

Probing the efficacy of virginity testing on the fight against HIV/AIDS: The case of the Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa

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Abstract: Virginity testing is defined as “a practice and process of inspecting the genitalia of unmarried girls and women to determine if they are sexually active. Virginity testing is a practice that is common in some sub-Saharan African countries including Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa. In Zimbabwe, virginity testing is performed in order to curb the further spread of HIV/AIDS. Proponents of virginity testing maintain that with its emphasis on total abstinence from sexual intercourse by girls, the practice is being revived to prevent HIV infection, to detect incest and abuse, and to re-instill and promote lost cultural values. Traditionalists view the revival of virginity testing as a signal of going back to basics and it enjoys a lot of support from those communities that practice it. In spite of concerted efforts to conduct virginity testing in all areas, some girls still fall pregnant, drop out of school and depend on their mothers to support their children. This paper therefore probes virginity testing among young girls in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal to establish if it is a viable strategy to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS. The study draws on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with girls aged 12 to 21 years.

Keywords: Virginity, Testing, Genitalia, Hymenal Examinations, Ukuhlokwakwentsombi, Ukuvavanyakobuntombi, HIV/AIDS infections.

Introduction

As the AIDS epidemic has been transformed from one of increasing HIV infection rates during the 1980's to one of increasing AIDS morbidity and death since the mid-1990s, the call for regular virginity testing of girls has been encouraged as a way of curbing the scourge of the disease (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001: 534). The traditional Zulu custom of virginity testing fell into disuse over the past decades. However, it has been revived by communities in order to prevent young girls from becoming sexually active.

There is often social pressure to participate in virginity testing although such testing has been opposed as ineffective, unhygienic and a violation of human rights (Taylor, 2004). “Virginity testing is used to control the sexuality of girls. It involves a physical examination conducted by an elder woman in the community to find out whether the girl's hymen is still intact by inserting a finger into a girl's vagina. The re-emergence of virginity testing started around 1994 in urban and peri-urban townships in KwaZulu-Natal where local women would organize small-scale events aimed at publicly testing teenage girls. The testing practice is traditionally used to bargain for high bride price (lobola) if they prove that the girl to be married is still a virgin.

Cultural beliefs are still upheld in KwaZulu Natal in general, in the rural areas in particular. Parents feel that talking to their children about sex and sexuality means encouraging them to have sex. However, the role of family is very important during adolescence as parents must teach their children about responsible adulthood. Families socialize adolescents to acquire the beliefs, values and behaviors deemed significantly appropriate by the society.

Background of the study

Virginity testing is defined as “a practice and process of inspecting the genitalia of unmarried girls and women to determine if they are sexually active (Wickstrom 2008:1). Virginity testing is a practice that is common in some sub-

Saharan African countries including Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa (Win, 2004.) In Zimbabwe, virginity testing is performed in order to curb the further spread of HIV/AIDS (Southern Africa Report, 2008). Researchers indicated that about 11.5 million people are estimated to be infected with HIV/AIDS (Southern African Report, 2010). In other countries, there is a myth that if an HIV positive man has sex with a virgin he will be cured. Zimbabwe is one of the countries where polygamy and patriarchy are practiced. Decision-making authority is vested in men and society has control over women's sexuality. Virginity testing prevents women from controlling their own bodies and increases their vulnerability to HIV infection (Southern African Report, 2010).

Win (2004) argues that in Kenya virginity testing helps to delay the age at first sex among rural Kenyan youth and it reduces vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections and HIV infections. In Kenya premarital sex is taboo and there is pressure on young women to maintain their virginity until marriage. Families and communities try and keep young women and girls ignorant about sexual matters. Studies conducted in Kenya report that older men seek out young girls in the belief that virgins are free from HIV infection (Win, 2004). The belief that virgins are free from HIV discourages the use of condoms during sexual activity. It is considered very shameful for parents if their daughter is discovered to have lost her virginity. A girl is expected to remain a virgin until marriage. In Kenya, virginity testing is also conducted in order to curb the further spread of HIV/AIDS (Win, 2004).

