

## School Related Gender Based Violence as a Violation of Children's Rights to Education in South Africa: Manifestations, Consequences and Possible Solutions

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**KEYWORDS** School Related Gender Based Violence. Children's Rights. Learners. Schools. Violation. Human Dignity

**ABSTRACT** This paper highlights how School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) which breeds violation of children's rights to education and human dignity is prevalent in South African schools despite sturdy domestic legal frameworks that flow from international and human rights treaties. The paper also sheds light on the most predominant manifestations of SRGBV namely bullying, corporal punishment and sexual abuse and how impunity and pervasiveness exposes learners to be victims of SRGBV in the hands of their peers; teachers; principals and school personnel. The overall findings of the paper indicate that both girls and boys are victims of SRGBV and this results in adverse consequences such as: violation of their freedom, security, privacy and integrity, health, death ideation, and high exposure to HIV/AIDS – these compromise schooling and far-reaching physical and social development of the victims. The paper recommends that the solutions and future needs for South African schools to curb SRGBV are: learners should be engaged as collaborators in inclusive and customised SRGBV activities that meet the unique needs and ethos of schools. This will promote human dignity and children's right to education in safe learning and nurturing environment. Adequate human and financial resources should be injected towards redress of SRGBV to assist learners suffering from physical and psychological aftermaths. Teacher training should be inclusive of techniques for curbing SRGBV and should equip teachers on how to address learner misconduct using non-aggressive practices. Anonymous disclosure by victims and swift response by the state on perpetrators should be promoted to abate the culture of silence on victims of SRGBV. Lastly, programmes that have been implemented to guide and redress SRGBV in line with the South African constitution and legislation should be monitored and evaluated to gauge if they have achieved the initial stated goals and objectives.

### INTRODUCTION

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide. It knows no geographical, cultural, social, economic or ethnic boundaries (UNESCO 2016; Duru and Balkis 2018; Parkers 2016; De Lange and Mitchell 2014). It is one of the worst manifestations of gender discrimination and violates a wide range of children's rights (Children's Rights International Network 2017). Widespread SRGBV in and around schools seriously undermines the achievement of quality, inclusive and equitable education for all children and hampers the empowerment and transformation of the lives

of young people, especially girls. Despite the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by virtually every state with the exception of the US, all indications are that SRGBV against children is on the rise (UNICEF 2012; Brehim and Boyle 2018).

### Conceptual Framework

It is embarrassing for a country to fail to meet its targets in providing education for all of its children due to SRGBV, but more so of violating a legal obligation set out in international human rights law such as the right to education especially if the country is a signatory). For the purposes of this review, it is important that we define what is meant by SRGBV and the right to education.

### Definition of SRGBV

SRGBV is defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in

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and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics (UNESCO/UNGEI 2015:1; Orton 2018). SRGBV includes individual action as well as society's harmful traditional practices or gendered expectations that negatively impact on children's rights to education (Greene et al. 2013; Mncube and Harber 2013). It can take place between students; teachers and students; teachers; between family or community members and students and can involve corporal punishment, bullying, threats and ethnic harassment (Duru and Balkis 2018). The definition by Kibriya et al. (2016:23), mirrors the position adopted in this paper. The latter uses SRGBV to refer to violence or abuse that is based on gendered stereotypes or one that targets students in and around schools on the basis of their sex, sexuality, or gender identities.

### Right to Education

The researchers shall use the definitions provided for by Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 in Paper 26 and supported by (de Souza 2016) which provides that:

- ◆ Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages, Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally available on the basis of merit.
- ◆ Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- ◆ Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children (De Souza 2016).

### Legal Obligations Aligned with SRGBV

#### International Law

Globally, international and human rights treaties articulate legally binding norms and standards

that must be adhered to by all states, including South Africa. South Africa has ratified a number of international, regional and national human rights treaties that necessitate it to prevent and respond to SRGBV to learners; creating a safe learning environment in their quest to exercise their right to education namely: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)(1966); The Convention Against Torture (CAT)(1984); The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)(1989); Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)(1979); The Dakar Framework for Action Education for All (EFA) (2000) (Seedat et al. 2017). Under these international conventions, South Africa has a duty to protect learners from torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and from violations of their right to dignity and security of the person.

#### Regional Law

There are three regional instruments which oblige South Africa to protect children these are: The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR also known as the Banjul Charter)(1981); the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)(1990), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)(2003). Like international law, the regional conventions ensure that state parties offer protection to children, and the girl child in particular of their rights to health and education; from all forms of sexual exploitation and also provide for sanctions against violations of such rights.

#### South African Law

South Africa also has a sturdy domestic legal framework that establishes the responsibility of the State to protect learners from SRGBV such as: The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996(a); Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, No 32 of 2007; South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996(c); Employment of Educators Act, No 76 of 1998; South African Council for Educators Act, 31 of 2000; Children Amendment Act, 41 of 2000; and

Protection from Harassment Act, No 17 of 2011. For instance, the latter's key principles are premised on:

*The right to equality, privacy, dignity, freedom and security of the person, the right to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources and the rights of children to have their best interests considered to be of paramount importance; as well as afford victims of harassment an effective remedy against such behaviour.*

All these cement South Africa's obligation to take affirmative and meaningful action to prevent and respond; punish and redress acts of SRGBV.

