

“I Touch Girls to Feel What They Are Selling”: Sexual Harassment of Female Learners in South African Schools

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KEYWORDS Abuse. Bullying. Learners. School Environment. School Violence. Teachers

ABSTRACT This article focuses on sexual harassment of female learners by male learners as a dynamic of school violence in the South African secondary schools. This research is based on a mixed method research approach and data was collected by means of questionnaires, focus groups and in-depth interviews. Participants were asked to recall incidents of violence either committed by them or they were subjected to in the school by fellow learners and/ or teachers. The study indicated that while the female learners suffer sexual harassment from male learners it is not reported due to fear; sexual harassment is excused as boys being boys, and/ or female learners having to enduring the humiliation.

INTRODUCTION

The reporting of sexual harassment and sexual violation in South African schools has escalated. The recent reports on the self-filming of gang sexual activities on school premises (Mukhuthu 2011) is but one disturbing incident of sexual harassment that learners realize in their schools. According to Bursik and Gefter (2011), sexual harassment in academic contexts continues to be a widespread problem with significant legal, psychological, and economic consequences. Despite such findings, the reporting of sexual harassment in the schools is far less in between.

Sexual Harassment in the School Context

Much literature has been written focusing on sexual harassment in various settings including amongst others experiences of women in tertiary institutions of learning (Rossi and Weber-Burdin 1983; Dey et al. 1996; Joubert et al. 2011), workplace (McKinney 1990; Basson 2007; McDonald 2012) and any other various social places. Sexual harassment was for a long time regarded as phenomena that came due to the abuse of power and in most cases, it was the issue of patriarchy in the workplace, when a male who was in power and expected sexual favours from female colleague(s) in promise of a job, favourable treatment in the workplace or promotion. According to Witkowska and Kjellberg (2005: 677), despite the recent attention paid to “peer” sexual harassment in schools, there is still little research in the arena, and there

seems to be little or no agreement among disciplines, researchers, or the general public concerning what defines harassment in a school setting.

Sexual harassment can present itself in different manners to people and seems to be defined differently and thus contributing to the problem of it not reported. According to Fitzgerald and Hesson-Mcinnis (1989: 309), the definitional issue [of sexual harassment] is critical, as much research indicates that there exist extensive individual differences in judgments of what constitutes sexual harassment. Therefore sexual harassment often rests on the subjective evaluation of a particular incident by the target (Corbett et al. 1993: 95). Fitzgerald and Hesson-Mcinnis (1989: 130) point out that researchers themselves often appear to mean different things by the term and thus data collection instruments and check lists used to determine the extent of the phenomenon differs. Corbett et al. (1993), however, concede that most definitions imply that the behaviour is unwanted and sexual in nature, and may include the requirement that such behaviour reflects an inappropriate use of power and that it includes any unwanted sexual leers, suggestions, comments or physical contact that a person might find objectionable. Although more than two decades old, Till’s (1980) categorisations of defining sexual harassment still hold relevance and urgency. According to Till (1980) behaviours that can be categories as sexual harassment were: (1) Gender harassment-generalized sexist remarks and behaviour, not necessarily designed to elicit sexual cooperation. Rather, they con-

vey insulting, degrading, or sexist attitudes about women. (2) Seductive behaviour-inappropriate and offensive, but essentially sanction-free advances; that is, no penalty is attached to the woman's negative response. (3) Sexual bribery-the solicitation of sexual activity or other sex-related behaviour by promise of reward. (4) Threat-the coercion of sexual activity by threats of punishment. (5) Sexual imposition-sexual imposition and assault.

In these categories, Witkowska and Menckel's (2005) definition of sexual harassment into two categories: implicit and explicit sexual references are indicated. The implicit are most common and includes comments about gender and sexuality, sexualised conversation, attractiveness rating and sexual comments while the explicit are the less common and includes behaviours like name-calling, pressuring for sexual favour and sexual rumours.