Well (2004) observes that in Turkey there are allegations that sexual penetration occur without women's consent; that they are forced by boyfriends or family members to engage in sexual intercourse. Young women are therefore subjected to hymenal examinations performed by nurses and forensic physicians. These hymenal examinations are conducted for a range of social reasons including suspicions of pre-marital intercourse and prostitution. It is argued that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the result of sexually promiscuous women. Women in Turkey are expected to have sex only with their husbands so virginity testing is conducted in order to check whether or not the woman has had sexual intercourse with another man. The practice of virginity testing has been done from the early twentieth century in KwaZulu-Natal (Le Roux 2006). The verification of a girl's virginity enables her family to demand a higher amount for lobola than the normal bride wealth at marriage; an additional cow to be given to the girl's mother. If the girl is found not to be a virgin, her father has to pay a cow to the chief because the girl has shown disrespect not only to her parents but also to the whole nation. In South Africa, the practice of virginity testing is mostly common among the Zulu, and to a lesser extent by the Xhosa. In practice, it requires the physical examination of a girl in order to determine if her hymen is intact (Scorgie, 2002).

The testing always takes place at the residence of the local chief, where all the girls of the community are tested by old respected women of the village. In South Africa, more specially in the past virginity testing was conducted by the local chief's wives or other nominated women in the village qualified to do so. A special occasion was organized in the chief's residence where all local girls who have not yet been tested in the village meet in order to be tested. The most qualified people preferred to perform virginity testing were older women who have already reached menopause. In addition, it can be an older person who is no longer sexually active and who has herself undergone virginity testing (Scorgie, 2002).

From informal discussions with stakeholders, the researcher learned that the term virginity testing misleads the public and people who are not involved in the practice and this contributes to the negative perceptions on virginity testing. Virginity testing is translated as "ukuvavanywakobuntombi" which implies that there is some "fiddling" with the girls' genitals whereas the reality of the matter is that girls are inspected and therefore the practice should be called virginity inspection, which is directly translated as "ukuhlolwakwentombi". Secondly, the researcher was able to understand cultural attachment that the communities and the stakeholders have to this practice. For example virginity testing is referred to as "inkciyo", which is a traditional garment that was used by Zulu girls many years ago. This garment was used to cover girls genitals.

Reverting to the issue of virginity testing as a practice is seen as a way of protecting girl's genitals (Informal communication with key stakeholders). Traditionally, virginity testing is a practice that could be traced back to the socialization of African people (Personal communication, Prince Ncamashe, 2010). It was intended to assure the purity of young brides who were to prove their pureness before their parents and future in-laws (Singer, 2003). This was used for reaching consensus on an amount of bride price to be transferred by the groom's family to the bride's family (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Virginity is seen by the presence of hymen in the girl's vagina whereas its absence means non virginity (Singer, 2003).

In some communities, the testing practice was done by the girl's mother or community matriarch (Personal communication, 2006). According to Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala (2002) "assessment (concerning virginity) is derived from indigenous rather than biological knowledge". And therefore one has to be acquainted in the metaphorical

language used in the folk description of the human body and bodily processes because the standards used by the testers are not grounded in the biomedical science.

As time went by this practice was tainted by other development like Christianity and the need for girls to acquire education. Christians criticize the practice as archaic and encourage girls to focus on education than cultural activity. Virginity testing as a cultural practice, has been under severe attack from the influence of the Western cultural perspectives with the introduction of gender, human and children's rights (Singer, 2002). These have introduced new dimensions to the practice, hence the mixed reaction from different groups who recently put a lot of lobby and advocacy against the practice.

The current popular belief that virginity testing provides solution to HIV pandemic is shared across various levels of society, and it is for this reason that the cultural activists, political figures and other stakeholders in the society throw their weight behind the practice (Commission on Gender Equality, Report 5). Reiterating the issue of HIV prevention Leclerc-Madlala, (2002) shares the sentiment that the resuscitation of virginity practice in Kwa Zulu Natal is as a result of an alarming rate of HIV in the country. On the basis of this argument virginity testing is a prevention strategy which helps to curb HIV/AIDS infections. It is also a form of social control to instill the value of premarital chastity and its emphasis is on total abstinence from sexual intercourse by girls. The practice is being revived to prevent HIV infection, to detect incest and abuse, and to re-instill and promote lost cultural values.