### Global Statistics of SRGBV

According to Alexander (2011), SRGBV is a fundamental violation of human rights, particularly the rights of women and children, and represents a considerable barrier to participation in education, gender equity, and achievement of Education for All (EFA). Heslop et al. (2017) also advance that SRGBV breaches the attainment three (3) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) namely: Goal 4 Education, Goal 5 Gender and Goal 16 Peace. These goals underscore the importance of redressing of violence against children; securing schools as safe and gender-sensitive places and acute monitoring of SRGBV.

Worldwide, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience violence, mostly within schools (Greene et al. 2013; Hayes and O Neale 2018). An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys (Rudd 2013) have experienced sexual violence and nearly half of all sexual assaults are committed against girls younger than 16 years of age (Greene et al. 2013). A study of SRGBV in four counties of Liberia revealed that 30 percent of girls and 22 percent of boys reported that they had been forced to have sex. In addition, although the study shows that abuse by peers was most common, almost one in five children spoke of abuse by teachers and other school staff (Postmus et al. 2015; Parkers 2016). In Uganda, by 2013, 77 percent of primary school children and 82 percent of secondary school children had experienced unwanted SRGBV (Magwa 2015). Whereas, in Zimbabwe, more than 100 girls are victims of SRGBV on a daily basis (Nyamanhidi 2015).

In South Africa, SRGBV is also very high. For instance about 1.8 million of all pupils between Grade 3 and Grade 12 (15.3%) had experienced

violence in one form or another (Burton 2008). Burton (2008) further adds that the National School Violence Study in South Africa conducted a survey in 2012 and found out that on the whole, one in five learners (22.2%) had succumbed to some form of violence while at school in the 12 months between August 2011 and August 2012. This translated to 1 020 597 secondary school learners. The above findings not only indicate the pervasiveness at which learners are victims of SRGBV but also highlights the failure of authorities to respond and identify strategies on how to respond to this phenomenon. This is particularly critical since teachers; principals; school personnel and learners continue to be implicated as perpetrators.

In addition, the statistics point to how SRGBV against learners is also viewed as a disquieting reality that inhibits a learner's personal independence and right to education (Greene et al. 2013; Magwa 2015). Teachers and school principals are reported in many studies as perpetrators and key actors in transforming a school culture that appears to legitimise; perpetuate violence and promote unquestioned routine practices that lead to SRGBV (de Lange et al. 2012; Chikwiri and Lemmer 2014; Altinyelken and Le Mat 2017). Though the existing literature shows that there are a myriad of factors that fuel SRGBV- both social and political - the absence of meaningful consequences for the perpetrators lends legality to their behaviour, arguably giving a license to this crime to continue unabated (Human Rights Watch 2001). Scholars such as Greene et al. (2013), Duru and Balkis (2018) advance that toilets, classrooms and corridors, and in some contexts, staff accommodation, classroom or school grounds have been identified as hot spots for SRGBV. Therefore, these gaps may explain why SRGBV, which manifests in different forms, continues with impunity and high prevalence in South African schools due lack of accountability (Mcube and Harber 2013). Hence, this paper will also examine some forms of SRGBV on learners as a violation of their right to education.

### Forms of SRGBV

Both girls and boys can be victims or perpetrators of SRGBV but the extent and form differs. Similarly, boys who are victimised experience the same range of psychological and physical consequences as girls. However, it should be noted

that these similarities or dissimilarities are not always precise – the prevalence fluctuates immensely between and within countries but unfortunately, these remain hidden. Girls also commit violent acts and boys also experience SRGBV at school (UNESCO 2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners (Roper 2013) are also prone to forms of SRGBV and are violated through what is termed corrective sex and bullying due to failure to fit into traditional gender norms because of their sexual uniqueness (UNESCO 2012a). This is an indication that different forms of SRGBV in schools overlap and reinforce each other. SRGBV violates children rights to education and limit their ability to enjoy the benefits of education and participate fully in their individual and their society's development (UNESCO 2016). Moreover, they violate the rights of children to freedom and security, privacy and integrity, and health and in some cases, even the right to life (Magwa 2015).

In this paper three forms of SRGBV will be addressed because they are interconnected in promoting SRGBV and are the most prevalent in schools. These are:

- ♦ To find out what is bullying and what are its effects;
- ♦ To identify forms of corporal punishment in school and its consequences and;
- ♦ To define what is sexual abuse and its manifestations in schools.

### METHODOLOGY

This paper was as desktop review and extant literature on the phenomenon under study ranging from global, regional and nation context was used.

### OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

#### Bullying

Violence in schools originates from different sources, take on many forms and involves different actors. Bullying is one form of SRGBV and takes place between learners or teachers. Learners may also bully teachers; teachers may be bullied parents; principals may bully teachers or be bullied by them (Mncube and Harber 2013; Baruth and Mokoena 2017). For instance, physical violence, threats, name-calling, sarcasm, spreading

rumours, persistent teasing, exclusion from a group, tormenting, ridicule, humiliation and abusive comments have all been identified as forms of bullying which unfold in and out of a school setting (Govender 2007; Laas and Boezaart 2014; Salmon et al. 2018). Bullying is defined by (O'Connell et al. 1999:438) "as negative actions which may be physical or verbal, have hostile intent, are repeated over time and involve a power differential". Bullying happens at all schools irrespective of social class, economic level of community members of a school or size of the school (Tattum 1993:4; Baruth and Mokoena 2017).

Salmon et al. (2018) did a study on "Bullying victimisation experiences among middle and high school adolescents" which highlights traditional bullying, discriminatory harassment and cyber-victimisation. Participants were 64 174 middle and high school students throughout Manitoba, Canada (Salmon et al. 2018). The study comprised of 57.8 percent learners from urban areas and 42.2 percent from rural settings. The results of the study highlighted that bullying was prevalent among middle and high school adolescents. A total of 58.3 percent boys and 67.8 percent girls confirmed that they has been bullied at least once in the past year (Salmon et al. 2018). In a similar vein, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) highlighted that a little more than 50 percent of 11–17 year-old Italians had been bullied by their peers. The results further showed that 19.8 percent were bullied more than once a month (ISTAT 2014; Longobardi et al. 2018).

In South Africa bullying is not a new phenomenon and is a cause for great concern because it has claimed the lives of learners and in some cases, educators. Writing about the South African context (Townsend et al. 2008:21) define 'bullying' as "largely unprovoked, negative physical or psychological actions perpetrated repeatedly over time between bullies and victims". In their study on "Legislative framework regarding bullying in South African schools", Laas and Boezaart (2014) found out that in 2008 over a million South African learners were subjected to some form of violence at school. Moreover, bullying has been acknowledged as one of the forms of SRGBV which continues to escalate, an indication that these statistics have not declined in the past few years. However, an earlier study by (Govender 2007), conducted through survey using



mixed methodology with 251 grade 8 and 9 learners in Kwazulu Natal came up with different results. Though the learners in this study underscored that bullying was problematic, the leadership of the school was accused of taking bullying as an extemporised issue - yet there was evidence that the learners were disregarding the school rules through bullying - leaving a huge dent on the school moral beliefs.

The University of South Africa also did a study in 2012 on bullying and used a sample size of 3 371 learners. The results of the study showed that a total 1 158 (34.4%) had been victims of bullying; 55.3 percent of the learners were emotionally bullied; 38.4 percent were physically victimised; 16.9 percent were tormented through cyberbullying and 2.8 percent were victims of verbal bullying (Laas and Boezaart 2014). In addition, the findings of the study showed that more than 30 percent of the bullying incidents occurred during teaching and learning time an indication of lack of classroom techniques to maintain discipline among learners. According to Mncube and Harber (2013) bullying in South African schools has also received a lot of media attention with daily reports appearing in the print and electronic media covering high levels of violence; physical and sexual abuse; and gang-related activities (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2014). For instance, in the Eastern Cape a report in the *Daily Dispatch* by Linden (2018a) captured a story on how the Eastern Cape education department was investigating cases of school violence after a cell-phone footage went viral on social media of girls fighting at two East London schools. While education bosses believed the two cases were related to bullying while parents were shocked about the levels of violence portrayed in the videos. A report by Chetty (2017) on *Herald Live* highlights how a Sanctor High School learner was pulled out of school in September last year after being badly affected by the verbal and physical abuse to an extent that she started to mutilate herself and eventually attempted suicide. It is these kinds of reports that indicate how bullying has blended within the school system and in the process, violates the right of learners not only to education but to respect and human dignity.

A coverage of the above media reports lend support to what was alluded by Le Roux and Mokhele (2011:318) who suggests that “crime and

violence in South Africa are a way of life”. Unfortunately, 10 years later the same problem still subsists. Undeniably so, this shows that there is a need to re-examine the existing legal frameworks such as Protection from Harassment Act, 71 of 2011, the Children’s Act, 38 of 2005; and the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996 (Laas and Boezaart 2014). These legislations provide for the right to education, safe learning environment and protection from harm for all children. However, bullying being a form of SRGBV, its root causes are different from many other forms of violence which influence the nature and extent of students’ involvement in bullying activities such as: gender, disability, obesity, age, location (urban or rural schools), social status, peer relations (Lee et al. 2018; Laas and Boezaart 2014; Longobardi et al. 2018; Salmon et al. 2018). Hence, a different approach in curbing its prevalence is required because apart from being complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, it has serious, instant and lasting consequences.

