Reviewer’s report

Title: Sexual violence against female university students in Ethiopia

Version: 2 Date: 15 Mar 2017

Reviewer: Joanna Busza

Reviewer’s report:

General Comments:

This paper addresses an important issue, and one that is gaining increasing interest and attention in Ethiopia and globally. The paper presents useful data from a university cohort, which is compared to similar studies conducted in other universities around Ethiopia. It draws attention to the high prevalence of gender based violence experienced by women, with data on "lifetime" experience of violence that usefully highlights the experience of younger women/adolescents (prior to university).

The paper requires some changes, however, most critically in terms of its literature review and the interpretation of some of the results. The literature cited is quite outdated and much of it is from local studies, "grey literature" (ie NGO reports) and UN guidelines. In recent years, quite a lot of research has addressed violence as a global public health problem, and some of this contemporary literature should be cited. A few examples are as follows:


In terms of interpretation and recommendations, the paper's Discussion section is overly simplistic. It also fails to recognize that a cross-sectional study provides associations and not causality between variables. Indeed, even the timing cannot be determined - e.g. women who report drinking could be doing so in response to having experienced sexual violence/assault NOT as a determinant of it. Please see https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4386280/ as an example from the literature on how substance use is a coping mechanism. It is also possible that certain behaviours cluster together - e.g. drinking/sexual behaviour/ risk-taking. Women vulnerable to sexual assault may be those who are involved in these clustered behaviours, but that would not necessarily mean that they are vulnerable BECAUSE of those behaviours.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that open communication with parents is protective of sexual violence per se. There are many possible confounders here - good communication with parents could be indicative of better parental skills, living in a protective family environment, or even a marker of socio-economic status/ education of parents. All these factors could lead to the girls in those households being less vulnerable to sexual violence for a range of complicated reasons unrelated to the sexual communication itself.
Therefore, I do not think it is appropriate to recommend reducing drinking and increasing openness of communication. Reducing sexual violence is highly complex and there are no simple solutions for its prevention. Also, since many of the episodes reported occurred before the respondent started university, actions taken now would not reduce those that occur during childhood and adolescence. I think this kind of study can raise awareness of the extent of the problem and highlight the need to conduct more detailed research and develop and test interventions. It is not well designed as a study for concluding what kinds of preventive actions will be effective.

Please add to the section on Study Limitations the well-known fact that sexual violence is a sensitive topic and very prone to reporting bias. We do not know how respondents understood the questions or in which direction the bias might be in this context (although in most cases, women tend to under-report sexual violence). But sexual violence is likely to suffer from other types of bias besides recall (if anything, it is NOT very susceptible to recall bias, since rape/other forms of assault are quite traumatic life events).

Other suggested changes:

Please rephrase "Having drunken friends." I think this measure must be in response to a question about having friends who drink (or drink regularly?), but "drunken" implies problematic drinking/becoming intoxicated. Perhaps the exact question used in the questionnaire to determine this variable could be translated and provided?

There is no need to say "completed rape". "Rape" and "attempted rape" are sufficient to distinguish the two.

I suggest avoiding very emotive language such as "victimized" or "violated." Also, to be accurate, the paper is reporting women who REPORT experience of sexual violence, rather than proportions of those who actually experienced it (which is impossible to verify, and there is likely to be some under- or over-reporting)

Lines 66-70: I am not clear on the relevance of the literature on dating. The sexual violence prevalence questionnaire examined any lifetime experience, regardless of perpetrator/relationship to perpetrator. Since "dating relationships" do not feature heavily, this could be removed, or moved to the Discussion where violence by a partner is discussed. The sentence in the Introduction seems out of place, following on from the literature on violence against women by fellow students or teachers.

Line 73 should read "commonest ones" NOT "commonest once" and "rape alone" rather than "rape only"

Line 75 "negative health behaviours" are mentioned as resulting from sexual violence but no examples are given. I suggest expanding the sentence to "negative health behaviours, such as …" and citing from the literature.
Line 76: "recognized as" rather than "recognizing"

Lines 87-88: I suggest capitalizing Southern National and Nationalities Region

Line 122 Does piloting 5% of the questionnaire mean that just 5% of the questions were piloted, or 5% of the study sample size?

Line 133-35: please use "woman" and not "girl" as you are referring to women over the age of 18

Line 143 should read "jokes" rather than "jocks"

Line 145: Why did the question specify episodes of violence before age 14? Provide a justification for this cut-off age.

Lines 174-77: I think it would be more useful give the statistics for the 45% of those who ever experienced sexual violence, i.e. among those who reported violence, --%

Lines 237-8: I suggest his is rephrased to read "Female students whose childhood residence was in rural areas reported higher prevalence …"

Lines 239-44: I do not understand how access to information in urban areas would reduce episodes of violence? Information might lead to women being able to seek advice/ support or assistance afterwards, or might help her gain protection if she felt in danger, but you need to explain why information itself might be protective. The lower reported prevalence among women from urban areas is more likely to reflect normative values in urban areas, and the possibility that in rural areas perpetuators of violence feel that there is likely to be a culture of science, and fewer legal or social sanctions.

Alcohol use - as mentioned previously, this is a very complicated topic. Alcohol use reflects social norms as well as individual decisions. Alcohol use is indeed associated with higher risk-taking, environments that could be conducive to sexual assault, but also individual mental health. Since we do not know whether the reported drinking behavior pre- or post-dates the sexual violence experiences reported, it is difficult to make assumptions. You can choose to provide a more nuanced/complex discussion of alcohol as both a risk for and outcome of violence (referring to the literature), or leave it as an observation from the data that should be explored in future research.

Lines 260-1: Please provide a reference for the assertion about norms regarding submissive behavior. The association between observing violence in the home and experiencing it could be more about willingness to report violence? Or growing up in a violent environment, making it more prevalent? Or mirroring traditional relationship roles that have been observed? Again, you may need to refer to existing literature on this to be convincing.

Lines 264-5: I don't understand the link between agreeing to sex with a boyfriend in order to please him and reported assault. If the women were agreeing to sex, then that means they were not raped!
Tables - make the use of decimal points consistent, e.g. whole numbers should be followed by a "0" to match the other figures ie 52.0%

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**  
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.  

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**  
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.  

Unable to assess

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No

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