Objectives of the study

The main aim of the study was to probe the efficacy of virginity testing on the fight against HIV/AIDS. The overall objective of the study was to explore the perceptions of virginity testing among young girls and how this practice can help in reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. In particular, the study looked at the reasons for conducting virginity testing among young girls in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal. The study drew on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with girls aged 12 to 21 years.

Research question

The study sought to answer the following questions in an effort to address misconceptions on virginity testing:

- Is virginity testing voluntary among young girls?
- What are the main reasons for undergoing virginity testing?
- What important value is attached to virginity testing?
- What are some the challenges associated with this practice?
- What are the implications for undergoing virginity testing?
- Is there a link between virginity testing and the curbing of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS?

The study was conducted in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal because virginity testing is mainly practiced by Zulu speaking people. The study draws on qualitative data, using mixed methods of data collection such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In total, three focus group discussions were conducted and in-depth interviews were used to complement the information received from these discussions.

The study was significant in three ways outlined as follows. Firstly, the study provided a deeper understanding of virginity testing from the perspective of young adolescents and draw on different arguments put forward by the people who think that virginity testing should continue and people who feel that it should be banned. Secondly, the study helped to expand the literature on virginity testing by giving insightful ideas on the topic. Lastly, the study focused on both the importance and implications of this practice in order to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Literature review

According to Gupta (2002), gender relations are essential components of the socio-cultural fabric of a society. From the earliest age, socio-cultural norms dictate that boys and girls adopt specific ideas of masculinity and femininity, which will impact on their sexual behavior, their respective sexual responsibilities, their sexual education and ability to access information about sex and their ability to access resources, including sexual health care. Gupta (2010) argues that the imbalance of power in sexual relationships, together with socio-cultural and economic factors, restricts a woman's sexual autonomy, expands male sexual freedom and thereby increases risk taking behavior. In the socio-cultural African context, women or girls are expected to be passive in sexual interactions and observe silence on issues pertaining to sex. These cultural practices are very oppressive to both women and young girls as they have no power to challenge them.

Leclerc-Madlala (2001) argue that virginity testing is a denial of the need to explore, speak about, and do something with regard to what some people (testers) openly condemn as a lack of male sexual responsibility. It is a traditional practice which is associated with gender differences and young girls are socialized to believe that they should undergo virginity testing. Young girls are socialized at an early age to view their virginity as their parents' pride. Van Schalkwyk, (2002: 1) stated that:

Culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It also includes value systems, traditional beliefs and practices which are linked with tradition or religion.

The quotation above confirm that culture shapes the way things are done in a particular community and our understanding of why this should be done. Virginity testing as a cultural practice has come under fire from different groups throughout the world. Human rights activities argued against this practice as they claim that the rights of the girl child are violated as there is a belief that they are vulnerable or even coerced into virginity testing. Some believe that there are social, cultural and economic factors that are pulling the young women to virginity testing against their will.

There is limited literature on the views and perceptions of girls about the practice. Gender norms cast women as being primarily responsible for productive activities within the home, in contrast to men who are cast as primary economic actors and producers outside the home. Even if a woman is informed or has accurate information about sex and HIV prevention, the societal expectation that a woman should be sexually inexperienced, makes it difficult for her to be an active agent in negotiating safer sex (WHO, 2003). A study by George (2008) revealed that some young adolescents undergo virginity testing to protect them against the risk of HIV infection. Often young people who are sexually active do not use condoms. It is for this reason that virginity testing is conducted because it is believed that virginity testing will discourage adolescents from engaging in sexual relationships. Testers claim that the revival of the practice of virginity testing promotes the lost African cultural values and traditions while preventing unprotected sexual intercourse and the risk of HIV infection (Kinoti, 2005).

Another study on virginity testing found that girls reported they were willing participants in virginity testing and were proud of their cultural heritage (Law, 2005). They stated that virginity testing protected them from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies and affirmed their self-respect. They pointed out that the practice has socio-economic advantages in that it contributes to a decreased risk of HIV/AIDS because it keeps girls attending school and reduces the need for social grants. Contrary to arguments that virginity testing puts the sex responsibility on women and not men, some chiefs argue that traditionally it is elderly women who are in the forefront of ensuring young women control their sexual relationships and are also urging them to perform virginity testing as well.