### Corporal Punishment

According to UNICEF (2014: 110) slightly more than 2 billion children are without full legal protection and globally, only 8 percent of children live in countries where corporal punishment is totally barred in all settings (Nkuba et al. 2018). Though a majority of states have outlawed corporal punishment in schools, the extant literature indicates that it does subsist and remains universally used or legal in many schools (Covell and Becker 2011; Gershoff 2017; Kaltenbach et al. 2018). According to Sithole (1994: 8) and Watkinson and Rock (2014) corporal punishment is the use of the cane or beating to instil discipline or as a corrective measure. The scholar condescendingly refers to it as “getting even with a pupil”. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006: 4) describes corporal punishment as:

*any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Mostly, it involves hitting children (‘smacking’, ‘slapping’, ‘spanking’), with the hand or with an implement – whip, stick, belt, shoe and wooden spoon’.*

The magnitude of reported cases of learner indiscipline warrants the use of different kinds of strategies in an effort to curb future occurrences

of disruptive behavior (Maphosa and Shumba 2010) in order to secure a safe learning environment. But Gershoff (2017); Nkuba et al. (2018) illuminate how corporal punishment continues to be inflicted on learners for a number of reasons. These include, for example, failure to do homework, late coming to class, absenteeism, bringing cellphones to school, running in the hallway, sleeping in class, noisemaking, giving incorrect answers, using foul language, scribbling in a text book, failing to pay school fees. The foregoing results are not surprising taking into consideration that corporal punishment in developed and developing countries has not been fully abolished.

Notably, statistics from 13 different Sub Sahara African (SSA) countries show the rate of corporal punishment ranging from 11 percent to an alarming 95 percent of reported cases by school children (Hecker et al. 2014; GIEACPC 2016d). According to (Gudyanga et al. 2014) a report by United Nations survey to determine the use of corporal punishment in 2008 reported that 35 000 school children in Pakistan dropout from school each year due to corporal punishment. Furthermore, infliction of beatings at schools are also responsible for one of the highest dropout rates in the world, which stands at 50 percent during the first five years of education (Gudyanga et al. 2014).

Conversely, some research studies, for instance, a study done in Zimbabwe by Gomba (2015) titled "Corporal Punishment is a Necessary Evil: Parents' Perceptions on The Use of Corporal Punishment in School" points in the opposite direction. The findings of the study illuminated that parents advocated for continuance of corporal punishment because of its immediate and future benefits, and that it was also cited in the Holy Bible. Writing on the Zimbabwean context Matope and Mugodzwa (2011) and Shumba et al. (2012) also suggest that advocates of corporal punishment consider it a necessity and an effective way of disciplining students and, to some students, it is the only language they understand. This is despite the fact that the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe ruled the use of corporal punishment as unconstitutional and a violation to human dignity and children's right to education (Kaltenbach 2017).

Meanwhile, study done by Oganda-Portella and Pells (2015) titled "Corporal Punishment in Schools: Longitudinal Evidence from Ethiopia,

India, Peru and Viet Nam" - revealed that among children aged 8; over half in Peru and Viet Nam, three quarters in Ethiopia and over 9 in 10 learners in India reported witnessing a teacher administering corporal punishment. The results further indicated that younger students in these countries were prone to corporal punishment as compared to adolescents in all four countries. Another study by Global Initiative (2016) demonstrates that corporal punishment was still being permitted in 69 countries with a rate of over 90 percent in countries such as Botswana, Cameroon, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, and Yemen. Between 70 percent – 89 percent rate of corporal punishment was recorded in Egypt, Ghana, India, Morocco, Myanmar, Palestine and Togo.

Ironically, the findings of this study captures Tanzania as one of the countries still practicing corporal punishment in schools. This is regardless of the fact that it is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which prohibits all forms of violence of the child under Paper 19. Of importance to note is that most of the teachers are in support of its use as compared to learners who felt that its use had negative implications on their education coupled with emotional and physical pain inflicted on them (Feinstein and Mwahombela 2010). Lombordo and Polonko (2005) further suggest that when corporal punishment is used on a regular basis it enhances a number of abnormal conduct such as lying, stealing, cheating, bullying and lack of lack of remorse for wrongdoing. Thus, Nkuba and Kyaruzi (2015) suggest that teacher training programs should equip teachers on how to address learner misconduct using non-aggressive techniques. Such an approach is bound to widen their knowledge on the effects of corporal punishment and how children's rights to education are violated in the process.

Khubela reporting for *Eyewitness News* in 2017 covered a story about a learner at Manyano Primary School in Mpumalanga who was left paralysed after allegedly being assaulted by his principal in 2016. The learner died a few months later due to sustained injuries. Similarly, *Sunday Morning Herald* also captured a story on 3 April 2014 that in Johannesburg a teacher was facing a possible murder charge following the death of a learner. The teacher allegedly beat the learner on the

head with a belt - which lead to deafness and blood clots in his nose, the learner later died in hospital. Mzimande (2015) reporting for *eNCA.com* shared a story on how 13 grade 4 primary school pupils were admitted to hospital with bruises on their hands after receiving corporal punishment from their teacher for failing to submit their homework.

