



RESEARCH AND THEORY

‘Sometimes taxi men are rough..’: Young women’s experiences of the risks of being a ‘taxi queen’

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ABSTRACT

The ‘taxi queen’ phenomenon in which young women become involved with older male taxi drivers while taking public transport has received little attention as an area of research. However, there are concerns that the exploitative nature of such practices of transactional sex may have public health consequences, in particular exposure to coercive sexual practices, risk of HIV infection, unwanted pregnancies, substance abuse, and economic vulnerability of young girls. This study aimed to explore the experiences of school-age girls of their relationships with public mini-bus taxi drivers, in order to achieve a better understanding of these relationships and their consequences. The study was conducted in 2009 in Cape Town and the southern Cape region in the Western Cape Province. Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative methodology was used. An open-ended qualitative interview guide was developed, and 25 interviews were conducted: 16 in Cape Town, and nine in the southern Cape region. Ages ranged from 13 to 31, although the majority were in their mid-teens. Thematic analysis of the interviews generated a rich and complex range of perspectives, with many contradictory perceptions and experiences emerging from the texts. While there was widespread recognition of the transactional and stigmatising nature of the relationship between older taxi drivers and so-called taxi queens, and that there were a range of physical and emotional risks related to these relationships, the research also highlighted the manner in which the phenomenon of taxi queens gives expression to issues both unique to the particular dynamics of these transactional relationships, as well reflective of the experiences of youth more generally. Thus, in considering young women’s vulnerability to violent, coercive and risky practices that may endanger their health and well-being, greater understanding of the specificity and variability of these experiences, together with recognition of the resonances with broader concerns facing South African youth, are needed. It is important

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that responses to the taxi queen phenomenon do not simply problematise the young women, but rather address the larger context that both facilitates such relationships as well as exacerbates the impact.

Keywords: transactional sex, young women, taxi queens, taxi drivers, transport, violence, coercive sexuality, HIV.

INTRODUCTION

The 'taxi queen' phenomenon in which young women become involved with older male taxi drivers while using public transport, in the form of the popular mini-bus, in South African cities and rural areas has received little attention as an area of research. While there is a growing focus on transactional sexual relationships in South Africa, the academic literature specifically focused on taxi queens is scant. Despite the paucity of critical literature, media coverage dating back to the late 1990s has pointed to concerns about such practices of transactional sex and related public health consequences, in particular exposure to coercive sexual practices, violence and the Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV.) Newspaper reports and a few student research projects, for example, have alluded to the exploitative nature of this phenomenon, drawing attention to how these relationships are associated with sexual violence, risk of HIV infection, unwanted pregnancies, substance abuse, and economic vulnerability of young girls. The taxi queens appear to face largely negative reactions from family and society, who usually view such girls as promiscuous and irresponsible (see Jooste, 2008; Mohamed, 2005; Mufweba, 2001; van Breda, 1998; van Wieling, 2004).

A focus on taxi queens emerges out of larger concerns about the vulnerability of particularly young and poor women to HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence which, in a context of poverty and other social inequalities, are major challenges for the majority of countries in Africa. In response to these social imperatives, heterosexual relationships have increasingly been problematised in southern Africa, with a focus on normative gender roles and gender power relations moving towards centre stage at the levels of research, policy and prevention (see for example, Abdool Karim, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Harrison, Xaba, Kunene, & Ntuli, 2001). Within this larger body of work, a focus on transactional relationships in unequal and coercive sexual practices among young people has emerged as a concern. The increase in intergenerational relationships has also been noted. For example, the HSRC National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey in South Africa (Shisana et al., 2009) shows that the percentage of women with sexual partners who are more than five years older than them has increased from 18.5%



in 2005 to 27.6% in 2008. They argue that this significant increase may represent an increase in transactional relationships between poorer and younger women with older and better resourced men and may pose a significant risk for young women with respect to their vulnerability to HIV infection and violence. Local studies in Southern Africa have foregrounded the normativity of transactional relationships, arguing that in many communities notions of love are bound up with material exchanges and not always based on basic survival needs (see for example, Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2010). A range of recent studies on the continent also illustrate that transactional sex is common and may be implicated in unsafe, unequal and coercive sexual practices (Clowes, Shefer, Fouten, Vergnani, & Jacobs, 2009; Dunkle et al., 2004a; Dunkle et al., 2007; Gukurume, 2011; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003, 2008; Luke, 2005; Maganja, Maman, Groues, & Mbwambo, 2007; Masvawure, 2009; Shefer, 2009; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2000).

As a result of the limited research that specifically focuses on the reportedly common practice of taxi queen and taxi driver relationships to date, the main aim of this research was to explore the experiences of school girls relationships with public mini-bus taxi drivers, in order to achieve a better understanding of these relationships and their impact on young women's health, well-being and future prospects.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in 2009 in two geographic areas in the Western Cape Province, namely in Cape Town (CT) and in the southern Cape (SC) region, in order to explore the phenomenon of taxi queens both in major cities and more rural towns. These two regions were chosen for convenient sampling as access to communities was assured through previous work. However, the researchers were also aware that these are communities where many young people use public transport and where the taxi queen practice is common. Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative methodology was used. In depth individual interviews were conducted with girls identified by snow-ball sampling as taxi queens in the geographic areas identified. In view of the absence of much existing data, preliminary focus group discussions were also held with youth in local communities, in order to investigate the perceptions regarding taxi queens among school going youth (Potgieter, Strebel, & Wagner, 2009). An open-ended qualitative interview guide was developed, based on issues emerging from the focus group discussions, for use with taxi queens.

