

School Violence and the Adolescent Girl Learners' Academic Progress in South African Schools

Ramodungoane Tabane

Dept of Psychology of Education, College of Education, University of South Africa
Tabanrj@unisa.ac.za

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Abstract

School violence affects all involved. Girl learners find themselves in a school environment where their scholastic careers are threatened as a result of various forms of violence experienced at school. The purpose of the article was to report research done on the effects of violence in schools on girl learners. A qualitative research methodology, with quantitative elements, was employed. Adolescent girl learners in secondary schools in six provinces in South Africa with ages from 14 years onwards participated in the study. The effects of violence in schools on girl learners are far-reaching, with some participants indicating that they had to miss out on school and pay extra cost to receive medical attention and that if the violence continued, they would drop out of school.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, Sexual harassment, Bullying, Career choice, Subject choice, School dropout, Psychology

1. Introduction

All children have the right to learn in an equitable, free and fair school environment. The South African constitution and the education system espouse equal opportunities for all. Various laws have been promulgated and different policies formulated to address the legacy of the apartheid regime that, amongst others, limited opportunities for blacks and females to get a decent education and economic opportunities. This resulted in a drive towards redress, a concerted effort to open opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups, including females.

To work towards equity in education and the field of science the ministry of education and science and technology encouraged girl learners to enrol for school subjects like mathematics and science as these subjects were historically somewhat male-dominated. These school subjects are also critical for enrolment for studies towards science degrees. However, there is an imminent threat to girl learners living up to the espoused redress drive and taking advantage of opportunities available to them because of the learning environment in which they find themselves. Violence in the school is one of such threats that girl learners are exposed to despite the existing favourable laws and policies.

The United Nations (1993) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of women.

In schools, violence can occur anywhere, especially in places where there is poor or inadequate supervision. Research on the dynamics of violence in schools is limited and most of the aspects that have been researched focused on bullying, especially male-on-male bullying. According to Leach and Humphreys (2007: 51) "existing research into gender violence has focused on investigating sexual harassment and abuse and not much on violence in general". This article, which focuses on the effects of violence on adolescent girl learners' scholastic participation and performance, is based on research that was conducted on the dynamics of school violence in South African schools.

2. Literature Review

Violence in schools is a growing phenomenon. The definition of school violence covers a broad spectrum including psychological, emotional and physical forms of violence. The nature of violence in schools, according to the United Nations' study on Violence Against Children "covers violence such as corporal punishment, bullying, gang violence and gender violence" (Leach and Humphreys, 2007: 51). In schools, the victims of violence are the learners who are perceived as being weak, unpopular, and, in some instances, of lower-socio economic status. In most cases it leads to an unfair disadvantage and undue pressure is put on these learners, while in some cases they fall prey to various sorts of abuse and harassment from those in power positions. Female learners are not immune to this phenomenon and the high level of violence perpetrated on girl learners is a cause for concern. Thus, with regard to what constitutes school violence on girl learners, Leach (2003) contends that in developing countries, young girls in particular are not always safe in schools and that policy makers, planners and development agencies have only relatively recently acknowledged this as a matter that needs attention in order to increase girl learner participation in education.

In this article school violence on girl learners is regarded as acts with the aim of disempowering, embarrassing and

hurting (either physically, emotional and/or mentally) them. Furthermore, the definition used in this article includes sexual harassment and rape as forms of school violence. School violence, as noted by Bogart and Stein (1987), must not be confused with playing pranks and teasing each other, where the recipient might have the right to participate or withdraw from such practical jokes. Violence does not only focus on the pain to the victim, but the victim's powerlessness to stop it. The intent of violence is to cause discomfort to the victim and in this case adolescent girl learners and ultimately, it affects their academic progress and career.