Given the above statistics, concerns and observations it is clear that the right to education of these learners is being desecrated. Reason being, students continue to be subjected to inhuman and abusive treatment which breaches their fundamental human rights in schools (Shumba et al. 2012). However, Mtsweni (2008) suggests that after the interdiction of corporal punishment in schools, a majority of teachers feel undermined and helpless without its use due to high levels of learner indiscipline in schools. Masitsa (2008) further states that the banning of corporal punishment in schools has led to some learners defying teachers and the school authority who are meant to act in loco parentis because they (learners) know they are backed up by the state law. Therefore, some teachers, as a way of regaining power and authority continue to use corporal punishment despite the serious consequences that flow from its use, namely, suspension, dismissal and jail term in extreme cases.

### Sexual Violence

Recent research indicates that schools have been increasingly implicated as having inexorable high rates of sexual violence besides the child's home and the perpetrators house (Devries and Meinck 2018; Magwa 2015; Gwirayi 2013; Chikwiri and Lemmer 2014; Altinyelken and Le Mat 2017). Sexual violence is another form of SRGBV and is defined by the World Health Organisation, (2014: 2) as

*'any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work'.*

The statistics for sexual violence are an indicator of how the innocence of young children and adolescents is grossly violated. For instance,

by 2002 WHO estimated that a total 150 million girls and 73 million boys (below 18 years of age) experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence at home, at school and within the community (Altinyelken and Le Mat 2017; PLAN 2008; Lieten 2015). These extremely high figures are an indication of how states have failed to abide by human rights obligations in various treaties that allude to the importance of taking meaningful action to prevent and respond; punish and redress such acts of SRGBV (Lalor 2004). Notably, this has led to the elimination of violence in childhood gaining attention and featuring prominently in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Devries and Meinck 2018). For instance, SDG 4 supports inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning; SDG 16.2 targets the eradication of all forms of violence against children give and the right of every child to live free from fear, neglect, abuse and exploitation (Njelesani 2019,). These SDGs are in line with elimination of sexual violence particularly in schools, while promoting a safe learning environment.

According to Prinsloo (2005: 5) a safe school is: *school that is free of danger and where there is an absence of possible harm, a place where non-educators, educators and learners may work, teach and learn without fear of ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation, or violence.*

However, Muhanguzi (2011: 716) is of the view that:

*schools offer a vigorous social cultural discursive environment in which students' interactions is characterised by gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances with deep-seated lack of female sexual autonomy in sexual relationships, compulsory heterosexuality and sexual exploitation of females.*

The foregoing definition reveals how learners tend to be socialised within a school culture that tolerates and normalises (Altinyeken and Le Mat 2017) the culture of SRGBV.

A substantive example of sexual abuse in school is presented in a research by Bekele (2012) on determinants of sexual violence among Eastern Ethiopian secondary schools. This comprised of a sample of 4 666 female and 7 668 male learners with an age range of 14-24 years. The results of the study showed that sexual violence was prevalent especially in high schools and appeared to

be a major characteristic of school life for many adolescent females. These results were attributed to inflated feelings of egotism and high rejection sensitivity which increased vulnerability to sexual violence victimisation among high school learners. However, a study focusing on Gender-based Violence in Primary Schools in the Harare and Marondera Districts of Zimbabwe by Chikwiri and Lemmer (2014) highlights that even learners in primary schools are exposed to indecent touching and groping, suggestive comments about the shape of their body and dress, sexual harassment on school premises especially in toilets, attempted rape, rape and incest by male teachers, janitors and boys (Chikwiri and Lemmer 2014).

As such, a call has been made that the existence of a school code of conduct needs to be reinforced among teachers, learners and parents. It should explain the kind of behaviour expected from learners including the standard of behaviour a school has to maintain (Leach et al. 2014; Bilaty 2012; Postmus et al. 2015). For instance, a longitudinal study was done in Kenya between 2003 and 2009 and revealed that out of 12 660 girls that were sexually abused by their teachers, the number of teachers who were eventually found guilty was only 633. In addition, Kalmelid (2013) carried out a study in Mozambique on 'Sexual Harassment in Schools: Descriptions, Explanations and Solutions among Participants'. The study revealed that, there was sexual harassment between male teachers and female students - channels used to report such abuses and lack of punishment towards the teachers exacerbated the rate of sexual violence. In addition, the results showed some of the girls continued to be victims so as to get material benefits and to be awarded good grades. These findings suggest that it is paramount that the girl child is subjected to awareness of the detriments of sexual harassment, the right to say no and the importance of education. The findings of this study are supported by Todor and Smith (2009) and UN (2012) who posit that education of girls has been found to have great impact on the future economic and social development of societies.