Recruitment of participants for the research proved to be extremely challenging. Key informants, including community leaders, NGO members and known members of the community, identified school-age girls who were thought to be taxi queens. On some

occasions, appointments that had been made were not kept by intended participants, or girls who were approached refused to be interviewed at the last moment. On other occasions, participants whom recruiters said had agreed to be interviewed either turned out to be somewhat older than the envisaged age-range, or would not openly admit to being taxi queens currently. Some participants denied being taxi queens themselves but spoke rather of their friends or relatives who were taxi queens in the interviews. This explains why some of the quotes are in the first person while others are in the third. While it was not always clear whether the participants who denied being taxi queens did so out of denial or out of a true reflection of their situation, their narratives were nonetheless valuable in deepening understanding of the dynamics and impacts of these relationships on young women. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with Black women: 16 in Cape Town, ten with coloured young women¹, and six with African young women; and nine in the southern Cape, six with coloured young women and three with African young women. Ages ranged from 13 to 31, although the majority were in their mid-teens.

All standard ethical procedures for research with human participants were adhered to and ethical clearance was obtained from one of the national scientific council ethics committees. Participation in the individual interviews was voluntary and confidential. Participants were given information sheets about the project, signed consent forms, and gave permission for the interviews to be audio recorded. They were also assured that they could terminate the interview at any stage. Interviews were conducted by a senior member of the research team, in the language of choice of the participants (Xhosa, English or Afrikaans) in a private venue. They received a small remuneration on completion of the interview, mainly to cover transport costs. The recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Thematic analysis informed also by discourse analysis was then conducted on the transcribed texts, using Atlas.ti (version 5.0) for coding and management of the data. The analysis was guided by the work of critical and feminist discourse analysts such as, Hollway (1989), Parker (1992) and Potter and Wetherell (1987) which places particular emphasis on how meaning is constructed through the language used and how this offers insight into larger ideological constructions of gender and sexuality, in this case particularly young female sexuality in this social context. The analysis conducted here was also concerned to apply an intersectional gender analysis that foregrounds the role of normative gender roles and their complex intersection with other forms of social identity and power such as age, material wealth, and so on. We focused on exploring the way in which such forms of inequality and social identity might impact on young women's agency and undermine their health and well-being, exposing them to a range of risks including violence and HIV.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the interviews with young women identified as taxi queens generated a rich and complex range of perspectives, with many contradictory perceptions and experiences emerging from the texts. What was notable was the degree of commonality of experience across the different geographic and demographic groups included in the study². The findings are discussed within three themes towards unpacking the emotional and physical challenges faced by such young women who may enter into a sexual relationship with a taxi driver: the nature and dynamics of the relationship between taxi drivers and the young women who travel with them; experiences of being taxi queens; and risk factors in the relationship, including alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy and HIV/AIDS risk, and coercion and violence. In order to understand the safety and health challenges of young women who engage in relationships with taxi drivers, the nature, dynamics and their own experiences of being a taxi queen are important before unpacking in more depth the particular areas of vulnerability that are associated with such relationships.

NATURE AND DYNAMICS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Participants described a typical pattern of how the relationships with taxi drivers started. For many, they were on their way to school, and would get into a taxi where the driver would invite them to sit up front with him. Alternatively they might have been introduced by a friend. They would then be told that they did not have to pay taxi fare, and thus the relationship started:

P: And so it comes, he starts talking to you once or twice, and maybe the third time you will get in his van and then, they wouldn't take your money. Now, it's going to depend on your reaction you're going to give now, and from there now they will see how far they're going to get with you (CT)

P: So when you get into the taxi, they say 'you don't have to pay, you can ride for free' and you think 'hey, that's nice, riding for free', so you get into the same taxi the next day, every day, and he says 'come, I'm going to take you out, bring some friends along' (CT)

Some would spend the day driving around with the driver, often staying away from school to do so, while others would meet up after school, and go out with the driver at night and over weekends. They then also met and befriended other drivers through their initial contact. Other participants indicated that they intentionally hung around with friends at the taxi ranks in order to meet drivers:

P: Yes. And so I started to drive around every day with the taxis when they were working. I got to know other taxi drivers, if they park like this, to go, if they smoke, then there's more drivers standing around ... and so it happened that I made friends with other taxi drivers ... When they were finished work, and the weekends and the evenings. And then they drive around, and they look for girls (CT)

P: See, I wait around at the taxis as they come around, waiting in the line. And my friends and I like hanging out over there. So that's where we met (CT)