A study prevalence of sexual harassment in High school by Walsh et al. (2007) found that 9% of learners reported that the gender of the perpetrator(s) was male, while 2% reported that the gender of the perpetrator(s) was female. Two percent of students reported having been sexually harassed by both males and females. The male as a perpetrator in this study was found to be higher than female as a perpetrator. It is thus important that sexual harassment of female learners by their counterparts must not be dismissed as "boys behaving like boys" or as bullying because according to Agyepong et al. (2011) 83% of the 8th through 11th grade girls have been sexually harassed in the school.

Another complexity that might contribute to sexual harassment is what Corbett et al. (1993) alert to in their study, that over one-third of the participants noted that they knew of sexual relationship between a high school learner and a teacher and in such case; the majority of the participant, though the student and the teacher were equally interested in the affair, as role models, male teachers in schools model "behaviour" to the unsuspecting young males who implicitly learns the usage and the abuse of power moreover if the educators do not act against such practices. Thus teachers (both genders) play a role in sexual harassment at school either by commission or omission. The troubling thought is that these and other sexual harassments are not reported and if they are it seems as if teachers are not acting and thus increasing the risk of

revictimization of female learners. Therefore, as according to Rahimi and Liston (2009: 526) many of the teachers...construe this as acceptance by the female [learners] and thus do not acknowledge and treat this as a form of sexual harassment.

Larkin (1994: 264) points out that when sexual harassment of young women at school is tolerated, educators contribute to the reproduction of a patriarchal society in which men frequently use violence to express their sexual domination over women. Thus, in the schools female learners find themselves in a learning environment where they have to lead a double life scripted by those with power at any given point who at times dismiss their sexual harassment complains as a joke or misunderstands in that it is their sole responsibility to ensure they are not sexually harassed. Burnes and Torre (2005) in Rahimi and Liston (2009) highlight the unfairness of the emergence of male sexuality that is nearly free of accountability contrary to the emergence of female sexuality that is burdened by double standards, social ostracism, sexual harassment, and risk of teen pregnancy.

Verbal and "sexual talks" endured by the female learners is another form of sexual harassment. Larkin (1994) laments that female learners are exposed to crude language and other forms of sexually harassing behaviour which has become part of the fabric of our daily lives and this also takes place in our schools. Rahimi and Liston (2009) argued that that female learners as adolescents face a double standard that encourages boys to have sexual experiences without negative repercussions, yet girls run the risk of being branded with an adverse sexual label whether they become sexually active or not. Studies among adolescent school girls in South India by Leach and Sitaram (2007) found, that verbal forms of sexual harassment were the most unpleasant experience that girls had in their schools. In their study on teacher interpretation of emerging adolescent female sexuality, Rahimi and Liston (2009) concluded that schools girls continue to be placed in contradictory positions concerning sexuality, that adverse sexual labels continue to serve as a means of sexual harassment that many teachers do not recognize, and that perceptions of sexuality and acceptable behaviour remain deeply embedded in race and class issues. Thus sexual harassment experienced by female learners irrespective of race and

class issues is not only physical but verbal and regardless of the language, labels, slang or popular culture. It is unwanted, hurtful, demeaning and in some cases traumatizing and thus has to be reported, addressed and researched.

METHODS

The study forms a part of the 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, Mpumalanga, North West, and Western Cape. This was a mixed method study. Purposeful sampling was employed in the selection of the schools due to the known and reported prevalence of violence in those schools. Quantitative data was gathered from a questionnaire completed by learners from which qualitative data was gathered from the randomly selected learners to participate in focus group (between 10-15 learners per group) and furthermore number of (between 5-10) learners from the focus groups were selected to participate in the in-depth individual interviews. Data for this article were drawn from learners who were 14 years or older. Both boys and girls and who have indicated that they have been affected by violence personally or have perpetrated violence themselves on other learners.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment is a form of violence experienced by both male and female learners and at times sexual harassment might be seen by both genders as “pranks” or jokes. However, to some learners these “pranks” are unwanted or solicited because they can be demeaning, hurtful and uncomfortable. As noted by Corbett et al. (1993) most definitions of sexual harassment imply that the behaviour is unwanted and sexual in nature, and may include the requirement that such behaviour reflects an inappropriate use of power.