Accordingly Joyner (2017) and Brock et al. (2014) advance that sexual violence as a disquieting reality has reached epidemic proportions that impedes a learner's personal autonomy and the right to education. In 2006, the South African

Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) noted that sexual violence, including abuse perpetrated by teachers, was one of the most prevalent forms of SRGBV. Likewise, Donald et al. (2014) advance that in South Africa 30 percent of sexual crimes are committed by adolescents - some as young as 10 years. This is a clear indication that a percentage of these perpetrators are primary school children. While there are a myriad of causes - both social and political - that fuel the phenomenon of sexual violence in schools, the absence of meaningful consequences for perpetrators lends legitimacy to their behaviour, arguably giving a license to this harm (Mcube 2013 and Harber). For instance, a General Household Survey carried out in 2012 noted that 7.8 percent of girls between the ages of 7 and 18 were not attending school because of pregnancy (StatsSA 2014).

Media reports have also cemented scholarly literature concerning this critical issue. For instance, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2018, a *News24* reporter, Mxolisi Mngadi, covered a story on how a police man investigating sexual assault in a School in Soweto was arrested for molesting two pupils in Grade 3 aged 7 and 8 when he visited the school to prepare the young victims to go to court. These children were part of the 87 children between Grades R and 7 that were sexually violated and raped by their school guard in 2017. The plague of sexual violence has also been captured through media particularly through the *Daily Dispatch*. In the Eastern Cape, a report on the *Daily dispatch* by Linden on 12 February 2018b revealed that a Grade 9 pupil was impregnated by a teacher at Flagstaff High School. It is alleged that teachers were having sexual relations with pupils and demanded sex from Grade 11 pupils in exchange for promoting them to Grade 12. Existing literature reveals that environmental influences, peer pressure, poverty, parental neglect, and lack of parental monitoring are factors that lead to sexual violence of girls (Greene et al. 2013; Magwa 2015; Duru and Balkis 2018).

Unfortunately, the above cases indicate that though the respect for human rights and the right to education (Martin et al. 2014) for every child is extolled as the ultimate solution to gender equality, the current environment in South African schools speaks volumes on how sexual violence has been legitimised. In addition to a plethora of legislation in South Africa, a number of critical



programmes to guide redress of sexual violence have been adopted and implemented. These include the: Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment (2008) in public schools which sets out a complaints procedure for educators and learners on sexual harassment and also the Department of Basic Education's Handbook for Learners on How to Prevent Sexual Abuse in Public Schools (2010). Parkers (2016) includes information for students about rights and reporting, and training on bullying in schools (Burton and Leoschut 2012; Altinyelken and Le Mat 2017). In addition, Section 54(1) of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act No. 32 of 2007, explicitly states that knowing about a sexual offence and failure to report it is a crime (Naidoo et al. 2017).

Despite the implementation of these programmes, the sheer scale of sexual violence in schools is a statement of not only the problem, but also of the existence of weak structures in place for combating to sexual violence in schools (Le Mat 2016). Undoubtedly, this is one of the major reasons why the prevalence of sexual violence continues. At the same time, the state response to this crime continues to be fraught with flaws and indecisive actions. It may be inferred that there exists a gap between existing laws and measures taken by responsible authorities. Unfortunately, these has led to a culture of silence which is deeply rooted amongst the learners, teachers and principals, thus, giving the perpetrators the leeway to continue committing such atrocities. In a society that is often perceived both domestically and internationally as one of the most violent in the world, this in itself justifies concerted action to break the cycle of violence that young people are exposed to – starting with the school environment (Burton and Leoschut 2013: 4). This is why SRGBV which is a violation of children rights to education, equality, human dignity and respect must receive priority at all levels and structures of society.

### **Effects of SRGBV**

SRGBV is a complex social problem that results from more than just school related issues. Violence against children in educational settings reflects and intensifies the deeply embedded social and cultural norms regarding authority, hier-

archy, discipline and gender (Greene et al. 2013). This has resulted in numerous and severe negative effects that learners are subjected to through different forms of SRGBV as discussed above. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) posit that the negative consequences that the learners may experience include dropping out of school, adolescent aberrant actions and even shoplifting. Harber and Mcube (2013), Banwari (2011) and Smit (2015) reveal in their studies that there is considerable evidence of harmful effects emanating from SRGBV some which include physical harm, death ideation, social difficulties and low self-esteem among victims.

According to Myburgh et al. (2015) low self-esteem resulting from SRGBV negatively affects the intellectual capacity of learners and hinders their capability to advance in their education. Existing literature also reveals how low self-esteem is linked to aggression and substance abuse and long lasting negative impacts on learners' verbal and decision-making ability (Kaltenbach et al. 2018; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Oganda Portela and Pells 2015; UNICEF 2014). These authors further contend that the end results of SRGBV manifests in impaired concentration while other learners prefer to move to new schools to avoid corporal punishment, bullying and sexual harassment. For instance, moving to a new school or dropping out of school may-be impelled by failure by the victim to defend themselves or failure by the system to take corrective measures.