These relationships were clearly constructed as transactional. All the young girls interviewed agreed that the relationship with taxi drivers involved their receiving gifts from the drivers. Apart from riding for free in the taxi, these mainly took the form of money, airtime for cell phones, clothes, jewellery and food:

P: They are friendly with you, they give you attention, they buy you stuff, you open your mouth you get everything, things like that...If you like ask for money, they will like spoil you with chocolates, anything, and if you want to go somewhere you can just phone them and then they'll come pick you up ... It was chocolates, it was flowers, teddy bears, all kinds of things just to keep you happy (CT)

For some girls, these gifts contributed to basic survival needs, so that they could provide money or food for the family, or get necessities that their families were not able to give them:

P: Now for us it was, for me it was just ... after my father was shot, no one was working. I met him, I went out with him. He took me out a lot, and for me it was, he permanently gave me money to put bread on the table, for the youngest children. And dad's diabetic, so he has to eat something to take with his pills (CT)

P: Ja. He did give me money. If I needed something, he'd, to a point that he knows about my situation, that I've got two brothers, and my grandmother she is the one, she is the breadwinner in my house. So, when I need money to buy electricity, I will go to him, 'well this is the situation and I've got no money' (SC)

However, for others the focus was less on necessity and seemed to be more on status, peer pressure, and meeting social expectations. Thus they were interested in obtaining luxuries, so that they went after drivers with smart taxis and good music systems:

P: I want to have expensive things, an expensive phone (CT)



P: For some it is, it is cool because it's got to do with popularity also. I want to be seen in this world of today. I don't want be called a, a geek (SC)

P: And what's so much the centre of attraction for them is the taxis look kwai [cool], the [sound] systems thump, and that sort of thing, material things like name brand takkies [sneakers], and that kind of stuff [pause] ... and having grand cell phones and so they think they will get involved with him, so that she can get her material things from him (CT)

A common sentiment was that girls targeted especially older men, who were in a better position to support them financially:

P: We stay here in [area]. In that area, they just say it's better to hide behind an older man, than to be a younger man's servant. Here with us it's like everyone goes out with old men, some of them with taxi drivers. So I'm now friends with taxi drivers (CT)

P: Like, I'm dating an old man right, because I that ... it's better [unclear] to date a taxi man in order to be able to obtain money... He gives me money, right, and then I do other things for myself like, if I want my hair done and then I ask for money to get my hair done, money to go out (CT)

Interestingly, other reasons cited for young girls getting involved with older taxi drivers were identified by participants as relating more to emotional needs: getting attention and love that they maybe did not receive at home; or perhaps in reaction to having been abused at home by parents:

P: Um ... maybe the mother, the father abuses her. The father abuses the child, now she just wants to get out of the house. Or the mother and the father don't even notice the child. Now look at the kid, 'hey I'm my own boss. My mother doesn't see me. My father doesn't see me. Now I can do my own thing. No one can tell me not to.' ... Because why, mothers and fathers they don't notice their children. It happens in very poor communities. Not because they're poor, it's just, they allow, the parents aren't very responsible (CT)

P: We are so many in the house, it's like you don't really get attention [looking and sounding quite sad] (CT)

P: Girls tend to, like I said, they tend [unclear], everything that their parents can't

give them. Maybe it's love or attention, uhm, affection, and intimacy. You know, having somebody to hold you or spoil you maybe. And I think that's what the girls lack these days (SC)

The role of sex in relationships between these young women and taxi drivers was portrayed in different ways. For most participants sleeping with the taxi driver in exchange for material and psychological benefits was the central feature of the relationships. Thus taxi drivers were depicted as only giving girls things because they expected sex. Many young women saw this as being bribed and manipulated, and stated that they would be 'dropped' if they did not agree to this, or once the driver had had sex with them, illustrating the way in which such relationships may facilitate unwanted or coercive sexual practices:

P: Like, my daddy always tells me, once you open your legs to a person, he thinks he has control of you, so once the girl sleeps with the taxi driver, then he's going to want to have control over her, and tell her what to do, and own her (CT)

P: They'll say to her ... 'And my money, my petrol that I put in? And now I bought you a present. I bought you airtime, so you must pay me back'. And that's the reason why, and that's how he lets her pay back, to have sex with him (SC)

P: Especially an older man, he gives you everything that you want. But if you can't give him [sex], then the whole thing just stops ... And if you don't want to give them anything in return, then you also won't get anything that you want. That's how it is (CT)

However, some interviewees insisted that they were 'only friends', and that they did not engage sexually with the drivers. Others acknowledged some sexual play, but that they drew the line at intercourse, or claimed that they ended the relationship when sex was demanded:

P: And we had an open clean relationship, without sleeping together, ok, we did French kissing in between, but we didn't have sex (CT)

P: I made him feel nice. Maybe oral sex. Yes. But I would never let it go further than that, see (CT)

P: We broke up because he wanted sex, and I told him I wasn't ready for that. So he said 'Fine!', and we broke up (CT)

Some participants regarded this as just a regular boyfriend relationship, claiming that they loved the driver, but also that they received 'benefits' as part of the relationship:

