South African Rural Girls' Safety Strategies on the School Journey

Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi, Xolani Ntinga, Ayanda Khumalo, and Zaynab Essack

Abstract: In this article, we use data generated through photovoice and focus group discussions to examine how primary school girls from two resource-poor and high-risk rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, negotiate their safety on the dangerous journey to and from school. Our findings show that girls actively identify and apply specific safe-seeking strategies by drawing on available community and interpersonal resources as they navigate their way to school. These strategies moderate risk exposure and are perceived to reduce girls' vulnerability to victimization. While the sustainability of these strategies remains in question, it is essential to note that girls can exercise their agency in providing safety in sociocultural and geographic contexts that expose them to risk.

Keywords: agency, harassment, neighborhood, perpetrator, threat, violence

Introduction

In South Africa, since many rural girls walk to school without significant adult supervision (Statistics South Africa 2021) they are exposed to several threats, risks, and vulnerabilities (Porter et al. 2011). Research points to how girls' daily commutes to school shape, and are shaped by, the possibility of violence and unwanted sexual encounters (Hampshire et al. 2011) including sexual harassment, abduction, and rape (De Kadt et al. 2014; Mhlongo 2017; Ngidi et al. 2021). However, these experiences are not uniquely South African. Researchers who have studied the impact of neighborhood disadvantage and violence on girls' school journeys in the poor communities of Baltimore City report that absenteeism resulted from exposure to violence on the school journey (Burdick-Will et al. 2019). In two high-crime and violent neighborhoods in Chicago, Heather Meyer and Ron Astor (2002) examined schoolgirls' understanding of the danger and the potential harm they faced while walking to and from school. Girls reported victimization from gangs who roamed the streets. In Philadelphia,

Girlhood Studies 16, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 105-121
doi: 10.3167/ghs.2023.160109
© The Author(s)
ISSN: 1938-8209 (print) 1938-8322 (online)

Douglas Wiebe and colleagues (2013) investigated children's vulnerability to assault during their walks to school. Most of the children reported experiences of gendered violence. The current heteropatriarchal system permits the violation of girls and brutal expressions of violence given the hegemonic sexist social scripts (Connel 2013; Woodson and Pabon 2016) that validate gendered and sexualized forms of violence (Smith et al. 2015) in South Africa and elsewhere. Moreover, ideologies that promote gender inequalities enable the harassment and abuse of girls, especially in rural settings (Bhana et al. 2021).

South African scholarship has identified schools in resource-poor communities as spaces in which violent gendered crime against girls is perpetrated (Chitsamatanga 2020) and that sexual violence clusters around schools in these communities (Breetzke et al. 2021). This makes South African schools located in areas characterized by chronic poverty, socio-economic distress, low rates of employment, and high rates of crime and violence generative sites for the examination of girls' vulnerability to, and safe-seeking strategies against, violence (Zincume 2014). While research has analyzed how children travel to school in rural areas and the many risks they face on this journey, there is relative silence about their agency in negotiating their safety. An exception includes Gillian Eagle and Kgomotso Kwele's (2021) investigation into young black women students' experiences with violence and their coping mechanisms when they travel to their respective campuses in Johannesburg, South Africa. These scholars report that in the face of their many risks, young women adopt both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies to mitigate their risk and assuage psychological distress. Similar findings have been reported in Lesotho where Pholoho Morojele and Nithi Muthukrishna (2013) used a participatory visual research methodology to document girls' school journeys and the related challenges they face. These researchers conclude that girls actively position themselves in relation to all the factors and dynamics that influence their journey and act accordingly. In a qualitative synthesis of global ethnographic studies on children's experiences of socio-material environments on their school journeys, researchers report that children feel vulnerable, but can also negotiate journeys and manage risks (Morris et al. 2022). In South Africa's remote, marginalized, and resource-constrained rural communities, parents/caregivers cannot afford to send their children to school by taxi or bus, should such means even be available (Mahlaba 2014). For this reason, we elaborate on the safe-seeking strategies that girls employ to counter risk and victimization on their rural school journeys. By conceptualizing girls as active social agents, we examine how their safety strategies emerge from both their social position as children in their rural communities and their interaction with their heteropatriarchal social environments.