Larkin (1994) warned that it is of major concern when the sexual harassment that young women experience at school is tolerated and educators contribute to the reproduction of a patriarchal society in which men frequently use violence to express their sexual domination over women. According to one participant, to deliberately exert their power, some male learners,

trespass the boundaries and enter the female toilets to harass them. One learner related that

The boys hide inside the girls' toilets then grab them

One other participant paints the abuse of power by older male learners in the schools and what the young and vulnerable have to endure in the school system. The participant explained that

Sexual harassment. Yah that one is very dominant...inappropriate touch... Boys doing it to girls and the younger ones like those who are in grade 11 and twelve coming to those that are in grade 8.

Another learner added that.

Many boys are doing it to girls, they try to touch our bums but when you're telling them to stop they say they are going to kill us or something.

In most cases the abuse of power works along with threats and fear. The abuser uses threats in order to remain in a position of power where he/ she is feared usually by the powerless and vulnerable. The female learners who have recently relocated or changed schools and those regarded as soft targets seem to be the focus of sexual harassment in the schools as the power of bullying and sexual perpetration is metered out on them either because the fear of revictimisation was instilled in them and/ or because they still new in the school and they do not know how or where to report incidents. They are disempowered in the schools and they are also afraid of fighting the perpetrators. According to one participant,

I think since I got in this school I'm always afraid to express myself like every time anyone tells me to do something I'm too scared to refuse because I am a soft person because every time somebody wants to touch me like when I say no they don't believe me because they know I'm too scared to report, sometimes I'm too scared to fight for myself.

Male learners in some cases take the not fighting back by female learners as an indication of weakness. Thus continue with the abuse and furthermore regard non-reporting of sexual harassment as an invitation or indication that the female learners enjoy or like being touched or fondled because some asserted that, girls like being fondled, because if they did not like it, they would report it.

Therefore, because there is no immediate repercussions in terms of an external reinforce-

ment as a result of the social scripting that such behaviours are to be met by similar force of power or pain, male learners fail to realize the damage of their behaviour on fellow female learners. It was also disturbing that female learners are blamed for being victims of sexual harassment. Rahimi and Liston (2009) found in their study that teacher's perception here is important because the manner that the teacher treats complains from the female learners might hold a key in addressing sexual harassment in school. In their study, the male learners' comments "as girls seem to laugh off "many of the teachers construed this reaction as acceptance by the female [learners] and thus did not acknowledge and treat this as a form of sexual harassment. Thus, a participant in this study acted according to these "social scripts" as written by people in authority and in this regard teachers and said that:

In sexual violence I think the females also contribute to this harassment because you can find a girl with a skirt that barely covers her and she expects a guy to just walk past and not do anything.

Due to poor or inappropriate social education and teachings of responsibility perhaps due to poor role models in the society male learners mirror the social ills in their communities and act them out in the school premises. In December 2010 two girls were groped and sexually harassed in public view in South Africa's Johannesburg taxi rank. According to a local newspaper Sowetan, the one girl, wearing a black miniskirt ...came out of a shop where a crowd of between 50 and 60 men had gathered and began following her and this is reminiscent of the incident four years ago at the same taxi rank (Sowetanlive). As a result of the incident, the South African Human Rights Commission planned a public inquiry into why two teenage girls were assaulted at the Noord Street taxi rank in central Johannesburg (NewsWatch). However, despite such public outcry, such ill treatment of females in the communities still persists. During the study a participant commented that,

There are girls with short skirts sometimes they come to us just to sit on top of you, stuff like that in class, the worst part in class what do they expect you to do?