Research has shown that males are mostly the perpetrators of violence on females. Walsh et al. (2007) found in their study on the prevalence of sexual harassment in high school that 9% of learners reported the gender of the perpetrator(s) to be male, 2% reported the gender of the perpetrator(s) to be female and 2% of students reported having been sexually harassed by both males and females. In addition, Mutekwe et al. (2012) reported in their study that the majority of the girl participants indicated that it was boys and male teachers who harassed and sexually abused them at school. However, violence on females and girl learners, although dominant, is not only in the patriarchal heterosexual relationships (male-on-female), which is the point highlighted by Leach and Humphreys (2007). These authors point out that existing research seems to focus on girls as victims of gender violence that is perpetrated within a heterosexual context. It appears to be largely ignoring the other forms of violence such as a homophobic, girl-on-girl, student-on-teacher as well as girl-on-boy violence, all of which have a negative effect on the victims.

The boundaries of school violence are fluid in that violence in the school can be the result of internal or external forces which have a bearing on the learning of the girl learner. Internal forces of the dynamics of violence in the school, might involve violence that takes place in the school – including corporal punishment – while the external forces can be any acts of violence from the community that spill over into the school.

It is extremely challenging when dealing with the fluidity of boundaries when the schools do not have fences or walls or gates to safeguard them, and external forces (for instance gangs) gain access to the schools easily. Thus, if gender violence is perpetuated in the school community or the communities around the school, girl learners continue to be in difficult position and their learning is in jeopardy.

2.1 School violence and girl learner scholastic progress

Adolescent girl learners who are exposed to violence find themselves in a difficult position as far as their scholastic career is concerned and they might be forced to make drastic decisions because they are not respected and are often threatened by their counterparts. According to Bogart and Stein (1987: 155) "there has been increasing evidence that women and girls are especially likely to be subjected to sexual harassment as they attempt to enter non-traditional fields of study or employment, such as the skilled trades, the sciences and engineering". Often, owing to fear of re-victimisation they might not report acts of violence perpetrated on them. In an attempt to escape from the humiliation and to stop the hurt and the harassment, adolescent girl learners might drop out of school or change school or school subjects as well as participation in school activities. Leach (2003: 389) found that "an environment which tolerates one illegal type of violence, e.g. corporal punishment, is also likely to be permissive of other forms of violence, e.g. sexual abuse". Therefore it is against this background of violence that young people are learning about and adopting what they see as conventional male and female behaviour. According to Mutekwe et al. (2012), a large number of girl participants in their study cited teasing, humiliation, verbal bullying and assaults of girls by boys as a major impediment to their education and career aspirations. It seems as though domination of the male tradition and hegemony persists in certain schools, school subjects and careers.

Sexual harassment as a form school violence against girl learners is covered widely in research as a form of gender violence in high schools (Corbett et al. 1993; Larkin 1994; Leach and Sitaram 2007; Gruber and Fineran 2008; Rahimi and Liston 2009) and literature in this area mentions that this phenomenon needs further investigation.

The effects of non-physical violence should also be considered when dealing with issues of violence. Verbal abuse, for instance in terms of name calling, affects adolescent girl learners' learning and it can also be used to maintain and remind them of their 'position' in a hegemonic society. Unwanted and unwarranted sexual talks can also be regarded as a form of sexual harassment and thus violence against girl learners if directed at them. According to Larkin (1994), female learners are often exposed to crude language and other forms of sexually harassing behaviour which has become part of the 'fabric of our daily lives'. Moreover, they are expected to compete on an equal footing with their violators and this expectation at times seems difficult to achieve. Leach and Sitaram (2007) found that verbal forms of sexual harassment were the most unpleasant experience that girls had in their schools. Thus, Rahimi and Liston (2009: 514) assert that verbal abuse and "sexual labeling [in particular] is a clear form of sexual harassment and, in many cases, it serves to remind young girls of their gendered role in the heterosexual script".

The persistence of any form of violence might also lead to mental and emotional states such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic disorder and low self-esteem, especially if the victims have to return to the same situation that violated them or put their lives in danger. Ageypong et al. (2011) argue that girl learners' education is negatively affected as a result of experiencing violations of one form or the other because in most cases the girl learners have to attend school at times with boys and male teachers who might have perpetrated these acts. This might cause such girl learners to feel uncomfortable and unsafe among their fellow learners and educators and their perception is that they do not belong. Consequently, they fail to participate effectively in the school.