Materials and Methods

We brought together a group of schoolchildren from two neighboring rural communities, Vulindlela and Edendale, located on the northwest perimeter of Pietermaritzburg in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa. These communities reflect socioeconomic distress that manifests, in part, in violent contact crimes. For example, the Plessislaer police station, the serving station for Vulindlela and Edendale, documented over 3000 cases of contact crimes in the 2020/21 reporting period (South African Police Services 2021). Media reports suggest that fatal shootings are reported almost every week at this police station (Makhanya 2022). Since violence is typically gendered in rural South Africa (de Lange and Mitchell 2014; Moletsane 2018), girls and young women are particularly vulnerable and experience the most victimization (Hallman et al. 2015). With a documented history of violence, Vulindlela and Edendale provide generative contexts for examining girls' vulnerabilities and their corresponding safety strategies. The history of violence in these neighborhoods accounts for girls' vulnerability. For example, in the early 1990s, as the era of apartheid was drawing to a close, this area experienced a politically motivated civil war, known locally as "the seven-day war," in which 80 people were killed and over 20,000 individuals had their homes destroyed. Women and girls fared even worse at this time in being victims of rape and femicide (Mchunu 2021). Indeed, even now, Vulindlela and Edendale continue to face violence and chronic poverty that results from socioeconomic neglect and poor access to basic services such as housing and public infrastructure. The regular victimization of girls has become a feature of these rural communities as Thobani Ngqulunga (2011) points out.

Participants and Data Gathering

Data for this article was collected as part of a larger mixed-methods study called the "Walking School Bus" (Essack and Ngidi 2018) that evaluated the impact of having adult-chaperoned walks to school and back on schoolchildren's experiences of violence. Given our focus on pre-adolescents, our qualitative data collection was governed by engaging in critical participatory methodologies related to research on social change (Duea et al. 2022) that limited power imbalances between us researchers and our participants (see Packard 2008), who were, in our larger study, 20 school-going boys (n=11) and girls (n=9) aged between 10 and 12 who were in Grades 5 to 7 in the local schools of Vulindlela and Edendale. The participants were recruited through the Community Preparation and Research Support Unit at the Human Sciences Research Council's Centre for Community-Based Research (Sweetwaters) Site. All the participants were purposively selected for the study because they walked to and from school without any adult supervision. The nine girls in this study lived and attended school in a rural area defined by a culture of gender inequality.

We used photovoice to collect data and this was supported by focus group discussions. Photovoice describes a research process during which cameras are provided to participants—children in this particular context—to document visually their everyday realities (Liebenberg 2018; Peabody 2013). This technique has been hailed for its resourcefulness in engaging children on sensitive topics and for including fun as part of the process (Mitchell et al. 2016). The photovoice exercise included having participants reflect on safe-seeking strategies on their school journeys in relation to their exposure to violence and victimization. While the broader study worked with both boys and girls, our aim in this article is to spotlight girls' agency and safety strategies, so here we focus only on data generated by the nine girls who participated in the larger study. The girls were asked to take photos that illustrated their safe-seeking strategies against gendered violence, crime, and victimization as they navigated the journey on foot to and from their schools.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was influenced by the work of John Fiske (1992), who argues that there are three sites of textuality. For Fiske, the image is the primary text, and what the producers say about their images is the production text. Finally, what the audience says about the images is their text. In working with the girls' photographs in this study, we analyzed the primary texts and the producer texts. We then conducted a thematic analysis of all the material collected, including the transcribed audiotapes of the discussions of the productions and the issues that emerged from them. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded, translated from isiZulu to English, and transcribed. Data management was supported through Atlas.ti (version 8).