While another learner as an indication of poor insight into their actions and repercussions commented that as male learners they feel en-

couraged by female learners because of the way they dress.

Girls wear short dresses and they do not wear underwear. And it disturbs me as I do not concentrate well in class and I want to touch. And thus,

I touch girls to feel what they are selling... I do not see it as sexual violence because I see them as if they are selling and in a shop if they are selling you can go in and touch without buying.

Thus, there are implicit messages that female learners invite sexual harassment and that male learners act within the "expected" norm when they are faced by female learners wearing mini-skirts. The sexuality responsibility of both the female and male boys seems to be put squarely on the shoulders of the girls. Female learners face a double standard in their daily lives where a social scripting seems to encourage boys to have sexual experiences without taking responsibility and negative repercussions of their actions while girls run the risk of being branded with an adverse sexual label whether they become sexually active or not (Rahimi and Liston 2009). There appears to be a lack of commitment from authorities in taking responsibility and being role models to male learners and in teaching internal locus of control, self-restraint and that through internal reinforcement a learner can have the power as well not to come up with excuses, hurt and humiliate fellow learners.

CONCLUSION

The study asked whether female learners in South African schools experience sexual harassment and in most serious cases, sexual abuse including rape. Data gathered from the questionnaires, focus groups and in-depth individual interview indicated that sexual harassment does take place in the schools and female learners are confronted with this form of violence almost daily. The exposure to such a violating environment that one has to go to everyday is not only screaming of insecurities of the school premises but it is also traumatizing to female learners who are expected to compete and perform academically in that environment.

In this study, 61% of female learners have indicated that they were sexually harassed and needed psychological assistance and their fami-

lies had to pay for these services. Thus, costs for taking a female learner to school increases as parent have also to pay for extra services while in most cases the victimizer's family do not necessarily incur such costs thus there are not much if any repercussions for male learners and their families because the male child will continue with schooling for instance while the female learners may drop out due to pregnancy or have to change school and thus affecting the emotional and social life of the learner concerned. The violation of female learners continues and is further exacerbated by the fact that female learners know their victimizers, they have to come to school, learn with them and there is some sort of "open secret" and due to fear of further or more intense harassment, female learners do not report sexual harassment and thus giving the impression to their victimizers that they like it. However, a worrying factor is when the teachers do not act on "open secrets" around sexual harassment.

In the schools, teachers' play an important role as figures of authority and their perceptions as well are important as they inform their agency in addressing sexual harassment as well as perpetuating male dominance if not challenged. It is, therefore important for teachers as well to be trained on sexual harassment issues in the schools with the specific focus on the learners and not only on them as employees because as far as this issue is concerned, they can either encourage sexual harassment by commission or omission, either way, they are responsible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Opportunities created for the female learners run the risk of not being effective because female learners are not taking them due to being expected to operate in the environment that enables sexual harassment. Thus, different programmes that can teach and sensitize male learners about their roles, about sexual harassment and the effect it has on the themselves and fellow learners must be devised and form part of life orientation in schools. On the same footing, the programme which should also include mentorship, should seek to educate learners on what is sexual harassment and empower learners on how to report sexual harassment and how to act against sexual harassment.

Teachers as well to be trained on sexual harassment issues in the schools with the specific

focus on the learners and not only on them as employees because as far as the issue of learner sexual harassment is concerned, they can either encourage sexual harassment by commission or omission, either way, they are responsible. Thus, the teacher programme among several should sensitize teachers on how to identify and act on sexual harassment and create a safe environment for reporting sexual harassment.

Therefore, this study suggests that there is still much to be done in the way of educating male learners in particular about sexual harassment and encouraging male learners to think about different types of masculinity based less on sexual entitlement and violence. Furthermore, female learners also need a programme to empower them in terms identifying and naming sexual harassment so that to take a stance when experienced and the role that they and the male learners play in perpetuation of this phenomena and how to stop sexual harassment.

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