

# Exploring the Influence of Stigmatisation of Sexually Abused Learners at Rural Secondary Schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of the paper is to explore the influences of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners at secondary schools in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. There is an outcry that there is an ever-increasing number of learners who are sexually abused at schools, and most of the cases are not reported. Besides the fact that victims are psychologically, emotionally, and physically affected, some of them are stigmatised. The stigmatisation brings shame, confusion, depression, and low self-esteem, and as a result, they end up leaving school at an early stage. A qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were followed in exploring the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners at schools. Data collection was through a literature review and document analysis of national and provincial sexual abuse policies in schools. It was found that stigmatisation contributes negatively to the wellbeing of the sexually abused learners at school.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the words learners and students are used interchangeably. Stigmatisation is a barrier to the wellbeing and educational progress of sexually abused learners in schools (von Wrangel 2024). This conceptual paper aims to explore the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in rural secondary schools in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Child sexual abuse is a great concern throughout the world (Ali et al. 2024). Such incidents occur for all ages, categories, and socioeconomic classes (Guiney et al. 2024). Children are part of society and are vulnerable to different forms of sexual abuse. Cases of learners' sexual abuse are reported from many settings, such as the family, school, church, and community (Livingston et al. 2020).

While most victimised learners do not report the sexual abuse to the authorities, there is a growing outcry about the increasing number of learners experiencing sexual abuse at schools in rural settlements (Jakubecy-Gibson 2024). Sexual abuse is defined as a sexual act committed or attempted by one person against another who has not given consent, refuses engagement, or has been in any way verbally or physically pressurised to engage in sexual activities (Guggisberg et al. 2021). Sexual abuse occurs when some-

one involves minors in sexual activities or interactions using force, blackmail, threats, intimidation, or deception. It involves sexual activities performed by adults and peers with or without the child's consent, and it may occur with contact, such as touching for sexual purposes, caressing, having oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse, as well as non-contact sexual activities (Ersoy et al. 2022).

South African rural schools face many social and environmental challenges that have a negative influence on the wellbeing and performance of learners. The affected learners face complex challenges throughout their developmental stages, and it is unlikely that the situation will change soon (Ntsanwisi 2024). Kamble (2024) indicates that sexual abuse is among the threats that learners are facing, but they do not report such cases due to fear of stigmatisation. Therefore, schools turn into stressful and debilitating places where learners who need extra psychosocial care lose hope and trust and feel disconnected from the school environment (Acosta-Gómez et al. 2018).

The sexual activities are carried out in secrecy, and in most cases, the perpetrator and victim are the only witnesses (Guerra et al. 2021). The sexually abused victims are psychologically, emotionally, and physically affected and their cognitive development competencies and skills

are undermined (Diraditsile 2018). The psychological sexual abuse consequences are characterised by negative emotions such as fear, worry, sadness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts (Mandau 2021).

There is a serious concern that learners do not disclose sexual abuse incidents because in most cases, they do not get support from the family church, schools, and the community. They are also afraid of the negative consequences of revealing the sexual abuse activities as well as the feelings of guilt and shame (Guerra et al. 2021). Learners' sexual abuse leads to a victim's powerful negative self-evaluative emotion of shame, and that shame rather than guilt is the core emotion for stigmatisation. Guilt motivates and amends the feeling of shame, which deeply motivates evasion (Landers et al. 2024). The stigmatisation brings shame, confusion, depression, and low self-esteem. As a result, the victims end up dropping out of school prematurely. If sexually abused learners do not receive the necessary support, their mental and physical health can deteriorate, and their education and prospects may suffer significantly.

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to understand how the influence of stigmatisation negatively impacts the wellbeing of sexually abused learners at schools. The findings will lead to the development of best practice guidelines for alleviating the stigmatisation of the victimised learners.

A qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm were employed in the investigation of this study. Data was collected using a literature review that incorporates books, scholarly articles, and documents that address national and provincial sexual abuse policies in school contexts.