Ethics

The study received ethics approval from the Human Sciences Research Council's Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 4/2208/18). Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians along with written informed assent from the child participants. Participants were assured that their identity would be protected by our using pseudonyms and were told that they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Findings

Girls' Vigilance and Risk Assessment

Our analysis suggests that girls used shared knowledge as an agentic strategy to negotiate their safety on the school journey. In their photographs, girls demonstrated both a geospatial awareness of their community and the social and gendered meanings assigned to such spaces. Importantly, participants demonstrated a shared understanding of risky and safe spaces through discussions about their photographs and their school journeys. The girls' photographs reflected this common understanding, especially of unsafe spaces.

While participants could recount experiences of physical harassment of themselves and/or their peers, and verbal harassment in the form of catcalling, their knowledge and awareness of safe and unsafe spaces did not always originate from their personal experience. Communities (parents, teachers, and friends) played a critical role in imparting this knowledge and, in this way, supported agentic strategies among girls. For example, participants shared warnings about spaces such as taverns.

> If you pass here, there is a tavern; it's dangerous here because other children from around my home (giggling) … There is … when you pass over here, children use[d] to walk here, and now that they've heard that a tavern is about to be opened, there will be problems arising. There are people that will come drink here … and people will get shot at if we walk this route. (11-year-old Andiswa)

As we can see, Andiswa described her vigilance about certain spaces that involves awareness raised by communities but that was also dependent on her individual risk assessment. In some instances, participants also made conscious choices to navigate spaces they deemed risky in groups rather than alone because they were late for school and felt safer walking through these unsafe spaces with others. The ability to anticipate risk is an important behavioral skill for these girls who navigate these spaces every day. This fine balance between safe and unsafe was succinctly described by Andiswa in her awareness that there are invisible boundaries between safe and unsafe spaces and that these constantly evolve in their overlapping or existing alongside each other.

Navigating Unsafe Spaces

The participants described their strategy of avoiding certain risky places like taverns, forests, and abandoned buildings altogether or at least at certain times of the day. Some participants opted for alternative routes or what they called "shortcuts" to avoid being harmed. Where risk could not be avoided altogether, participants described other risk-reduction strategies. Key among these was running past unsafe spaces or away from risky ones. Ten-year-old Zama said, "When [we are] passing by the tavern, older men call us to come to them, and we run past the tavern very quickly." This strategy was referred to by other participants, including 11-year-old Angela and 12-year-old Nothani.

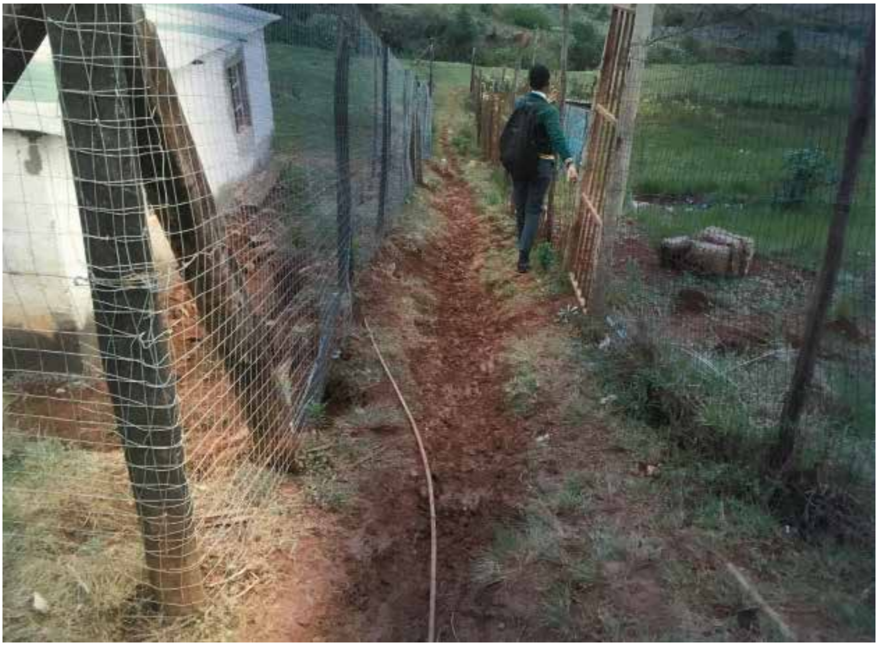
> Researcher: And what do those people that are taking drugs do to you? What do they say to you?
>
> Angela: They call us and say, 'Hey girls come here,' and they give us money.
>
> Researcher: Do you take the money when they give it to you?
>
> Angela: No, I have never taken the money; we even ran away once.
>
> Nothani: After that we left and ran away and one of those boys caught Mbali and kept touching her bum, then she cried, and I ran back towards her and grabbed her then I ran to her mother and told her.