For some women, marriage increases the risk of HIV infection (International Women's Coalition, 2008: 1). More than fourth-fifths of new infections in women occur in marriage or in long-term relationships with primary partners. Some women who are living with HIV/AIDS were virgins when they got married and had remained faithful to their husbands (International Women's Coalition, 2008). In the study of sexual power and HIV risk, conducted by Pettifog, Measham, Rees and Padian (2004) it was reported that women are not obtaining HIV tests; not disclosing test results; not requesting that their partners be tested; not using condoms or remaining faithful because of the fear of being beaten or abandoned by their partners. Fearing violence or rejection, 58 percent of South African girls avoid discussing condom use with their partners. Yet in couples where one partner is infected with HIV, consistent and correct condom use provides the HIV negative person with a near zero risk of infection (International Women's Health Coalition, 2008).

Gupta et.al (2003) argues that virginity testing should be viewed as a "gendered response to a local disease experience that is fundamentally gendered in nature", on the same breath cautioning that the interventions that seek to respond to the AIDS epidemic should do no harm but be gender sensitive.

Methodology

Research design is a set of logical steps taken by researcher to answer the research questions (Brink, 2006:92). Mouton describes a research design as a plan or blue print on how the researcher intends to conduct the research in order to solve the problem. The researchers used field study as a research design. The reason of for using field study is because it enabled the researchers to investigate the reason why virginity testing must be conducted on young girls.

Qualitative Methodology

According to O'Neil (2010) qualitative research means any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (O'Neil, 2010). This study relied on a qualitative research methodology to collect and analyze the data.

Population

KwaZulu-Natal has a population of 9.8 million constituting 21 percent of the total population of South Africa, and has a larger proportion of females than males. Almost 53 percent of the population of KwaZulu-Natal constitutes women. It is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa with a high unemployment rate. Almost 36 percent of the population is unemployed. Most of the population is dependent on agricultural employment. Most of the economic activities in KwaZulu-Natal are concentrated in Durban, Pinetown, Pietermaritzburg, Empangeni, and Newcastle. The poverty line of KwaZulu-Natal is R322 per month (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

The poverty level in KwaZulu-Natal has remained high since 2011 with 21 percent of South Africa's population falling below the poverty line (Department of Welfare, 2011). Social factors like education, unemployment, poor health and housing quality are closely linked to poverty. The poverty rate is higher in the rural than the urban areas.

Sampling

The sampled group for this study consists of one group of six people between the ages of 12-21.

Sampling methods

The researchers used non-probability and its sub type of snowball sampling to find girls who had undergone virginity testing. Snowball sampling is normally used when there is no knowledge of the sampling frame and limited access to appropriate participants for the intended study (Alson & Bowels, 2003). Snowballing involves approaching a single case that is involved in the phenomenon to be investigated in order to gain information on another similar person. This one person refers the researcher to a similar case and preferably more than one other case. It was not easy to find participants for the study because the study was itself sensitive and involved discussion of cultural issues. Some participants were unable to talk freely about virginity testing because of the stigma and the fear that they would be perceived as sexually active. For the purpose of this study, only girls who had undergone virginity testing were selected. Each focus group consisted of about six people and the emphasis was on understanding their perceptions of virginity testing the age of the participants ranged from 12 to 21 years.

Data analysis

The researchers used theme identification methods to analyze data. According to Ryan and Barnard (2011) theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. Theme can be described as an "umbrella" constructs which are usually identified by the researcher before, after and during the data collection. (Hayes 2005) defines themes as "recurrent ideas or topics which are detected in the scripts being analyzed, they usually come up in more than one occasion in a particular set of data". Themes can also be identified by reviewing the original field notes. The researchers identified all the data that relate to the above mentioned pattern or theme and entered the data appropriately.

Ethical considerations

Ethics are defined as the branch of philosophy dealing with values that relate to human conduct, with respect to the rightness or wrongness of specific actions, and to the goodness or badness of the motive of and ends of such action (Mafunisa: 2000:79). Chapman (1993:93) argues that ethics are concerned not only with distinguishing right from wrong and good from bad, but also with the commitment to do what is right and acceptable. The ethics which were followed in this study are discussed below.

