

SWAZILAND

Building the evidence base to understand and prevent campus sexual assault in Swaziland

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BACKGROUND

Sexual assault (SA) on university campuses has attracted growing attention in the Global North (1) but there is little data available on the scope of the problem in the Global South. One small study at a South African university found that 94% of female students reported feeling fearful on campus, with 57% specifically afraid of SA (2). Preventing SA for university women in the Global South may be one key to keeping them in higher education and promoting gender equity and health. Providing non-judgmental, empathetic training on the origins of SA and resistance strategies for women may also create important ripple effects as they assume leadership positions in their communities.

Women's empowerment has been both an outcome and a process in global health and violence prevention for decades. With a few notable exceptions (3-5) these interventions are often atheoretical (6-8), frequently focusing on economic empowerment through microfinance (9-10) and less on critical reflection on how cultural pressure to engage in emphasized femininity (11) may lower women's ability to resist male sexual coercion. The Enhanced Assess Acknowledge Act (EAAA) provides young women with thoughtful, feminist training on emotional, physical, and verbal strategies to resist SA and coercion, while affirming that SA is never the fault of the victim and only perpetrators are responsible for prevention (12). EAAA has been shown to reduce completed SA by 50% among female university students in Canada (13).

We aim to address two key gaps in our understanding of sexual violence in southern Africa: First, we will conduct a campus-wide survey of female students at the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) to establish the prevalence and correlates of sexual assault in this population. Second, we will adapt the EAAA intervention for implementation at UNISWA and pilot test the adapted intervention to establish acceptability, feasibility, and potential effect size for a later efficacy trial.

AIMS

This proposal aims to identify the prevalence and correlates of SA victimization on a university campus in southern Africa, and to adapt and pilot an evidence-based SA resistance intervention for university women in Swaziland.

OBJECTIVES

1. Establish prevalence and correlates of SA victimization on a university campus in southern Africa.
2. Adapt EAAA, an evidence-based sexual assault resistance intervention for Swaziland.
3. Establish the adapted intervention's potential to reduce sexual assault.
4. Establish the feasibility and acceptability of the adapted intervention.

METHODS

We will first conduct a survey at the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) to determine the prevalence and correlates of SA victimization female university students, with in-depth interviews for context and deeper understanding. We will also conduct formative qualitative work with expert key informants to understand common SA scenarios as well as institutional perceptions of SA at UNISWA.

In consultation with the EAAA originators, we will use these data to adapt EAAA for SA resistance on the UNISWA campus, modifying the curriculum to fit the Swazi context while maintaining fidelity to EAAA's theory of change. The adapted intervention will be piloted using a randomized control trial design with approximately 100 female participants randomly assigned to either EAAA or a wait list control condition. Outcomes will be evaluated at 3, 6, and 9-month follow-ups. We will conduct qualitative interviews with intervention participants, facilitators, and community gatekeepers throughout to understand change processes and further refine the intervention.

TIMEFRAMES

This is a two-year project. The prevalence survey will take place in year 1 and the intervention will be piloted and evaluated in year 2. Qualitative work will be conducted throughout to provide context.



IMPLICATIONS

There is currently no epidemiological data on sexual assault victimization among tertiary students in southern Africa, despite the high background prevalence of gender-based violence in the region (14). To our knowledge, the study we have proposed in Swaziland includes the first survey of SA victimization prevalence among university students in the region. Findings from this survey will make a substantial contribution to our understanding of campus sexual assault and its correlates. This will also be the first adaptation and evaluation of an evidence-based SA resistance intervention for university women in southern Africa. Data from the survey and intervention pilot will be used to inform a future proposal to further refine the adapted intervention and conduct an efficacy trial.

References available on request.

