

Gender Violence in Schools

Gender Violence in Schools

Schools have an important role in protecting children from violence because that is where children spend more time in the care of adults than anywhere else outside of their homes. Yet violence in schools including gender based violence, has become perverse and requires more attention than ever before.

Research has shown that the schooling environment has increasingly become a breeding ground for potentially damaging gendered practices which remain with pupils into adult life. By condoning male aggression, feminine submission and transactional sex and not dealing decisively with sexual abuse and aggressive behaviour, schools send messages to pupils that violence is a 'normal' way of life.



Definitions

Gender violence in schools points to a school culture that perpetuates male domination and violence against female teachers and pupils.

Gender violence and sexual violence refer to any physical violence that is directed against women and girls because they are female or violence that affects females disproportionately such as rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and indecent assault.

Rape is defined consistent with current South African law as unlawful sexual intercourse with a female without her consent.

Statutory rape is sexual intercourse with a minor under the age of sixteen.

Sexual assault is used to describe violence or unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature that does not meet the South African legal definition of rape, including but not limited to oral and anal penetration, sexual penetration with objects, and attempted rape.

Sexual harassment is used to refer to unwanted sexual advances whether or not accompanied by physical contact and unsolicited sexualised degrading language.

Sexual abuse or gender abuse will be used generally to describe all of the above.

Key facts and figures

- The UN Secretary General's multi country study on Violence against Children shows that up to 21 percent of women in some countries reported having been sexually abused before the age of 15.
- Boys face a greater risk of physical violence than girls and girls face a greater risk of sexual violence and other forms of gender based violence. Much is directed against girls, by male teachers and classmates.
- Violence is also increasingly directed against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered young people.
- Sexual abuse by older pupils, teachers and 'sugar daddies' is only one aspect of a wider problem of school-based violence, which includes excessive corporal punishment and bullying.
- The South African Police Service (SAPS) reports increases in the number of children being arrested for acts of sexual violence. In Mitchell's Plain, a township community in the Western Cape, up to 40 percent of the 950 sexual violence cases recorded in 1999 were reportedly committed by children.

Research by the Medical Research Council of South Africa found that in South African schools:

- One in five high school boys admits to having committed rape.
- Boys as young as nine force girls to have sex with them.
- 20 % out of a 1000 pupils from 70 villages in Eastern Cape had forced themselves on a girl or women or participated in a gang rape, also known as streamlining.
- Young men who have a higher social and socio-economic status (that is, with a mother who has gone to high school or beyond) are 20% more likely to rape. They also have an exaggerated sense of sexual entitlement.
- In Gauteng the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation found that one in three (31,4%) offenders at a correctional facility claimed they had forced sex.
- In Western Cape out of 1400 men interviewed, 15% reported sexual violence and 42% physical violence towards a partner.
- In Western Cape a very high number of boys' first sexual experience was violent and coerced. Peer pressure plays a big role.

Causes

- There are high levels of apathy among officials, lack of information among pupils and parents and a reluctance to believe girls who make allegations.
- Most teachers do not see boys' intimidating behaviour as a serious problem but as part of growing up.
- Teachers are generally unwilling to report other teachers' sexual misconduct.
- Not all parents, teachers and girls disapprove of teachers or older men having sexual liaisons with schoolgirls, whether for economic or cultural reasons.
- Poverty and sometimes peer pressure, has seen young girls engaging in transactional sex as a means of paying school fees, meet daily expenses as well as obtain gifts.
- Common thread in all types of rape was that the perpetrators had experienced trauma during childhood, such as sexual abuse or other violence.

Consequences

- School performance suffers as victims find it harder to concentrate on their work after their assaults. Some girls lose interest in school altogether while others are transferred to new schools
- Other than the exploitative nature of transactional relationships involving young girls and in rare cases boys, it exposes them to high risks of contracting HIV and sexually transmitted infections.
- According to the Human Rights Watch report, social workers and therapists working with girls who were raped by teachers or classmates reported, among other problems, that girls were failing higher education matriculation exams and losing interest in other outside activities, such as sports.
- Parents told Human Rights Watch that their children had become depressed, disruptive, and anxious. Teachers expressed concern that girls they knew to have experienced sexual violence at school or at the hands of their teachers or classmates were not performing up to full potential.

Recommendations

The UN study recommends:

- The development of a national strategy or plan of action on violence against children which is realistic with time bound targets and integrated into national planning processes.
- The design and implementation of policies and programmes from a gender perspective, taking into account the different risks faced by girls and boys in respect of violence.
- Adults who oversee and work in educational settings have a duty to provide safe environments that support and promote children's dignity and development.
- Encourage schools to adopt and implement codes of conduct applicable to all staff and students that confront all forms of violence, taking into account gender-based stereotypes and behaviour and other forms of discrimination.
- Ensure that school principals and teachers use non-violent teaching and learning strategies and adopt classroom management and disciplinary measures that are not based on fear, threats, humiliation or physical force.
- Ensure that curricula, teaching processes and other practices are in full conformity with the provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, free from references actively or passively promoting violence and discrimination in any of its manifestations.

Other recommendations:

- Developing a safety for schools policy.
- Schools to become less authoritarian, more pupil-friendly and more supportive of girls so as to promote effective learning and personal development.
- Teachers to be trained to identify and punish abuse and to publicise the penalties that it incurs.
- The teacher training curriculum to include ethical conduct, sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS and guidance on how schools can challenge negative stereotypes about female and male behaviour.
- Civil servants to ensure effective dissemination and enforcement of regulations about teacher misconduct and sexual abuse and to speedily prosecute those accused of sexual relations with pupils.
- Ministries should provide clear guidelines to district officials, schools, parent and teacher associations and the general public on the regulations prohibiting and punishing all aspects of professional misconduct.
- Research should be carried out into the prevalence of homophobic violence, sexual harassment of teachers and the abuse of boys in schools.

Additional reading:

UN Secretary General's report on Violence against Children: www.violencestudy.org

UNICEF website: www.unicef.org

An investigative study of the abuse of girls in African Schools' by F Leach et al, Department for International Development: Educational Papers, No. 54, DFID, August 2003

Scared at school: sexual violence against girls in South African schools by Human Rights Watch
<http://www.hrw.org/reports>