Despite the inherent risk and, in some cases, actual experiences of violence, participants felt able to escape danger by running away.

Seeking Refuge in Trusted Neighborhood Homes

Other participants reported that they ran into nearby households of trusted adults when at risk of violence on their school journey. To illustrate, Zama produced a photograph (see Figure 1) showing a schoolgirl walking between the security fences of two households. Referring to the white house on the left of the photograph, she suggested that it was one of the homes she ran to whenever she encountered threats on her journey to school.

Figure 1: Relying on the safety of neighborhood homes



Describing the images they produced during the photovoice activity, other participants said,

> They [perpetrators] hide and wait for school children to come back from school so they will take our stuff. In this picture is an adult man's home. So, if they want to rob me, I can run to this house and ask for help. (10-year-old Zama)
>
> This path is safe because if criminals want to kidnap me, I can seek assistance in the houses close to the path. It is also safe because it is in an open space, and adults can see when we are under threat. (12-year-old Vuyile)

These narratives offer evidence of the support provided to vulnerable girls by an extended network of people in rural communities who act as caregivers to the girls (see Meyer and Chetty 2017). The narratives also point to girls' use of this support. What is interesting is that these extended networks of support and safety are not determined by kinship as Nicola Critchlow (2007) has pointed out in a different context. Rather, they emerge as a response to living in a place that is shaped by limited socioeconomic resources (Mahlaba 2014). Moreover, since violence against girls in South Africa's rural areas is routine (Chabangu 2014), many adults (even those who are not in kinship networks) stand ready to offer protection against harm to any girl who comes running into their household given the constant expectation of danger in these communities. For the girls, this is a viable and useful strategy.

Risk-confronting Strategies

In some instances, participants drew on risk-confronting strategies to negotiate their safety on the school journey. These involve directly addressing the threat posed by perpetrators as suggested elsewhere by Faith Tucker and Hugh Matthews (2002). Participants described shouting to get attention as a key risk-confrontation strategy. The proximity of neighboring houses or trusted adults means that girls shouting for help when necessary is a viable strategy. For example, 11-year-old Lulama said, "The path that I walk feels safe because it is close to people's houses, it is quiet, and if someone wants to hurt you or touch your private part, you can immediately shout for help." Likewise, 12-year-old Nothani added that "when I walk on this route, I feel safer because there are always people around, and it is closer to home, so I feel safe. I can shout for help."

Eleven-year-old Nosipho recounted that her having shouted out the perpetrator's name discouraged further violence from taking place. She explained, "This person was following us; we would stop, and he would also stop. When we walked faster, he also walked faster. So, my friend and I decided to shout his name, and he stopped following us." The belief was that if a perpetrator's name is called out, other adults in the community will hear and will come to rescue the girls in danger and the potential perpetrator would cease threatening them.

Shouting out a perpetrator's name or calling for help might be regarded as a dangerous act given that it reflects resistance to the threat. However, given the limited options available to schoolgirls in resource-poor communities, these risk-confronting acts are their only options. As noted by Tucker and Matthews (2002), openly confronting perpetrators directs public attention to both the act of violence and the perpetrator, and this may result in preventing an act of violence.