Bogart and Stein (1987) state that experiences of violence extend beyond the scholastic career and this fact poses a major threat to all students, not only because violence infringes upon both educational and employment opportunities, but because sexual harassment is often associated with many other harmful social behaviours, including alcohol and drug abuse. It also increases other risks, including those associated with unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

3. Methodology

The article is based on a broad study on the dynamics of violence in South African schools conducted in high schools in six provinces of South Africa, namely, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West and the Western Cape. This was primarily a qualitative study that also employed some quantitative research methods in order to get at the lived reality of violence in schools. An interpretative methodology was used to analyse data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with learners. Data were drawn from learners who were 14 years or older.

The participants were both boys and girls who had either been affected by violence personally or had voluntarily admitted to having perpetrated violence on other learners. A paper-pencil/pen questionnaire completed by learners was administered to learners ranging between 30 and 45 learners per school. A purposeful sample of a minimum of five learners was selected from each focus group to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The focus of this article is on the effects of school violence on adolescent girl learners, thus data related to violence and girl learners as formulated in the survey questionnaire and posed in the interviews were selected for analysis. In the situation where data from males and females might overlap, data that include and have a bearing on the female learners was considered for analysis.

4. Findings

In this study, 19% of participants indicated that violence had been perpetrated by male school mates while 8% indicated that a fellow female learner was the perpetrator. This is in agreement with the findings of Walsh et al. (2007) and Mutekwe et al. (2012) that the perpetrator or perpetrators were mostly male.

Thirteen per cent of those who had experienced physical abuse indicated they had been physically injured and had had to seek medical attention. The physical violence and injury did not only affect the female learners but could also lead to violent retribution, as shown by the excerpt below:

I have experienced some physical violence; I have been harassed in the school violently. That guy he touched my behind, and then that felt really uncomfortable and I went and told my brother and he wanted to [stab] him with a scissor.

At times the act of violence can also spark more violence at the school and in some cases the fighting among the learners can continue for a long time:

The boy used to harass me, this day I decided to have a fight with him.

A girl learner felt she needed to stand up and retaliate, defend herself and said:

I was a victim once, so this time I decided to defend myself.

Victims of sexual harassment do not only experience physical but also emotional strain as in some cases they might suffer mental and/or emotional distress such as fear, trauma, depression, stress or anxiety after such an ordeal. Some participants indicated that they lived in fear in their schools. They had been bullied and their belongings were taken from them. Learners were afraid of going to the ablution blocks to relieve themselves. For the adolescent girl learners this had particularly negative implications during menstruation. One of the participants said:

We are afraid to go to the toilets because they take our money and cell phones. There are some places that we no longer go to because of fear of what fellow learners might do to us.

4.1 School dropout

Due to traumatic experiences of violence in the schools, 31% of female learners indicated that they would not return to school as a result of the experience of violence that they endured on the school premises.

4.2 Psychological aspects

In this study, 51% of the adolescent girl learners indicated experiences of emotional distress after being sexually harassed at school, yet only 22% of those who felt distraught sought psychological assistance. Seventeen per cent of the respondents who would have wanted to go for the psychological services indicated that the psychological services were not available where they live, while 25% indicated that the services were too expensive. The adolescent girl learners who indicated they were sexually abused or harassed at school indicated that 25% of assistance was provided by the government, while the school provided 30%. This is not much assistance considering that the ordeal was actually experienced on the school premises.

The study also found that violence experienced at school has financial implications because in most cases it is the responsibility of the victims to settle medical accounts after experiencing violence. Sixty-one per cent of adolescent girl learners indicated that their family had to pay for the medical treatment, while only 20% indicated they had received it for free. Therefore these unforeseen additional expenses to a family that cannot afford them might mean making financial sacrifices. This could mean that they would have to do without necessary school equipment because they cannot afford to buy it. In addition, going for medical and psychological treatment means that the adolescent girl learner might have to be absent from school. Twenty-one per cent of the participants indicated they had to stay away from school for two to five days a month to receive treatment. Staying away from school has a negative impact on their learning as valuable time will be lost. Thus 75% indicated they had to repeat a year and 25% repeated more than one year, and 31% of adolescent girl learners indicated that they would not return to school as a result of experiencing violence (including sexual harassment) at their schools.