### Objectives

The objective is to explore the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in rural secondary schools. The findings will provide a better understanding of the influence of stigmatisation, which can affect the school progress and future of the affected learners. A better understanding of the phenomena can also provide guidance to schools to enable them to assist and support the victimised learners.

### Literature Review

In the literature on stigmatisation, it is described as the negative implications, such as shame, badness, and guilt, conveyed to the children about the events that are integrated into their conception of themselves (Yucel 2024). The perpetrator may silence the victim by blaming them for such behaviour. The victim may also see the behaviour as abnormal and taboo, for which they might be held responsible (Kennedy and Prock 2018). This results in self-blame, shame and fear of others' unfavourable opinions should their secret be discovered. Shame and self-blame are perceived as aspects of stigmatisation because the victims want to shield their battered selves from other people's judgement and scrutiny (Romero 2024). The victims develop psychophysical trauma, which affects their development and wellbeing throughout their lives. In attempts to avoid social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety, some abused learners engage in risky behaviours such as drinking alcohol, drug abuse, early unprotected sexual activities, prostitution, homelessness and gangsterism (Iorfa et al. 2022).

### *Sexual Abuse and Stigmatisation in Limpopo Province Rural Schools*

Learner sexual abuse is a worldwide social and health problem that affects learners, including those in rural schools in Limpopo province. Learners are sexually abused at home, in the community, and at schools. The victims do not disclose the incidents out of fear of being stigmatised and blamed for flirting or being seductive to get what they wanted (Zantsi 2014). Many cases of learner sexual abuse occur in rural schools where the victims and their parents are unwilling to disclose the abuse. Some learners are sexually abused by teachers, and many of the victims are from low-income households, with parents frequently neglecting to report incidents because they see those teachers as sources of finance and support (Mandla and Masinga 2010).

In some rural areas of Limpopo province, like in the Bapedi tribe, sexual abuse incidents are not disclosed due to, among others, fear of the

perpetrator, the practice of the spirit of ubuntu, the socioeconomic status of the family and relationship with the perpetrator, protecting the dignity of the family, fear of discrimination, and fear of witchcraft and cultural beliefs (Frank 2019). Victims suffer in silence because of fear of disclosure, stigmatisation, and discrimination by teachers, family members, friends, and the community (Neshunzhi et al. 2023). In the Bapedi-speaking tribes, learner sexual abuse issues are regarded as matters for the affected families to deal with, including traditional court interventions if necessary (Rapholo 2014). In some incidents, victims are silenced by threats, blame, and bribery. Learners of the Bapedi tribes in rural areas are likely to suffer continuous sexual abuse, which compromises their wellbeing, psychological, social, physical, and health, and their educational trajectories (Frank 2019).

Due to cultural standards of secrecy and fear of punishment, incidences of sexual abuse against Venda people cannot be reported because of fear of bringing shame and dishonour to the family. Sexually abused learners cannot report such cases because of fear of stigmatisation, and as a result, their developmental stages are negatively affected (Ramphabana 2019).

Stigmatised sexually abused learners who experienced violence and trauma could develop mental and physical health challenges, aggressive behaviours, anxiety disorders, sadness, emotional depression, and cognitive and behavioural dysfunction. As a consequence of stigmatisation, some become drug addicts and develop serious mental health problems (Tsheole et al. 2024).

### *Types of Stigmatisation*

Sexually abused learners are frequently under the impression that they are “on the stage” because the school, family, church, and the community are constantly watching and observing their moves. They remain silent to avoid harmful social reactions (Ersoy et al. 2022).

There are four different types of stigmatisation based on where the labelling emerged and originated from. These are briefly explained in the section below.

Public stigma is often a cause of self-stigma and describes the way society reacts to a person in an abusive situation on an affective, be-

havioural, cognitive level based on historical and cultural origins (Gürsoy and Gizir 2018). The strength of the stigma depends on the ideals and customs in society on that topic (Green et al. 2024).