The fact that more than one billion children attend school every day underscores the importance of ensuring that the learning environment of such learners does not increase the risk of children's rights being violated (Greene et al. 2013). Instead, schools should mirror the central rights of children enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989). In other words, the children's rights to education is not only critical but can be realised only when learners are able to learn in nurturing environments. The latter must be free from SRGBV, enable learners to unlock their full potential and, promote and protect human dignity. Pinheiro (2006) presented a comprehensive World Report on Violence against Children based on regional consultations. The study revealed that a majority of the schools did not offer a nurturing environment and thus were destroying the essence of

human integrity. This resulted in absenteeism of learners due physical and psychological, verbal abuse; bullying; and sexual violence. All these forms of SRGBV can further lead to future health risks for the victims.

Meanwhile, absenteeism of the learners has been attributed to lack of accountability; transparent and standardised reporting channels of SRGBV. Psaki et al. (2017) conducted a study on "Associations between violence in school and at home and education outcomes in rural Malawi: A longitudinal analysis". The sample of the study was 1763 adolescent girls and boys (869 girls, 884 boys) in rural, southern Malawi. The findings of their study was that due to high rates of SRGBV, absenteeism was a common phenomenon and was equally common for girls and boys. In other words, high rate of SRGBV may lead learners in believing that violence is an acceptable way of expressing disapproval, promoting gender inequality or anger. This creates a sense of insecurity among learners within the school premises hence the reason for staying away from school.

Research also highlights that apart from emotional suffering that both boys and girls who are victims of SRGBV experience, it is the girl child who suffers more especially through sexual violence - which may in turn result in unwanted pregnancies. Studies further show that these girls end up having unsafe abortions; sexually transmitted infections and high exposure to HIV/AIDS (Banwari 2011; Gwirayi 2011). These health risks compromise girls' schooling and their broader physical and social development. Many schools do not permit pregnant girls to attend school, or allow girls to bring their babies or return to school following childbirth (Melchiorre 2010; Grant and Hallman 2006). Some of the girls prefer to stay away from school because of name calling associated with getting pregnant at school (Human Rights Watch 2001; Magwa 2015).

A recent study conducted in Malawi revealed that boys equally undergo psychological trauma due to sexual assaults and this was linked to worse education outcomes for boys as compared to girls (Psaki et al. 2017). Devries and Meinck (2018) suggest that boys seem to be more likely to disclose experience of sexual violence when they are afforded an anonymous method of disclosure than if they are interviewed face to face (Devries and Meinck 2018). In other words, the methods used

to collect data of SRGBV are bound to seriously underestimate the levels of sexual violence and other forms of SRGBV experienced by boys, hence the majority of learners (boys) resort to a culture of silence to avoid being stigmatised and ostracised (Altinyelken and Le Mat 2017).

According to Parkers (2017), MENET-UNICEF carried out a study in 2015 in Côte d'Ivoire and the results revealed that 56.3 percent of child victims did not report sexual violence because they did not know where to report, feared being reprimanded, and shame attached to sexual violation. Additionally, concerns have been raised that the victims are forced to remain within the same environment with their perpetrators because extreme cases of SRGBV are not reported for fear of retribution or protecting the reputation of coworkers, students and the school (Harber and Mcube 2013; Magwa 2015). Thus, taking such a step does not only condone violence and continued exposure of SRGBV but highlights the failure to abide to the international human rights norms and standards which stipulate that it is the duty of the state to address persistent violations of human rights and take positive measures to prevent their occurrence.

A study on SRGBV in Togo outlined the key reasons for the under-reporting of SRGBV reinforced the lack of awareness of the legal framework in and out of the school environment and lack of respect of what institutes violence (Devers 2015; Parkers 2017). These views are supported by a report in 2001 by Human Rights Watch in South Africa. The report illuminated that seldom do schools take an initiative to ensure that learners, particularly girls, have a sense of security and comfort at school and that schools hardly reprimand or discipline boys nor the teachers who commit acts of SRGBV. This infers that little, if any change has been realised over the years concerning the promotion of safe schools or curbing SRGBV. Consequently, this deepens gender and social inequalities and reduces the overall quality of life (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2017) and education that is given to these learners.

Duru and Balkis (2018) contend that failure to curb and redress the consequences of SRGBV is because there is a weak link between what is termed a well-organized school - which meets students' academic and psychological needs and

teachers supporting their students, a supportive peer culture and a safe and supportive school environment that is capable of reducing problematic behaviors. Garner (2014: 489) points out that there is a need of a paradigm shift and redress of SRGBV if it is to be successful. The author further identifies seven important factors that schools need to focus on in order to curb the consequences of SRGBV to ensure that the rights to education of learners is not destabilised. These are: curriculum; positive behaviour intervention; social and emotional aspects of learning; professional development and training; family involvement; community engagement; and policy development (Gamer 2014).

