural responsiveness of police, as they are the most well-known and most utilised source of formal help.

It is recommended that:

- crime prevention and education programs to address the issues of healthy intimate relationships, sexuality and sexualised violence and coercion be developed, in consultation with young people from African backgrounds. These must take into account diverse cultural backgrounds and practices, and recognise their experiences of living, studying and working in Australia;
- gender and culturally specific educational programs for young people of African backgrounds living in Australia be developed;
- peer education models be trialled. These have been effective in working with young people on issues relating to sexuality and violence;
- community campaigns to raise awareness of the law and individual rights and responsibilities relating to families and relationships, including areas such as family law, laws related to domestic violence, housing and residential tenancies be developed;
- community policing initiatives with African communities be supported, to identify what policing practices lead to positive and supportive outcomes for all community members and whether any strategies need revision;
- training be provided to police officers to increase their understanding of the diversity of African communities and families, to assist them to better understand the most effective response to call-outs for family violence; and
- workforce training initiatives be targeted at police and other human service agencies to increase cultural knowledge and sensitivity and improve responses to young women from African backgrounds who seek help.

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