Researchers who specialize in the investigation of children's geographies emphasize their competence in demonstrating sophistication and agency in monitoring violent spaces (Cole 2008; Valentine 1997). Nosipho, for example, employed agency in monitoring her space by calling out the potential perpetrator's name to expose him and his intentions to the public in the expectation that she would be helped. Sarah Starkweather (2007) argues that these strategies are taught to, and learned by, girls informally in communities with high levels of poverty and violence.

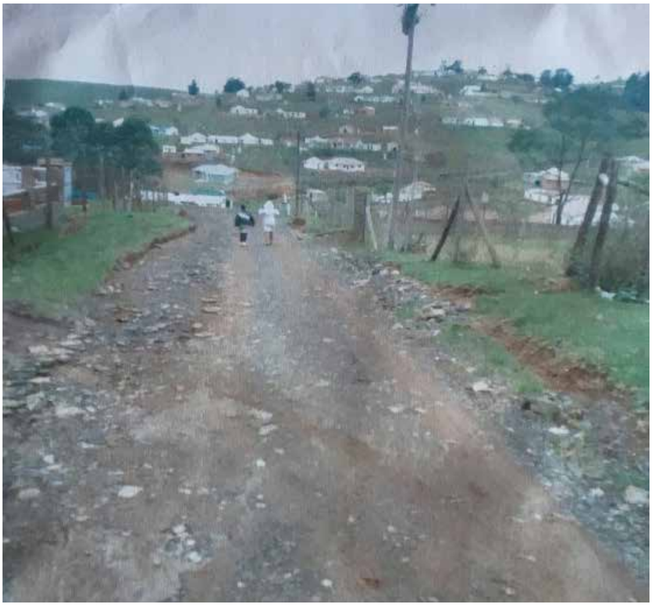
Negotiating Safety in Numbers

Our analysis also revealed that girls walked in pairs or groups as a risk-reduction strategy to ensure their safety. The participants reported that they felt much safer when they walked to school as a group. For example, 11-year-old Lulama "sometimes walk[s] with another boy [and] we usually walk as a pair" to feel safe.

Girls drew on the collective strength of their peers to push back against potential perpetrators or rescue other girls in danger of being snared by assaulters. Walking with other children, instead of walking as individuals, is an important defensive skill that rural girls learn to use very early in their lives to navigate their violent neighborhoods (Lieberman and Zimmerman 2015; Morejele 2013; Muchaka and Behrens 2012). Participants described a sense of safety in numbers. For example, as 11-year-old Nombuso noted, "I think it's safe when we walk as a collective." Nombuso went on to explain that walking with others was protective because group members could support retaliation efforts or seek help. She further explained, "Yes, we are safer when we are walking as a group, and we can fight for ourselves."

Twelve-year-old Thandeka, referring to a photograph she produced (see Figure 2) of two girls walking together to school, said that walking in groups facilitated good decision-making.

Figure 2: Walking to school as a pair



Thandeka said,

> When I pass here, I pass with a lot of friends … it is not like when you are walking alone, it is better to be walking with people than alone because if you are walking alone, it is easy for you to make a bad decision but if you are in a group then it will not be as easy to do so.

Literature that examines children's navigation of violent neighborhoods supports the findings in this study. For example, Bjorn Nansen and colleagues (2015) report that the collaborative efforts of a group of children who navigate their neighborhoods by walking together increase their safety against violence. Walking in pairs or groups also enhances the girls' surveillance of their neighborhoods, an important skill for navigating violently charged terrains. According to Ismawi Zen and Nur Amalina Ali Mohamad (2014), human-centered surveillance helps potential victims of violence to navigate their social environments more easily and further avert threats of harm. In the context of these findings, schoolgirls suggested that their surveillance depended on their all being aware of the need to assess their neighborhoods for potential threats or for suspicious individuals who might harass them. Thus, as the girls suggested, it was easier to act swiftly to counter any threat when they walked in pairs or as a group.