Self-stigma is the most harmful form of stigmatisation that considers the psychological and social effects of carrying a stigma. Self-stigma arises from public stigma imposed on individuals and includes harmful attitudes and misconceptions that lead to distorted self-perceptions and personal humiliation when people openly acknowledge their situation (Matthews 2019). People who self-stigmatise develop unfavourable opinions and impressions of themselves, losing self-confidence and self-esteem and withdrawing themselves from the community (Gürsoy and Gizir 2018).

The third type of stigma is stigma by association. Stigma by association refers to social and psychological responses to people who are associated with a stigmatised individual. People who are closer to the victim experience stigma themselves. This process is a phenomenon driven by observers (Johnson and Schminke 2024).

Structural stigma is the institutionalisation and perpetuation of a stigmatised status by societal institutions and ideological frameworks. Sexual stigma can manifest itself both in institutions and in individuals (Ersoy et al. 2022). The socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and wellbeing of marginalised groups are the causes of structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2024). Cultural standards, beliefs, and definitions that exist regardless of an individual’s attitudes are manifestations of structural stigma.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical context on the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in schools is gathered from Goffman’s theory of social stigma because it is instrumental in investigating social phenomena that involve social injustice (Aranda et al. 2023). Social stigma is the life-threatening disapproval of a member of society based on social characteristics that are perceived to differentiate them from other members of society (Victor and Amzat 2023). Positive social feedback about an individual’s adherence to other social rules is insignificant compared to

the powerful impact of social stigma. This may lead to oneself stigma that originates from unfavourable perceived personal characteristics in a way that may lead to a spoiled identity or self-stigma. Goffman (cited in Allison 2023) refers to stigma as a situation whereby an individual is disqualified from full social acceptance. Social stigmas are frequently associated with culture, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, sexuality, body image, physical disability, intelligence, and health. Certain stigmas are relatively recognised to be evident, while others are known to be hidden and need to be disclosed (Kwon et al. 2024). The social stigma theory is used in this paper to illuminate how stigmatisation harms the wellbeing of sexually abused learners at schools.

### Research Question

The main question to be investigated in the research is: To what extent is it known about the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners at rural secondary schools? Jeries-Loulou and Khoury-Kassabri (2022) argue that more than 40 percent of learners experienced at least one incident of sexual victimisation during their lives. As a result, the victims are isolating themselves because of discrimination. Stigmatised learners need assistance and support to be able to face victimisation challenges at schools. There is a need to know and understand the extent of the influence of stigmatisation on sexually abused learners.

### METHODOLOGY

The researcher explores the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in rural secondary schools. A qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were used in exploring the influence of stigmatisation of the sexually abused learners in schools and the best practices that can be followed to support them. Stigmatisation of sexually abused learners is a social phenomenon, and therefore, a qualitative research approach is an appropriately planned inquiry into a social phenomenon within its natural setting. Johnson and Christensen (2024) found that the phenomenon to be addressed may include actions, behaviour, relationships,

or events involving an individual, group of people, or a school as an organisation.

### Data Collection

The literature review was used as a method of gathering information to find material pertinent to the subject under investigation to expound on learners' experiences and to address the problem (Johnson and Christensen 2024). Extensive research is conducted for a better understanding of this phenomenon and its epistemological component by uncovering the deeper meaning within the literature (Goodwin et al. 2023).

### Data Analysis

Data analysis of the literature adopts an interpretivist paradigm within a school setting (Jang and Sung 2024). The researcher reflects on the phenomenon that addressed the actions, behaviour, relationships, and events that involve individuals, groups of people, or a school as an organisation. Using this interpretative lens, it is possible to construct intervention activities that will lessen the stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in schools and to gain a greater understanding of the extent to which stigmatisation affects them.