P: But with regards to taxi men, it's not about loving a 'taxi man', sometimes it's about loving the person ... Yes, I can say that it's a normal relationship. It's the same as others, I don't see any difference (CT)

P: Because he loves me, he gives me everything that I want ... He takes care of me, man...there's nothing that I do ... he caters to my needs. For everything that I receive, he does everything in his power to ensure that it's like that (CT)

P: I love him but I know that I'll also receive money (CT)

Others reported that they in fact supported the driver financially, to maintain his drug habit, or helped him out when he had difficulties meeting his daily targets:

P: And everything was tight as far as money was concerned, because you need money to maintain your [drug] habit, and the money that he drives is for his target. So it was always that in the evening we've got a problem because he's got no target money, because he smokes most of the money out during the day. And then it was that I was working at that time, so I basically supported him and myself (CT)

In sum, there was a lot of commonality in the way participants described their involvement with taxi drivers. There seemed to be consensus regarding the centrality of gifts in this relationship, as has been identified in media reports (Jooste, 2008; Mufweba, 2001; Skoch, 2010; van Breda, 1998). That sex was a normative expectation in return for the gifts from the taxi driver was evident. However, what was also interesting was the diversity of ways in which these relationships were expressed and experienced by the young women involved. For example, they identified a variety of reasons for getting involved with taxi drivers. On the one hand, many regarded it as a means of survival, 'putting food on the table' for themselves and their families, as has commonly been understood (Potgieter, Strebel, & Wagner, 2009). On the other hand, some saw it as involving status and the influence of peer pressure, as well as an opportunity to acquire luxury items, in line with other findings (Mohamed, 2005; Siemonsma, 2011; Skoch, 2010). Participants identified a further motivation for the involvement of young women with (usually) older men, namely as an expression of emotional needs and emerging out of possible neglect or lack of care in the home.

Also interesting were the different views on the role of sex in the relationships. While

many respondents reported that transactional sex was at the centre of the relationship, as suggested by media reports and other studies (Mufweba, 2001; Skoch, 2010; van Wieling, 2004), there were others who denied that this was the case. Respondents also teased out different forms that the relationship might take, for example seeing it as being just a friendship or an ordinary love relationship, or one in which they in fact supported the driver financially, which challenge the more traditional notion of transactional sex. While the alternative and apparently more positive constructions of the relationship were evident, they were clearly a minority perspective with the majority of participants suggesting that when gifts were received there was pressure to provide intimacy. Such pressures clearly speak to possible risks for such young women with respect to coercive and unsafe sexuality and possible violence as is further elaborated in the narratives that follow.

EXPERIENCES OF BEING A TAXI QUEEN

The term 'taxi queen' was widely used by the participants to describe these relationships between young women and taxi drivers. It was generally experienced as a negative description, with words like 'prostitute' and 'slut', also being used which explains the discomfort that some participants might have had with adopting such a term to describe themselves³:

P: I wouldn't like that, because, I wouldn't want to be called a taxi queen ... A taxi queen, mostly they say a taxi queen is for example a girl that goes from taxi to taxi to taxi, but everyone dingesse [sleeps with] her

P: [Laughs embarrassedly] Naaiers [people who sleep around]. They say because they see today this one comes to her and the next day the other one comes to her (CT)

P: It's not nice for us to be taxi queens, it's almost like prostitutes, it's almost like that's that you are doing ... I always felt bad when they called me taxi queen, when you walk around then they say 'there goes that taxi queen, she's off to her man again' (CT)

Taxi queens were seen as being 'promiscuous', going from one driver to another, often sleeping with a number of drivers at the same time, or having children from a number of different drivers:

P: Because the taxi queens are like that, they sleep with any taxi driver, especially the attractive girls who throw away their lives, who sleep with different taxi drivers,

they sleep around with them, tonight I am at your house, tomorrow I am at your house, that's how the taxi queens sleep around with the drivers, and they are all mostly married (CT)

P: One girl together with different taxi drivers, and they must sleep together. Most of the taxi drivers have already got a whole lot of children from a lot of different people ... with every girl he has sex with he has a child. There by us, there will be girls who have three children from three different taxi drivers that she slept with (CT)

This stigmatisation and moralising response to the taxi queen was experienced negatively by participants who elaborated how most people saw these relationships as a bad thing, and disapproved of young girls being with older men, they were also looked down upon, and their families were stigmatised:

P: They gossiped, yes

I: What did they say?

P: 'She's a taxi queen. No, look how she is. She thinks she's kwaai [cool]'

I: And how did you feel about that?