However, a glance at the statistics is indicative that a substantial number of learners in primary and secondary schools still experience SRGBV. Thus, the current global statistics and media reports are symptomatic of why schools are susceptible to SRGBV and neither can they shield away from effects of SRGBV. Unfortunately, the literature gives an oblique picture that in numerous school settings, there still exists rudimentary information concerning this endemic, hence the *status quo* subsists (Maphosa and Shumba 2010; Gwirayi 2011, 2013; Magwa 2015; Mcube and Harber 2013; Devers 2015; Parkers 2017). It is on this basis that this paper recognises the urgency of dealing with effects of SRGBV as well as identifying strategies that can be implemented to eradicate the culture of impunity by the perpetrators as well as the silence of the victims.

### CONCLUSION

More than one million children attend school every day therefore, one of the crucial mandates for any state is that these children attain their education in a safe learning environment. Conclusions drawn from this review show the global statistics expose a huge number of learners subjected to different types of SRGBV that impacts negatively on their human rights and the right to education on a regular basis. A comparable pattern on SRGBV levelled against learners particularly on girls also subsists in most schools in South Africa. Although the latter has signed and ratified the CRC as a way of showing its obligation to safeguarding children rights to education the picture on the ground shows that diminish-

ing SRGBV is not a one-size-fits all situation as the prevalence of these crimes varies within the provinces. This calls for participatory involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the education system. However, pathetic and sporadic structures in schools; the feeble judicial systems that takes too long to settle cases; victimisation and stigmatisation; protecting colleagues and school reputation, are among the factors that contribute to acts of SRGBV being given lesser attention. This highlights failure by the responsible authorities to look at a broader picture on how to redress and expedite an exchange of ideas on why principals, teachers and learners continue to be implicated in these detestable acts. This is despite sturdy legal domestic framework which fortifies the country onus to take affirmative and meaningful action to prevent and respond, punish and redress acts of SRGBV.

The findings of this review further reveals that there also exists different forms of SRGBV, namely: bullying, corporal punishment, and sexual abuse, which are also abnormally high. These forms of SRGBV are manifest from societal and cultural beliefs that concern issues of gender, power dynamics and discipline and consequently, they have seeped through the school system. These lead to numerous consequences for the victim and the perpetrator such as low self-esteem, absenteeism, impaired concentration, school dropout, death ideation, and high health risks especially for the girl child. This implies that SRGBV is a disquieting phenomenon that needs redress in order to avoid inhibiting children's right to education and essence of human dignity.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

SRGBV is encompassed by incalculable factors at school, family and community level that merge to construct susceptibility for violence in schools. Therefore, the pandemic of SRGBV and the violation of children's rights to education that flow from it needs redress beyond the school boundaries. Therefore, this review recommends that:

- ◆ Students should be engaged as collaborators along with teachers, and their peers and inclusive and customised school wide activities that meet the unique needs and ethos schools involving all the stakeholders

should be encouraged so that SRGBV can be attenuated - this will promote human dignity and children's right to education.

- ◆ A majority of learners especially in high schools have cellphones, thus schools can create websites to educate the learners on SRGBV.
- ◆ The ministry should employ adequate school counsellors who will be readily available to assist learners suffering from physical and psychological aftermaths of SRGBV.
- ◆ Teacher training should be inclusive of techniques for curbing SRGBV and should equip teachers on how to address learner misconduct using non aggressive techniques. This will widen the teacher's knowledge on the effects of SRGBV and how children rights are violated in the process.
- ◆ There should also be awareness that is targeted to the girl child on the detriments of sexual harassment, the right to say no and the importance of education in a school environment. Anonymous disclosure by victims and swift response by the state on perpetrators should also be promoted as this can abate the culture of silence on victims of SRGBV, especially boys who are either sexually abused or experience other forms of SRGBV.
- ◆ Programmes that have been implemented to guide and redress SRGBV in line with the South African constitution and legislation should be monitored and evaluated to gauge if they have achieved the initial stated goals and objectives.
- ◆ Moral, ethical values and principles, norms and beliefs consistent with the constitution should be promoted through a code of conduct which must be signed by the learners and their parents on admission with explicit guidelines on how learners and parents/guardian should abide by the code of conduct and the channels to follow when one has been victimised.
- ◆ Parents should be encouraged to talk about SRGBV with their children at home about the signs and effects of SRGBV.
- ◆ Strategies should be put in place on how to redress SRGBV and issues related to SRGBV should be part of the school curriculum. This will enhance positive discipline management techniques in classrooms.

- ◆ Although there are numerous reports through media of victims in schools including murder, few prosecutions and convictions have been made. To curb this evil it is important to send a strong message to potential or would be perpetrators and more prosecutions and stiffer sentences should be imposed.
- ◆ What is happening in schools, mirrors what is happening in families, communities and the wider society. There is need therefore to cascade these measures beyond the school confines.
- ◆ The future leaders (youth) of this continent comprise of more than 60 percent of the population. Therefore to curb SRGBV, it is critical that school children are groomed from the onset to be peacemakers who are capable of promoting societal values, conflict resolution and diversity.

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**Paper received for publication in March, 2019**

**Paper accepted for publication in May, 2019**