5. Discussion

From the data that was gathered and presented, three areas relating to how violence affects girl learners' academic progress are discussed in this section.

5.1 Absenteeism and school dropout

It emerged from the study that adolescent girl learners' scholastic career is affected by violence that they are exposed to at school. These findings are consistent with the findings of Rahimi and Liston (2009) and Mutekwe et al. (2012) that girl learners are more likely to decide on their scholastic career based on their learning environment. As a result of the violence experienced at school, 49% of adolescent girl learners in this study indicated that they had to stay away from school because of fear, victimisation and/or hospitalisation while teaching and learning continues at school.

An adolescent girl learner's performance might be poor as a result of being absent from school. In this respect 21% of girl learners indicated they had to stay away from school for two to five days a month to receive treatment. Lessons at school continue – in most cases with the perpetrator present – while the victim-adolescent girl learner stays at home, either afraid of going back to school, or actually nursing her emotional, psychological and/or physical wounds. Thus, adolescent girl learners' academic and career prospects are negatively affected as adolescent girl learners indicated they had to repeat once or twice, while others indicated that they would not return to school as a result of experiencing violence at their school.

5.2 Additional unforeseen costs

School violence on adolescent girl learners also has financial and in most cases unforeseen implications and some of these costs might come in terms of hospitalisation and/or other medical expenses due to acts of violence. In most cases these expenses are not borne by the perpetrator. Up to 61% of the affected families might have to pay additional costs for services such as psychological services and medical attention and the girl learner will have to be out of school. This will have an effect on her school performance with accompanying implications for school and subject choices.

These unforeseen costs will also have an influence on the family because they might have to sacrifice whatever they budgeted for in order to attend to medical, psychological and/or legal expenses. In some cases this might mean settling for less or not purchasing the required school apparatus or other requirements.

5.3 Impact on equity

Employment equity, the initiatives of the minister of science and technology to have more girl learners enrol in science and mathematics subjects, is under threat because some of the girls who might have experienced sexual harassment, for instance, were in this cohort. It is thus important to reiterate what Larkin (1994: 264) pointed out:

[E]qual opportunity initiatives are of limited use if, for example, female students are urged into mathematics and science fields but we neglect to consider the hostile climate they encounter there through social ills like bullying, physical attacks, sexual labeling in terms of calling girls names and sexual harassment when they are in such male dominated fields.

As discussed in the results section, 75% of participants (including girl learners) indicated they had to repeat a year and 25% repeated more than one year as a result of violence at school. Therefore, the girl learner cohort that was placed in specialised school subjects or programmes that were previously male dominated do not continue with the subjects or they drop out due one form of violence or the other and thus the status quo remains.

6. Conclusions

Although there are policies to ensure that all learners learn in an equitable and free environment, what happens in practice is often the opposite of what is intended, especially where girl learners are concerned. In many cases, adolescent girl learners seem to be attending school in fear, because of violence experienced at school. They miss school and learning time and this affects their performance and career choices as they often end up not choosing certain school subjects and/or drop out of school as a result of violence experienced at school.

It is unfortunate, as indicated above, that the adolescent girl learner's scholastic and career aspirations are wrecked as a result of such disempowering actions. It is clear that gender violence needs attention so that all learners will feel safe in schools.

7. Recommendations

In view of the above findings and conclusions, it is recommended that empowerment must not only be seen as a top-down approach that comes from the minister of science and technology, but as a bottom-up approach. In the schools all school personnel play a key role to ensure that the playing fields are levelled. Teachers need to be in class, be visible and be held accountable for violence happening at school while under their supervision.

It is recommended that a learner empowerment programme for both male and female learners be devised. Girl learners should be encouraged to claim their power and boy learners sensitised about the repercussions of their actions.

An investment should be made in better security and supervision in and around the school. This will ensure that both internal and external forces of violence are addressed. Learners must not be left unsupervised in the classrooms or on the school grounds.

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