P: I felt junk. Because why, people talked badly about me (CT)

P: I didn't feel good. Because sometimes the kids shout 'taxi queen' at you, because when they see you every day in the same taxi, then they call you taxi queen, that's what they do, the children (CT)

P: As soon as you, as soon as you start doing things that you're not supposed to, it's not only you that gets a bad name, your family, your friends, the people that you associate yourself with (SC)

An alternative experience reported by some was that it was a rational choice, that they felt that there was no reason why girls should not have affairs with drivers, and that they did not care what others thought of them. In addition these young women stated that, contrary to expectation, they felt in control in the relationship, that they were manipulating the taxi driver to give them gifts, while they had no intention of actually having sex with him:



- P: For me it was nice to be friends with taxi drivers because I didn't have to worry what people said about me. I also told my mom, people can say what they like, it won't matter to me (SC)
- P: OK it's not that I encourage girls to become taxi queens, but, if a girl can think and has brains and can work from them like just money, and if they like love money so much, or they need it, and then, how can I say, they CAN maybe then just have a fling on, or date the taxi driver or whatever, but not further than that (CT)
- P: Like you're messing around with him, like you're with him but you're not sleeping with him, so you'll have your young boyfriend ... like me, there is someone and he knows what I'm doing. He's 21 and he knows that I have a taxi man, and the taxi man thinks that he's my brother ... Oh he [boyfriend] knows that I'm not sleeping with the taxi man, and what the taxi man knows is that he's my brother, so when I get together with him and receive money, I'll get it for the both of us (CT)

However, a major concern for many of the girls was the negative impact that the relationship with taxi drivers had on their lives. There were strong sentiments that there was no future in the relationship with a taxi driver, as he would move into relationships with other girls and not give up his family for the young woman:

- P: But that's why it's not nice to be a taxi queen, you won't get anywhere in life. It might give you a life, but it won't last forever, because your man, he's a taxi driver, he's got other, he's married, he is just going to leave you, he'll look for other taxi queen girls (CT)
- P: Because now he say's to you, 'uh-uh, I'm finished with you ... I'm going to take that breyani [curry dish], I'm going to throw it away, and make a new curry for me', something like that (CT)
- P: But he's not going to leave his wife for you, let me tell you that. He can tell the young girl today, 'listen here, I'm going to leave my wife for you.' He's just using you, I've seen it, I know what I'm talking about (CT)

Many reported a sense of personal disaster, that they 'were throwing their lives away'. They spoke of their lives 'falling apart', feeling ashamed, losing self-respect and being degraded:

- P: It is a good thing, when I'm not with him I can see how my life goes forward,

because he pulls me back (CT)

P: My self-esteem went very low (CT)

P: Ja. I mean it's totally, it just makes you sleg [a bad person]. There's not another word for it. You drag your name through the mud (SC)

Thus on the one hand, the depictions of taxi queens as being promiscuous and unconcerned about their behaviour, highlight the strong stigma attached to the relationship with taxi drivers, as captured in other writing about the topic (Jooste, 2008; Mohamed, 2005; Skoch, 2010). Participants experienced the dominant response in their community as negatively judgemental, further highlighting the extent of stigma surrounding this behaviour (Potgieter et al., 2009; Siemonsma, 2011). The stigmatisation of such young women necessarily further impacts on their esteem, possibly exacerbating other negative impacts, but also making it difficult for them to seek help. On the other hand, respondents also expressed agency in their relationships with drivers, pointing to the complexity of power dynamics involved, and challenging notions of helpless and vulnerable young women. In addition, there was recognition of the damaging effect of these relationships on their lives (van Wieling, 2004) which emerges further in the next section where participants elaborated on the health risks involved in being in these relationships.

RISK AND DANGERS OF BEING A TAXI QUEEN

Participants highlighted some of the many risks involved in their relationships with taxi drivers. Firstly, most participants saw alcohol and drugs as a central feature of the relationships between taxi queens and drivers. Drinking was regarded as common, both among the girls and the drivers, and they reportedly often partied and drank together, or the driver 'got' the girl drunk, so that she would be willing to sleep with him:

P: They are children who drink and take drugs, so maybe they say buy me a bottle so that we can drink together, and lekker [nice] music, and you just want to feel cool, high class in the taxi, with your glass and the music is loud, and all that sort of thing (CT)

P: They'll make you nicely drunk, and then they'll say they want to have sex with you. That's how it goes everywhere (CT)

There were differing perceptions about the role of drugs, so that some participants downplayed their use, while others saw particularly tik [methamphetamine] as a major problem:

P: They like material things, but drugs, drugs aren't really what they're into, they don't use ... They enjoy alcohol, a lot of which you see in the townships. (CT)

P: The taxi queens, they use drugs like tik and alcohol, they're not themselves at that time, when they take things like tik and [unclear] and dagga, and all the drugs, by us they do drugs like tik, and then they don't feel the same, they are different when they have taken tik, they are rude, they steal, they break into people's houses (CT)

Moreover, participants maintained that some taxi queens relied on drivers to support their existing drug habit, while others were introduced to drugs by drivers, or given drugs in order to have sex. Some girls were reportedly used by drivers to sell drugs, or to obtain drugs from drug dealers:

P: But you know now, the taxi driver, you know, he's got money, and he knows you've got the drug problem, he does the same drugs, he can maybe support you, but you know, it's give and take, nothing's for nothing. So you get involved, and you know he can support your habit [unclear], so there's no problem in the world, so that's when it comes, yes, then you sleep with him, whatever, and then tomorrow, he doesn't support your habit on time, or whatever, then you just go to the next one who can(CT)

P: They actually come to you, and they offer you drugs. And that is also, I guess their way of making business, because once you're hooked, you come back for more, and you pay and they get money out of this (SC)