## RESULTS

Literature on the stigmatisation of sexually abused learners indicates that stigmatisation of sexually abused learners has a negative influence on the victims and affects their wellbeing at school. It causes severe depression, which results in some cases of suicide (Sehlo et al. 2022). Stigmatisation is a threat to the victim's health, life, and education (Johnson and Christensen 2024). Victim learners become more vulnerable due to isolation and lack of support. They suffer severe emotional, psychological, mental, and physical trauma due to stigmatisation and social withdrawal and silently cry for help and support. Stigmatisation is a barrier to the wellbeing and educational progress of learners (von Wrangel 2024), and some drop out of school and resort to negative behavioural activities, including drug abuse (Lekan-Agunbiade et al. 2022).

## DISCUSSION

### Scholars' Understanding of Stigmatisation of Sexually Abused Learners

Stigmatisation has long been a concern that contributes to the low quality and lack of progress in learners' performance in school. The victims and culprits are indiscreetly discriminated against and experience a negative attitude from the school and society. Therefore, the victims remain silent to avoid fear of being isolated and degraded. This increases the severity of the victims' anguish and isolation (SuKwon and Jacoby 2022). The stigmatisation denies such learners their right and opportunity to associate with other people, dignity, education, and safety.

Some learners experience high levels of stigmatisation and lose control over themselves. They regard themselves as an embarrassment to the family, church, school, and community. This affects their future hopes, and their dreams are also shut down (Kucuk and Koruk 2022). As a result, the affected learners feel unprotected and excluded by society. The stigmatisation makes such learners feel socially rejected, and they experience behavioural, emotional, and physical problems (Kurzban and Leary 2001).

Impregnated sexually abused learners are labelled, stereotyped, discriminated against, and stigmatised by the school and society. They are rejected, blamed, and punished for their bad morals. The victims suffer severe emotional, psychological, mental, and physical trauma because of stigmatisation and social rejection. They, therefore, drop out of school to avoid stigmatisation. Unsupported learners stay in isolation, stranded, depressed, and become more vulnerable. Some even commit suicide, have unprotected abortions, die or suffer serious complications during childbirth, kill or sell their children after birth, stay in illegal marriages with the perpetrators who impregnated them, and experience domestic violence (Lekan-Agunbiade et al. 2022).

There is a low early disclosure due to the uncertainty of the learners on how the school and society would react. Female learners are more likely to disclose than male learners. The reason for this could be that, in most stereotypical rural communities, boys should be strong and be able

to defend themselves. It would be very shameful to acknowledge that they had been sexually harassed and abused (Guerra et al. 2021).

Sexually abused learners who cannot disclose the abuse due to fear of stigmatisation view the school as an oppressive, tense, or life-threatening environment. They feel unprotected and develop anger from a lack of care and support. Those who lack support from their families feel hurt and develop emotional trauma and stress. The stress can possibly cause hatred and violent outbursts. The internal frustration may lead to life-threatening or antisocial behaviours (Willan et al. 2024).

### Factors Contributing to Learners' Silence

Victims who reported sexual abuse incidents to their caregivers were not given adequate attention because the latter were afraid of being stigmatised with shame and fear of having such learners. Sexual abuse of learners is a major global source of trauma and human suffering, which can profoundly affect the victims' behaviour from their developmental years through to adulthood. Stigma surrounding sexual abuse contributes to severe depression and hallucinations, which lead to suicidal ideology or thoughts (Sehlo et al. 2022).

According to Ersoy et al. (2022), most sexually abused learners suffer in silence because reported cases are just the tip of the iceberg. Fear of stigmatisation contributes to the silence of sexual abuse incidents. The victim learners face unique barriers in looking for help because of fear of stigmatisation (Kettrey and Marx 2024). Chandran et al. (2018) are of the same opinion that fear of being stigmatised and of the offender is another factor in the low reporting and withdrawal of reporting of learners' sexual abuse cases.

Sexual abuse stigmatisation has a negative influence on the learner's personality over the long term, and occasionally it lasts over a lifetime. It has an impact on various facets of the child's life, such as psychological and physical wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and academic careers. They experience a loss of focus, zeal, and interest in learning that impairs academic achievement or causes a pause in one's academic career (Johnson and Christensen 2024).