Informed consent

Informed consent is a statement (usually written) that explains aspects of a study to participants and for voluntary agreement to participate before the study begins (Lawrence and Neuman: 2014:151). The participants were fully informed about the procedure and risks involved in the study and they gave their consent. The researchers made sure that the participants were completely free to express their feelings.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Anonymity is the ethical protection that participants remain nameless, their identities are protected from disclosure and remains unknown (Lawrence and Neuman 2014:154). Anonymity is one important ethical consideration which encourages participants to give information freely. Anonymity means subjects remain nameless. Anonymity is good foundation for confidentiality where respondents know that the information given will not be misused.

Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation is an ethical principle that people should never participate and research unless the explicitly and freely agree to participate (Lawrence and Neuman: 2014:151). The researcher ensured that the respondents participate voluntarily basics. Care was taken to avoid any forced responses, and those that did not want to take part are not forced.

Findings

Definition of virginity testing

The interviewed girls were able to define virginity testing. They defined it as follows: *“it is when you lay down and the elders insert the finger to check whether the hymen is still intact, if the hymen is intact you are declared a virgin and when the hymen is not intact then you are declared a non-virgin.”* They also define virginity testing as follows: *“it is when you lie down on your back and the testers insert their fingers in the vagina to check if a girl has been sexually active or not. If you are a virgin you will receive a white dot pasted on your forehead, if you are no longer a virgin then they will not paste a white dot on your forehead”*.

Both male and female participants were able to identify the procedures involved in virginity testing. Inserting fingers into a vagina is a method that is being used to check whether or not a girl is a virgin. They all reported that a girl who is no longer a virgin will not receive a white dot on her forehead. Both female and male participants reported that an intact hymen is seen as an indicator of virginity.

How is virginity testing conducted?

Participants were asked to explain how virginity testing is conducted. Female respondents reported that there are two different ways of determining whether a girl is a virgin or not. In the first method the girl would lie down and the tester inserts a finger into the vagina to check whether or not the hymen is still intact. The second method requires the tester to use a jug of water: the girl will lie down on the floor and the tester will pour the jug of water into her vagina, if the whole jug of water enters her vagina then she is viewed as no longer a virgin.

Respondent A: *“You lie down on your back and then the testers will insert the finger to check whether the hymen is still there or not”*.

Respondent B: *“You lie down with your back and the testers will pour a jug of water into your vagina and if the whole jug goes into your vagina then you are no longer a virgin but if half of it goes into your vagina then you are a virgin.”*

The female respondents reported that there has been a change in the way virginity testing has been conducted in the past few years. They reported that some testers now use a machine. They reported that a girl will lie down and the tester will place a machine in the vagina. If the light on the machine turns green then the girls is a virgin, but if the light turns red then the girl is not a virgin.

Respondent C: *“The testers no longer use their hands, they now use a machine because when they put their fingers in the vagina, sometimes they break the hymen, and when we go there the following year they will find out that we are no longer virgins, even if we did not engage in sexual relationships”*.

All the female participants reported they are now happy that the testers are using a machine to determine virginity. They reported that the hymen may break when fingers are used to determine virginity and this traumatizes young girls. In addition, the elders are unlikely to believe that the girl lost her virginity during the testing process.

In the interviews, participants failed to point out that sometimes a virgin does not bleed during her first sexual intercourse. This may be due to a number of reasons. As earlier mentioned by Le Roux (2006), many doctors claim a hymen is not a good indicator of virginity because the hymen can easily break through sports and physical activities or even as a result of tampon use. Boys and girls strongly believe that a virgin should bleed on her first sexual intercourse. Interestingly, it was found that some girls do indeed lose their virginity when the testers insert their

fingers in the vagina. It was reported that the finger should be gently inserted to avoid the tearing of the hymen during the virginity testing process.

Respondent D: *“In the past few years when the testers used their fingers to check whether a girl is still a virgin or not, the insertion of the finger broke the virginity of the girl and when the girl goes for virginity testing the following year she was declared as a non-virgin. However this happened to a few girls, and that is why we are now using a machine.”*

From the interviews it emerged that a girl who lost her virginity before marriage suffers discrimination and is not allowed to perform activities that are meant for virgins. Safeguarding fertility before marriage was offered as one of the most important reasons for virginity testing.