P: And at the end of the day he uses her to sell drugs for him, he uses her to do a whole lot of illegal stuff (CT)

Secondly, a strong concern for many girls interviewed was the risk of falling pregnant from relationships with taxi drivers. It was seen as common for girls to get pregnant from drivers, even at a very young age, and that some girls did so consciously as a way of ensuring their relationship and ongoing support from the taxi driver. If they fell pregnant, however, it was thought that the driver would drop the girl, while others might have an abortion:

P: Most of the teenagers here in [name of place] are pregnant, 16, 15, 13, then they are pregnant, from relationships with taxi drivers ... And most of the taxi queens have children from different taxi drivers, and do wrong things (CT)



P: Lots of them are now, the [unclear], they just want to take the young girls lives away from them, by having sex with them and making them pregnant, and having nothing more to do with them (SC)

P: After a month, I found out that I was pregnant. And that was, obviously he didn't use a condom with me. And I was so cross with him. I wanted to commit suicide, because I wasn't ready to have a baby (SC)

However, some young women thought that pregnancies from drivers were not common, and that most girls were on contraception:

I: So there aren't many of your friends [taxi queens] who have had babies?

P: No, not really ... there are a few of them who, two of them who got pregnant, but not many (CT)

P: So, if I want to have sex, then I go for an injection, then I know I won't get pregnant because I am on the injection (CT)

Participants expressed similarly varying experiences and opinions regarding the role of condoms in relationships with taxi drivers. Some stated that there was no problem, and that both taxi queens and drivers used condoms, as they were worried about pregnancy or getting infected with STIs or HIV:

P: Using a condom and he doesn't want to? I cannot do that, I won't not use a condom because I'm young. What if he gets me pregnant? What would they say at home, who got me pregnant?! AIDS is something I wouldn't get, so who else would have infected me? ... it's about caring for yourself ... caring for yourself, not to be affected by all these things. I'm not ready to have a child ... [unclear] ... I don't want to have a child yet and that's why I want to use condoms (CT)

Others claimed that neither taxi queens nor drivers used condoms, that the drivers were reluctant, and that girls struggled to negotiate their use with drivers, or were forced by them to have sex without condoms:

P: No! It's not easy [to negotiate using a condom] because sometimes they'll say things like you don't trust them when you ask to use a condom. (CT)

P: And they don't want to use condoms ... so she falls pregnant ... and then there's

also alcohol and getting drunk ... you get drunk and you fall pregnant. Like, you don't think about using a condom when you're drunk, before having sex ... and obviously HIV is also there (CT)

P: And then we had sex... and then what happened is that, after a month, I found out that I was pregnant. You know. And I couldn't believe it because, I remember, before we had sex, I said to him, 'you know what, how about if we use a condom? ... I don't really want to lie, I wasn't sure that he did put on a condom, or what was, I couldn't look at him ... So he lied to me, I asked him, 'did you put on a condom?' And he said, 'yes,' because I didn't know how it feels when he had a condom, and all that stuff (SC)

Thirdly, there were some concerns about the risks of HIV and AIDS, although this also varied. Many participants thought that AIDS was not regarded as an issue, that they did not know anyone who was infected, and that neither taxi queens nor drivers really seemed to be worried or talk about the issue much:

P: In [name of place] it doesn't seem that way, not at all, it [HIV/AIDS] doesn't exist, I don't even think they know there is such a thing, because I asked him, there's many times when I asked him, 'We must go to a clinic or something, because you are like a 'los lappie' [promiscuous], aren't you scared of AIDS?' (CT)

I: Do friends talk much about risk of HIV infection?

P: We're young, we don't talk about such things to each other. Other girls are 'active' [sexually], I'm not active, I'll use condoms. The taxi queens sleep around with different men all the time (CT)

Others thought that some taxi queens got infected by drivers, or were infected themselves and spread the virus to the drivers:

P: One of them has two babies from, from one taxi driver, and now she's got HIV (SC)

P: I had sex with him. And it was unprotected. Because what he did, he lied to me, you know. [To think that I told him] that I was still a virgin, so I think to my mind, where I am now, he took advantage of me. He lied to me and said to me, 'you know, if you are a virgin, you won't be able to get pregnant. You won't be able to get HIV and AIDS because you are new' (SC)

Fourthly, experiences of coercion and violence in relationships with taxi drivers varied among participants. While some felt safe as long as they knew the driver, others claimed that they were afraid of the driver in respect of their physical safety, and some reported experiences of being physically abused:

P: No man you trust the guys ... you trust the guys and nah ... you don't have to be scared, but if you see someone, a stranger then you have to worry, because you never take someone who's a stranger (CT)

P: Then I said to my friend, I'm not going to go together with this guy anymore, because I'm scared, when I'm with him then I feel scared, because why, it's almost as if he's going to do something wrong to me (CT)

P: And then he started abusing me as well. If I don't want to go with him and that, he'll phone the whole time and then I'll just give up, and then I'll go with him, and then he will smack me around (CT)