### **The Problem of Stigmatisation Faced by the School Students**

Guerra et al. (2021) argue that both male and female learners experience sexual abuse at schools, and the incidents are not disclosed due to fear of stigmatisation. As a result of the silence, they become helpless, feel guilt, shame, uncertainty, and trauma, and some of them even drop out of school. The victims develop psychophysical trauma, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, some abused learners engage in risky behaviours such as drinking alcohol, drug abuse, early unprotected sexual activities, prostitution, homelessness and gangsterism (Iorfa et al. 2022), or they can develop mental and physical health challenges, aggressive behaviours, anxiety disorders, sadness, emotional depression, and cognitive and behavioural dysfunction. Some become drug addicts and develop serious mental health problems (Tsheole et al. 2024).

### **CONCLUSION**

Learners of today will become the society of tomorrow and should be raised as a healthy generation. They should not be exposed to risky and dangerous circumstances. The school, family, and communities should pave the way for support and encouragement of multidisciplinary studies rather than punish them. This could inspire the desire to recover, but usually only in a setting of support where there is no shame from the public and acceptance from others is evident.

This study provides evidence of how sexually abused learners suffer depression and the consequences of stigmatisation in silence. Therefore, best practices should be developed to alleviate the stigmatisation of the victimised learners. The practices will encourage them to disclose and report sexual abuse incidents in order to receive appropriate support and treatment. There is a pressing need to create strategies to reduce all types of stigmatisation and promote the wellbeing of learners.

Sexually abused learners should be supported by all stakeholders including the school, family, church, and community. This might inspire the desire to heal, but usually only in a setting of support where there is no stigmatisation from

the public and acceptance from others is evident. The schools should develop programs that could lessen the impact of stigma by encouraging learners to come forward and talk about experiences without fear of being stigmatised.

There is a dire need for the development of community-based and public-focused projects to improve parental awareness, knowledge, and skills in preventing the stigmatisation of sexually abused learners. Schools should also engage in awareness campaigns and educational programs for learners and parents to be well informed and be able to address sexual abuse learner stigmatisation incidents.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The aim of the investigation was to explore the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners in rural secondary schools. The findings indicate that stigmatisation of sexually abused learners has a negative influence on the victims and affects their wellbeing at school. It induces profound depression, which leads to suicidal thoughts and even to suicide itself. Stigmatisation is a threat to the victims' health, life, and education.

Learners suffer sexual abuse stigmatisation at the family, church, schools, and in the community due to a lack of knowledge of addressing such incidents. They should be provided with education about the management of depression caused by sexual abuse stigma at an early stage to avoid the feelings of guilt and shame. The acquired knowledge will help the victims to relieve the depression and the suicidal thoughts. Victims should be given support at school, home, and in society.

Schools should be created as centres offering a safe environment and helping to break the silence and provide support to avoid oppression, tension, or life-threatening situations. Schools, parents and society should not accuse and blame learners who are sexually abused. There should be gender sensitisation among all stakeholders to prevent learner sexual abuse incidents. They should be encouraged to report such cases and be given the necessary help to do so.

Teachers spend more time with learners at school and have an opportunity to identify the

behavioural changes at the earliest possible time. They should open doors for discussions and dialogue and involve all stakeholders in deriving the necessary remediation measures. Professionals in different institutions, such as health, education, and welfare, should be trained to enable them to intervene in a proactive manner in the sexual abuse of learners.

The appropriate way of reducing the influence of stigmatisation of sexually abused learners at schools is to do away with the barriers that promote a conducive environment for this process to occur. Victimised learners should receive the support required to cultivate self-compassion and self-trust in order to recover from the experience of sexual abuse. School, family, church, and community should not expose learners to the risks of sexual abuse environments. They should rather join hands in fighting against victims' discrimination, stigmatisation and prejudices originating from sociocultural and family backgrounds. The school is expected to create a safe learning environment for effective teaching and learning. Additionally, it is emphasised that a platform for open discussion is rather to be enhanced, unlike stigmatisation of learners at schools.

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