

# 'Do not walk alone'

Learners face daily risk of sexual assault

Although the National Learner Transport Policy (2015) makes provision for subsidised transport for children who walk long distances to school, implementation has been slow.

**Photo:** Children Nature Network, Nappy.



**A**dolescents in South Africa experience among the highest rates of sexual violence in the world. More than a quarter of adolescents (26.3%) have experienced some form of sexual violence, according to a 2018 [nationally representative household study](#). In that study, when data were collected at schools – where participants might have felt safer to answer honestly – this figure rose to one in three (35.4%).

Much research has been conducted on sexual assault in schools. However, participatory research by the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the HSRC highlights that school children feel particularly vulnerable as they walk to school. A group of teenagers from a KwaZulu-Natal township was invited to create short films of their experiences of vulnerability to sexual violence, using their cellphones. The resulting cellfilms provided a window into the lives of adolescents in this setting, and the sociocultural norms and patriarchal contexts that put them at risk of sexual assault.

By *Andrea Teagle*



Teens in townships are particularly vulnerable. To better understand adolescents' experiences and fears around sexual violence, a group of researchers invited adolescents from a KwaZulu-Natal township to create films about 'an aspect of vulnerability to sexual violence that matters most' to them. Led by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Dr Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi, the research team equipped the adolescents to be able to create cellphone films – or 'cellfilms'. The films were not intended to be documentaries, but rather portrayals of the teenagers' experiences or perceptions of vulnerability. Scripts and settings were left to the participants to decide upon.

All five groups chose to depict scenes of abduction and rape on the way to and from school – something that the participants said happened 'all the time' in their community.

### **Ever-looming danger**

The study was conducted in the Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu (INK) township precinct, outside Durban. KwaZulu-Natal is predominantly poor and rural. More than two-thirds of school children ([2 million](#) of approximately [2.8 million](#)) walk to school – putting them at risk of assault as they navigate sometimes treacherous terrain. Although the province has recorded an increase in reported cases of sexual assault on adolescents, Ngidi and colleagues note that research on the dangers of school journeys specifically lags behind media reports of this phenomenon.

The research team – which also included Prof Relebohile Moletsane from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Dr Zaynab Essack from the HSRC – used a method called availability sampling to recruit the participants: 10 girls and 9 boys between the ages of 14 and 17 years. All were dependent on social grants and lived in informal settlements or government housing projects. During the study, they received cellphones and training on how to create cellfilms.

A sense of ever-looming danger is present across all of the film scripts, Ngidi and his colleagues write. The 'present and persistent' threat of sexual victimisation creates 'a sense of fear and helplessness'. In four of the five stories, an adolescent girl is abducted and raped – in one of them, she is also killed. In the fifth, a boy is abducted. In this last film, the perpetrators are caught and killed by angry community members.

“We wanted to show how serious this issue is,” one participant, Richard (16), explained. A boy in another group, Alsina (14), stated: “The [sexual] abuse of girls by boys and men in our community is common. My message is do not walk alone because these criminals will assault you if you are a girl.”

The teenagers related the stories directly to their own fears, and reports of assaults on teenagers in their communities. Sthandwa (14) stated, “It makes me feel very sad because it means that I have to live constantly under threat of what might happen to me. I might be raped.” Another girl, 16-year-old Kimberly, expressed a similar sentiment: “I don’t feel safe ... because rapists are found everywhere in our community.”

The films also indicated that the participants considered girls to be facing the greatest danger, but that adolescent boys are not exempt from assault.

### Unexpected perpetrators

Ngidi and his colleagues chose this participatory research method to allow participants ‘to tell personal stories or to describe their lived experiences of issues important to them’. According to Essack, participatory visual methods are particularly useful for engaging adolescents.

“The participants become protagonists, actively relating their lived experiences and perceptions. These approaches are invaluable, especially for sensitive research topics,” she told the *Review*.

The films shed light on some of the sociocultural norms that facilitate violence against adolescents. One of the films depicts a respected older man abducting and raping a teenage girl, indicating that – contrary to what is sometimes thought – perpetrators of violence are not always young men (as was common in [the late 1980s](#)) or unknown to the victim. The researchers note that in their discussions about older rapists in their communities, the adolescents consistently referred to these perpetrators as ‘uncles’. The continued use of this term of respect points to how the expectation of deference to elders may put adolescents at greater risk.

‘Since adolescents occupy a low social status in comparison to older men, as do females to males, they are expected to show respect [*Ukuhlonipha*] and reverence for adults generally, and men specifically,’ Ngidi and his colleagues write, adding that *Ukuhlonipha* requires that adolescents do not challenge or question their elders.

These sociocultural dynamics intersect with a context of widespread normalised violence. As scholar and activist Helen Moffett has [argued](#), authorities legitimated the use of violence as a means of control during the apartheid era. Today, write Ngidi and his colleagues, ‘practices of abduction for rape perpetuate and widen patriarchal power imbalances and the [social control of women and girls](#) through sexual violence.’

The impacts of vulnerability to sexual assault are far-reaching for learners. In addition to the obvious immediate threat to their lives and wellbeing, the associated stress affects young peoples’ learning capacity and places them [at higher risk for long-term mental health issues](#).

### National Learner Transport Policy

The study findings point to a need for safe scholar transport and visible policing in the community, the authors write. The 2015 [National Learner Transport Policy](#) was hailed as an important step for ensuring that scholars have safe passage to school. The policy makes provision for subsidised transport for learners in areas where they cannot access public transport and those who walk long distances (more than 5km) to school. However, implementation has been hindered by the lack of clarity on the respective roles of the Departments of Education and the Department of Transport. Also, some argue that the policy is too narrow, excluding children whose walks are short but nonetheless dangerous.

In July 2021, the [KwaZulu-Natal Learner Transport Policy](#) came into effect, driven by advocacy by Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre. The provincial policy fills some of the gaps in the national policy – for example, clarifying departmental roles in implementation for KwaZulu-Natal. However, EE notes that the policy makes no plan for overcoming critical financial constraints to implementation. For this reason, Essack and Ngidi have also piloted and evaluated a ‘Walking School Bus’ intervention – adult-chaperoned walks to and from school – to explore alternative learner safety interventions.

National provision of transport also remains hindered by a critical lack of data, according to the HSRC’s Dr Peter Jacobs. In 2018, Jacobs conducted [a briefing](#) that recommended a thorough investigation of learner transport at district level to identify who qualifies for public transport; however, provincial department support to enable this research has yet to materialise.

Meanwhile, the cellphilm study suggests that adolescents continue to fear sexual assault on their school journeys. When asked why they continued to go, one participant responded: “Because we have no choice. We are forced to come to school, but it is not safe.”

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