

Ntombi Vimbela! A promising sexual violence risk reduction intervention for South African higher education settings

Mercilene Machisa, Pinky Mahlangu and Yandisa Sikweyiya



“Yes, these things do happen in our lives, we get raped by people, even those that we date, or someone forces you to do something that you do not want to do”. Female student at SA campus

Population-based surveys have found high prevalence of sexual violence against women in South Africa (1, 2), and female students enrolled in higher education are not exempt. However, there is a lack of rigorously tested and evaluated campus-based sexual violence interventions in the country (3).

Prevalence and risk factors for sexual violence experience

In a survey completed by a volunteer sample of female students from nine campuses in South Africa, 20% experienced sexual violence in the past year (4). Female students' sexual violence risk was associated with poorer family background, experiencing food shortage and other material pressures faced in adapting to campus life. Female students who experienced sexual violence were more likely to have experienced adverse childhood, other traumas, abusive male partners, and to report depressive and post-traumatic stress symptoms(4). Sexual violence experience occurred in contexts of students' regular heavy drinking as part of entertainment and engaging in transactional sex.

Developing Ntombi Vimbela!

Informed by formative research findings and effective evidence based interventions (EBIs) including Stepping Stones Creating Futures (5), the Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act Sexual Assault Resistance

program (EAAA) (6) and SASA! Raising Voices (7), our research team at the [Gender and Health Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council](#) developed Ntombi Vimbela! to fill the critical gap of sexual violence interventions in South African higher education settings. Ntombi Vimbela! is a risk reduction intervention which consist of a series of ten peer facilitated workshop sessions each running for 3.5 hours and targeting first-year female students. Activities are designed for participatory learning about sexual rights, assertive communication, gender (in)equality, healthy sexual relationships, violence against women and its drivers, identifying sexual assault risk and sexual assault resistance strategies. Ntombi Vimbela! content equips participants with coping skills to withstand social or material pressures or other mental stressors whilst adapting to campus life. Ntombi Vimbela! also promotes the use of health, psycho-social services and access to justice. Acknowledging that some participants could be sexual violence survivors, workshops focus on building empathy, appropriating blame towards the perpetrator and minimizing survivor self-blame.

“I also had that mentality of understanding that sometimes there is an excuse for a perpetrator to rape a person, when I got here they told us that there is no reason for a perpetrator to touch a person because you are the only person who has the right to your body” Female student at SA campus



Piloting Ntombi Vimbela!

We conducted a pilot of Ntombi Vimbela! from July to October 2019. We recruited, trained and supported peer facilitators to conduct workshop sessions in eight selected campuses with 118 volunteering first-year female students. Workshops were held outside of the schooling hours as agreed with participants. The facilitator teams fostered rapport, espoused the values of respect, confidentiality and sisterhood which created safe spaces for participants to engage and learn as illustrated below.

“What I noticed about this group is that we all kept to confidentiality, ever since I got here I have never heard of... ok maybe there are those who have but on my side I have never heard even in my

class of people talking about someone else's story outside, not even a single day." Female student at SA campus

"If you maybe share a story and then the next session when you come to attend they don't look at you and judge you because of what you shared, they are always fine as if nothing happened and that is what gave me the power because they did not judge me or look at me as if they have questions they are all right and I feel free around them." Female student at SA campus

Ntombi Vimbela! is relevant for South African higher education settings

The pilot focused on determining whether Ntombi Vimbela! content was acceptable and relevant to first-year female students and whether its manualised delivery methods were feasible. After facilitators completed conducting workshops in the different sites, the research team held group discussions to obtain participant feedback. Participants found Ntombi Vimbela! to be relevant for first-year female students because it resonated with their lived experiences. They recommended that the benefits of Ntombi Vimbela would be maximized if it was implemented at the beginning of the academic year, a time at which first-year female students are most vulnerable.

"I feel that the program is very important and I wish it could be done at the beginning of the year when learners are still new from high school and know nothing about varsity so that it can teach them how to do certain things at university through the techniques that we learnt from this program". Female student at SA campus



Ntombi Vimbela! holds promise for empowerment, gender transformation and sexual assault risk reduction

Participants shared positive personal changes including better understanding of sexual rights, improved bodily autonomy, self-esteem, self-confidence, enhanced communication skills and emotional

expressiveness. Their gender beliefs began to shift, and they challenged inequitable dynamics within their intimate relationships.

“One of the things I learnt is you having the right over your body and only you, that stood out for me because for instance in my relationships and in my past relationships I would feel bad if I am tired to have sex with my boyfriend, even though he wouldn’t retaliate to say why don’t you want to, but I would feel bad that I am a woman I have to give him whenever he wants, I would feel like I have done him wrong but now I have learnt to know that I have rights over my body and I have the right to decide on what is happening and what is not happening and its all about me when it comes to my body, if I don’t want it, I don’t want it” Female student at SA campus

Ntombi Vimbela! equips participants to identify sexual assault risk and implement protective strategies including assertive communication, verbal resistance and physical self-defence. The pilot participants found the content of Ntombi Vimbela! useful and were confident to use the skills gained to minimise sexual assault risk.

“There are also the danger cues that I learnt about here in this program, that when I go out to a club, [I have to use] my money... ok [now] I have this tendency of going out to a club with my own money to buy my own alcohol, I do not expect someone to buy me alcohol and if I go with a friend I tell her not to sell me out to the guys and I will do the same with her, when I want to go home I tell her and she should do the same then we take a taxi and we go, you see.” Female student at SA campus

Participants appreciated WenDo, the feminist self-defense group training they received. Participants were confident that the skills they gained would be helpful in sexual assault risky situations. However, given the timing of the feedback, participants had limited exposure from which to share their use of the skills in real situations.

“So, as a woman what has been shared here is almost everything that I needed to be educated on, even the fact that I was trained on how to defend myself physically is very helpful, I needed that as a woman in these days.” Female student at SA campus

Way forward- testing Ntombi Vimbela!’s effectiveness

While we have received positive feedback indicating Ntombi Vimbela!’s promise, we need to conduct a pragmatic randomised control trial which will establish its effectiveness in reducing female students’ sexual assault over time. Conducting a cost-effectiveness study will also help policymakers to make decisions regarding the scaling-up of Ntombi Vimbela! in South African institutions.

** Authors: Mercilene Machisa, Pinky Mahlangu and Yandisa Sikweyiya are Specialist Scientists at the SAMRC Gender and Health Research Unit and Honorary Lecturers at the University of Witwatersrand’s School of Public Health*

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