Difference between a virgin and non-virgin

Girls showed much knowledge when discussing the difference between someone who is a virgin and someone who is no longer a virgin. A virgin's breast should point upwards and a virgin's body should be firm with no veins. Others reported that older people can tell if you are no longer a virgin just by looking at the eyes of girls. Some of the participants reported that when the virgin urinates in the sand, her urine will break the sand. There will be a mark on the sand that shows it was a virgin who urinated in the sand. They reported that there will be a small hole in the sand.

Responded E: *“The legs of someone who is not a virgin become different after losing virginity, the veins of someone who is a virgin are firm, the whole body is firm and the breasts look strong and firm. When she is walking, you can see from her walk that she is a virgin”*

At which age is a girl expected to lose her virginity?

Respondents were asked to give their opinion of the age a girl is expected to lose her virginity. Most female respondents felt that a girl should lose her virginity at the age of 21 when the traditional ceremony known as “umemulo” or the 21st party has been performed by the girl's father to show his appreciation and gratitude to his daughter for behaving in a culturally acceptable manner.

By conducting this ceremony the father is giving permission to his daughter to now engage in sexual relation for she has reached the age of maturity. When a girl reaches the age of 21 without losing her virginity she is respected by her peers and also the elderly. Even though many respondents reported that it is acceptable for a girl to lose her virginity at the age of 21, a few respondents believed that a girl should still remain a virgin until marriage.

Some of the respondents observed that there are families who do not perform the traditional ceremonies for young girls. Instead the parents choose to arrange a 21st party for the girl and she will be given a key as a token of gratitude that she has behaved appropriately. It was observed that those who celebrate a 21st party are usually Christians as opposed to Zulu's who uphold traditional culture.

Responded f: *“She must remain a virgin up until lobola is paid and she has married. A girl should lose her virginity in her marriage”*

“Up until you reach 21 and your father has done the traditional ceremony known as ‘umemulo’ or the 21st party then only you may engage in sexual activity”

“The bible says that a couple should engage in sexual activity once the couple is married.”

“Normally people who comes from families who are Christians, they do not have the traditional ceremony known as ‘umemulo’, they usually have the 21 party”

Some respondents hold a different view about the age at first sexual intercourse. One respondent stated that the girl should make the decision. The decision should not be influenced by others in the community. She felt that the decision to engage in sexual intercourse should be made by the girl herself and the girl should have sexual intercourse when she feels ready for the act.

Young people's views on virginity testing as a way of pregnancy prevention

Virginity testing in KwaZulu-Natal has been conducted in order to discourage girls from engaging in sexual activities and is seen as the best way to control fertility among unmarried women. Most respondents reported that if virginity testing is not conducted young girls will behave as they please without fear of the consequences and they will have babies at an earlier age. One of the respondents observed that the reason why there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy is that young people are no longer undergoing virginity testing in some areas. Some respondents truly believe that virginity testing can prevent unplanned pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Respondent B: *“It will not prevent all pregnancies, it will only prevent pregnancy for those who undergo virginity testing because they know that they will undergo virginity testing but for those who do not undergo virginity testing it will not prevent it. “If every girl can undergo virginity testing, the teenage pregnancy rate can drop; one of the reasons why there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy is because not every girl undergoes virginity testing.”*

The respondents believe that if young girls are tested for virginity, they will feel afraid of engaging in sexual activity and in that way teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases will be reduced. Young girls felt that if girls do not undergo virginity testing, they are not afraid of engaging in sexual relationships because they know that no one will find out that they are no longer virgins. They believe that virginity testing can be used as a strategy for pregnancy prevention. Both female and male respondents felt that if all the girls in South Africa were encouraged to undergo virginity testing, the teenage pregnancy rate will decrease.

Young people’s views on whether virginity testing can lead to rape or not

During the interview conducted, adolescents were asked if they felt that virginity testing can lead to rape. Boys and girls seem to share a different view on whether virginity testing can lead to rape. Most of the girls reported that virginity testing can lead to rape. One of the reasons they advance was because virginity testing is done openly and boys are able to see which girls are virgins and which are not. Virginity testing is not conducted in private places; they are usually conducted on sport grounds and at the king’s palace. Respondents felt that those places are not secure enough. The girls walk naked in front of thousands of people; showing their buttocks and breasts. They also reported that journalists take photographs while they are naked. They felt that walking naked in front of thousands of people makes them vulnerable to rape because people can identify girls who are virgins and those who are not.