Many thought that the driver saw the girl as his possession, so that he could force her to have sex, or physically abuse her, for example in cases where she wanted to end the relationship, or he thought she was sleeping with another driver. Commonly, withholding of sex was viewed as grounds for a beating:

P: Sometimes taxi men are rough. If you want something, you'll have to sleep with him to get it, even if you're not ready, so some people encounter those difficulties and that's when it's rough. Or maybe you don't want to go to his house ... he takes you to his house forcefully (CT)

P: They're [taxi drivers] physically abusive, and for some of them, say you want something ... he gives it to you and then you don't want to have sex with him, then he goes off angrily and beats you up as a result of not wanting to have sex with him (CT)

P: And if you say no, then he's going to use force whenever he sees you in the road. He'll use force to get his thing right, because you have to be with him (SC)

Another form of abuse reported was the way in which taxi drivers might 'sell' their girlfriend to meet their targets for the day:

P: And then, they haven't reached the target in the evening, then they go to the

merchant, they take her, the girl, the child that they're with, they make her sleep with the merchant, for money to pay their target. (CT)

Thus participants articulated a wide range of possible risks and disadvantages of being involved with taxi drivers, but again here experiences varied considerably. While there seemed to be agreement about the centrality of alcohol use and abuse in the relationship, as has reported elsewhere (Potgieter, Strebel, Shefer, & Wagner, in review; van Wieling, 2004), there was a lot less consensus on the role of other substances, although tik use was considered to be common (Jooste, 2008; Skoch, 2010; van Wieling, 2004).

The differing perceptions on the frequency of pregnancy among taxi queens is interesting as teenage pregnancy remains a concern in local communities (Morrell, Bhana & Shefer, in press; RSA Department of Health, 2007). Discussions about the use of condoms produced similarly divergent experiences, although the high rates locally of teenage pregnancy in some communities, as mentioned above, and HIV infection suggest that condom use is at least inconsistent (RSA Department of Education, 2007; Shisana et al, 2009). Other writings on taxi queens too seem to support the idea that negotiation of condom use is extremely challenging for these young women (van Wieling, 2004). What was striking in the narratives of participants in this study was the relatively limited expression of concern about risk of HIV infection, given the context of the very high rates of infection in South Africa. Another common theme among girls interviewed was the risk of coercion or physical abuse from the driver. This again reflects findings of other writings on taxi queens (Potgieter et al., 2009; Skoch, 2010), although taxi drivers themselves did not appear to agree that such abuse occurred (Potgieter et al., in review).

DISCUSSION

A number of key areas emerged from the analysis of interviews with young women identified or identifying as taxi queens, which need to be considered in understanding and contextualising the relationships between young girls and older taxi drivers. What was notable was that even though there were contesting voices about the nature of the relationship, there was widespread recognition of the unequal transactional nature of the relationship between taxi drivers and so-called taxi queens, and that there were a range of physical and emotional risks related to this. Also apparent was that the phenomenon of young girls getting involved with older men who are better resourced was largely regarded as a normative part of youth culture, and also materially part of the daily lives of young working class girls using public transport to get to school and elsewhere.

It could also be argued that relationships between girls and drivers may be seen as part

of a much wider subculture of young girls accessing material goods through older men, who are perceived to be better resourced than younger men. Broader social pressures of materialism and consumerism may be feeding into the kinds of transactional relationships that are at the core of the taxi queen phenomenon. Gender roles and power relations also intersect with local practices that serve to legitimise and reinforce these sorts of transactional relationships. In some ways the taxi queen phenomenon is not a unique framework of relationships, but reflects the transactional nature that is endemic to normative heterosexual relationships, and that has been reported widely in many other local studies on sexuality amongst youth (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Kaufman & Stavros, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Maganja et al., 2007). However, it is also important to recognise that the relationships between young girls and taxi drivers were not only experienced as transactional in nature, but could also involve various forms of emotional intimacy. Indeed the nuanced and complex nature of the relationship needs to be acknowledged as not simply hingeing on material gains. Thus for some young women the relationship clearly offers not only material benefits such as money and gifts but also emotional security and care, as well as the status related to being involved with a man who is viewed as powerful in such communities.

Also linked to the importance of appreciating the complexity of the relationship, between young women and older taxi drivers is the recognition of the contradictory nature of power relations that they reflect. On the one hand, the drivers were depicted as having the power to use and abuse the young girls, through gifts in exchange for sexual favours; while on the other hand, there was evidence of agency and control in the ways that the girls negotiated the terms of the relationship. Thus while the intersection of social inequalities on the basis of gender, age and material wealth in particular, may undermine the young women's ability to negotiate an equitable and safe sexual relationship at the time, her lack of agency should not be a knee-jerk assumption.