Male Chaperones for Enhancing Safety

Relying on male peers as chaperones who could offer protection was another safety strategy that these girls used. These chaperones were identified as older male youths from the girls' communities or other older male peers from their schools. For the girls in this study, walking in the company of trusted male youths on the school journey offered a sense of safety. Indeed, 11-year-old Nosipho said of one older boy from their neighborhood who watched over them as they walked to school, "It is sometimes safe because when we get out of school, Sizwe sometimes watches over us and protects us from people who might want to kidnap us." Twelve-year-old Vuyile, who referred to a photograph she produced of a young man who sometimes accompanies her to school, said, "This is the place we walk on; we walk with someone we know, and our parents are proud of him. It is important to walk with someone you trust in unsafe spaces."

The following conversation between 12-year-old Amanda and the researcher is instructive here.

> Amanda: We are girls, then there is my friend's friend, a boy doing Grade 10. My friend is supposed to be doing Grade 10, but she failed, so they know each other then we walk with him, and we feel protected because he can fight for us.

> Researcher: Why do you feel better when walking with a boy?
>
> Amanda: So that in case there is a junky wanting to take our school bags to sell them, then we feel protected when we are with him.

According to the participants, their parents also leveraged gendered and age-specific understandings to negotiate their safety. For example, participants reported that some of their parents approached other older male youths from the community and asked them to accompany the girls to school. In other instances, participants said that their parents sent older boys to wait by the school gates to protect them from potential sexual predators. Referring to a photograph she produced depicting a boy who sometimes accompanies her to school, 12-year-old Amanda suggested that his presence on the school journey also made other girls feel safe from harm. She explained that "when traveling with a boy I trust or know [such] as brother Sabelo, I feel safe, together with other girls because no one can harass us. After all, we are walking with him."

This was an important strategy employed by both parents and girls in the rural setting we studied. According to Gill Valentine (1997), parents in resource-limited rural communities encourage their daughters to seek protection from at least one man in their communities as a strategy to negotiate their safety. Girls in this study sought assistance from older male peers whom they trusted and respected. See, also, Linda Sandberg and Aina Tollefsen (2010) for similar findings.

Conclusion

In this study, we found that rural primary schoolgirls, often perceived unidimensionally as voiceless and vulnerable, are active individuals who can identify and apply certain strategies to negotiate their safety as they traverse the potentially treacherous school journey. Girls identified several self-reliant strategies they use to negotiate their personal safety on their school journeys. While acknowledging that their school journeys exposed them to many risks and much danger, they also demonstrated personal agency in assessing these risks and using protective strategies to maintain their safety. Such self-reliant protective strategies mediated the effect of risk exposure and were perceived to reduce girls' vulnerability to victimization and harm.

The visual data in this study showed images of significantly under-resourced communities common to much of rural KZN. As a result, the strategies used by these girls to deal with potential harm stemmed from individual and community-level agency in response to limited government support, services, and resources. Self-reliant strategies were commonly used by the participants to negotiate their safety. These strategies were underpinned by vigilance and by the risk assessment employed by the girls to survey and understand their environment so as to inform the most appropriate self-reliant strategies. With school journeys placing girls at heightened risk of victimization, participants used shared knowledge and awareness of safe and unsafe spaces in their community as an agentic strategy to navigate their way to school. With no adult supervision on the school journeys, girls in this study demonstrated their ability to cope with various threats. This agentic knowledge allowed them to anticipate risk and make informed decisions on possible ways and means of reducing it. This suggests that these girls are active individuals who acquire knowledge about their socio-cultural environments, engage with this knowledge, and use it to inform their safe-seeking strategies. Even though these safety strategies do not directly translate to lower risk, they create a space in which young girls feel empowered about their safety decisions and more psychologically and physically secure in their daily lives.

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Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) and World Bank Development Marketplace for Innovations on Gender-Based Violence Prevention. The opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either the SVRI or the World Bank.

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