Respondent C *“It can lead to rape because when virginity testing is conducted, journalists come and take photos, in that way people are able to identify who is a virgin and then they rape the victim.” Yes, it does lead to rape. When virginity testing is conducted everyone is allowed to watch us naked, only the front is covered. Boys get sexually aroused just by seeing us with our breasts and buttocks not covered and they want to have sex with us. Some of the girls are raped after the reed dance ceremony. Also the journalists come and take photos so people know exactly that so and so is a virgin”. However, the practice ensures that teenagers do not engage in sexual intercourse early and contract sexually transmitted diseases.*

While girls felt that virginity testing makes them more vulnerable to rape, boys were against the idea. They reported that their presence is one of support and to show how much they love and respect their culture. They felt that those who rape the virgins should receive severe punishment as they do not respect their own culture.

Respondent C *“It is our culture and we respect it, when we go there we show support to young girls and the fact that their buttocks and breasts are not covered doesn’t mean that we will want to have sex with them. We truly respect our culture. Those people who rape young girls don’t show respect and they don’t deserve to be called Zulus.”*

In the interviews with young people, it emerged that not only virgins get raped due to some of the existing myths. Some respondents reported that if you have sex with a widow whose husband died many years ago, you will also be cured. There is a belief that someone who has not been sexually active for a long time can cure a man who is living with the virus. Young adolescents were against this prevailing myth. They believe that if you are HIV positive and have sex with a virgin or widow you will certainly infect that person and will not be cured; instead the number of people who are HIV positive will increase.

Virginity testing as a way of fighting HIV/AIDS

KwaZulu-Natal is the province the hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Respondents believe that virginity testing will help to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS, and delaying the onset of sexual activity among young women will help to curb the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS. Some girls believe that virginity testing empowers them as young women and reduces their risk of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy. Most respondents reported that virginity testing helps to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS because young adolescents will not engage in sexual relationships. They will have a fear of engaging in sexual relationships because they know that when they have to undergo virginity testing, the testers will find out that they are no longer virgins.

Respondent D *“Virginity testing can help in reducing HIV/AIDS in the sense that if every girl is tested they will remain virgins and they will only engage in sexual activity after marriage.” Virginity testing will help in reducing HIV/AIDS, because adolescents will not engage in sexual activity, they will have the fear that the testers will find out that they are no longer virgins.*

All the respondents were aware of HIV/AIDS, and thought that if every girl were to undergo virginity testing, the level of new infections will decrease. However they also acknowledge that even though boys are not tested they must practice monogamy and remain faithful to their partners, and before the marriage ceremony both partners should go for an HIV test. One of the girls reported that community leaders should also encourage boys to abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage.

“I think it should not only be the girls who are tested but also boys so that when they get married both partners are HIV negative. Community leaders should also encourage boys to also abstain from sex before marriage.”

Most respondents felt that if everyone is tested for virginity there will be a decrease in the level of new HIV infections. However some respondents acknowledged that it is important to test for HIV before marriage so that if one partner is infected the other partner will know their status and take preventative measures to protect themselves. They are also aware that HIV/AIDS is not only contracted through sexual activity but also through blood transmission, but that this rarely happens.

Responded E: *“No, it will not prevent it. If young girls undergo virginity testing they will be afraid to engage in sexual relationships before marriage, and I believe even when they are about to get married, their partners should go for HIV testing.”*

In addition both girls and boys felt that it is important to educate those who have the virus to live a positive life without infecting their partners. Information on HIV/AIDS is very important for people to make informed decisions about their lives and also to have access to health services. They felt there is a need for more awareness campaigns on how to remain HIV negative. People should be given information on condom use.

Discussion

The results from this qualitative study indicated that adolescents identify virginity testing as a strategy to determine whether or not the girls are sexually active or not, and to also curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Major Findings of the study

The findings of this study concerning the reasons for probing virginity testing among girls in rural KwaZulu-Natal are also consistent with the custom being associated with lobola and marriage and recently, with the fight against HIV/AIDS. Daniel (2005) observes that virginity testing was originally intended to prove the purity of the bride before marriage. But since the advent of HIV/AIDS, the study revealed that girls who are virgins are in a much better position to command higher respect and to lead a life free of this killer disease and other sexually transmitted diseases.

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