Notwithstanding the nuances documented here, for the purposes of promoting the health and safety of young women, it is evident that such relationships are framed by multiple inequalities between the taxi queen and the taxi driver, and participants foreground the potential vulnerability of these young women to a range of practices that may seriously impact on their long term health and wellbeing. These include violence, unsafe sex (therefore HIV and/or unwanted pregnancies) and exposure to drug and alcohol addiction. The link between these relationships and substance abuse and addiction (as both an outcome or a motivation for such practices) has been recognised elsewhere and is clearly of concern (Jooste, 2008; Skoch, 2010; van Wieling, 2004). There was a lot less consensus on the role of other substances, although tik use was considered to be common (Jooste, 2008; Skoch, 2010; van Wieling, 2004). Moreover, the association of substance abuse with

increased risk of HIV infection has also been documented in other studies in the region (Pithey & Parry, 2009; Staras, Tobler, Malonado, & Cook, 2011; Townsend et al., 2010). Participant attitudes and practices regarding condoms also demonstrated contradictions, and point to the problems among youth more broadly in the negotiation of the use of condoms (Eaton, Flisher, & Aaro, 2003; Machel, 2011; Maganja et al., 2007; Steffenson, Pettifor, Seage, Rees, & Cleary, 2011; Shefer et al., in review). The pervasive nature of the reported threat and experience of coercion and violence in these relationships too was striking, and again reflective of reportedly widespread gender-based violence in local communities (Dunkle et al., 2004b, 2004c; Flischer, Myer, Marais, Lombard, & Reddy, 2007). Furthermore intergenerational sex between young women and older and better resourced men has emerged as a significant risk factor for young women with respect to their vulnerability to both HIV infection and inequitable relationships (Chinake et al., 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Luke, 2005; Motsemme, 2007; Nkosasana & Rosenthal, 2007; Shisana et al., 2009). The complicity of parents, conscious or unconscious, in supporting their young daughters' transactional relationships with drivers, seemingly also to benefit from the gifts, is also cause for concern. Moreover, the point made by Potgieter, Pillay, and Rama (2006, p. 36) that the "the issue of poverty and violence against women cannot be separated from the gendered issues related to transport policies, planning and services" is relevant. The 'taxi queen' phenomenon is reflective of the raced and gendered economic situation within which these young women and their families are located.

The social stigmatisation of taxi queens also emerges as a factor that possibly exacerbates the negative impact of unequal relationships by impacting further on such young women's self-esteem and possibly undermining their ability to seek help. However, the paradoxical ways in which such stigmatisation operates also needs to be appreciated. Thus, while it was the girls who were clearly and most consistently stigmatised, in line with wider literature highlighting the way in which young women are more likely to be stigmatised for having multiple partners than men (Shefer & Foster, 2009; Shefer, Strebel, & Jacobs, in review), there was also status involved in the position of being a taxi queen. Likewise, the drivers were seen as unfaithful 'ladies men' causing the downfall of young girls, but also men envied for being able to attract young girls, or just doing 'an honest day's work'. For them the stigma of these transactions was notably much less (Potgieter et al., in review). Another form of stigmatisation of the girls was reflected in the 'othering' of taxi queens and in the denial of the sexual nature of the relationship. Interestingly then, while the material nature of the transaction was tacitly accepted, the sexual nature of relationships was heavily condemned. Such denial, which has also been found in other research among South African youth (Motsemme, 2007; Shefer et al., in review), would also then mean a denial of risky sexual behaviour, and increased risks of HIV infection, as well as coercive sexual practices. In addition, the stigmatisation of taxi queens across

local communities was reflected in the difficulties experienced in the recruitment of young girls to participate in the interviews. The possible illegality of aspects of the taxi queen phenomenon may also have contributed to this, given that many girls are underage, and that drugs and possibility other criminal activity seem to be strongly connected to the taxi queen relationship especially in some communities.

In conclusion, this research has highlighted the manner in which the phenomenon of taxi queens gives expression to a range of issues both unique to the particular dynamics of these transactional relationships, as well as reflective of the experiences of youth more generally including their risks with respect to unsafe and risky sexual practices and vulnerability to violence and abuse. While there are obviously no easy remedies to the challenges raised by the study, greater understanding of the specificity and variability of the experiences of young people and their health and safety risks, together with recognition of the resonances with broader concerns facing especially Black working class South African youth, begins to provide a context for considering responses. With respect to the particular challenges facing taxi queens as young women in poor communities, it is evident that transgenerational power inequalities intersecting with material power places them in a vulnerable position to coercive sexual practices, other forms of violence, as well as exposure to HIV and other potential health risks. While the study has highlighted the complexity of their situation and their agency on some level, the negative consequences of engaging in such relationships are more than evident. Moreover the stigmatisation and negativity that they face in their communities no doubt further impacts on their experience and undermines their capacity to seek help. A holistic approach which challenges the moralistic response by families, peers and communities, and addresses the broader social context including the sense of entitlement of older, resourced men, is needed to avoid a pathologising and exclusive focus on these young women.

Notes:

- ¹ These are the categories currently used by the South African Department of Labour for the purpose of equity and redress. We use these categories since historical divisions of apartheid are still salient in contemporary South Africa.
- ² While there were some emerging differences, given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, these are not reported here.
- ³ What is noteworthy is that although all the girls interviewed had been referred to the researchers because they were known/thought to be taxi queens, many distanced themselves from the practice and spoke about 'others' when describing the lives of taxi queens

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