

Gender-based Violence in Primary Schools in the Harare and Marondera Districts of Zimbabwe

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KEYWORDS Gender. Violence. Psychological Abuse. Physical Abuse. Sexual Abuse. Child Labour. Culture of Silence. Primary Schooling

ABSTRACT Gender-based violence is violence directed against any person on the basis of gender, including acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or threats of such acts. Although any person is a risk, women and girls are the primary victims of gender-based violence. Informed by womanist theory, this paper reports on a qualitative study of gender-based violence in Zimbabwean primary schools. Participants were twenty girls who had been victims of gender-based violence enrolled in primary schools in the Harare and Marondera districts of Zimbabwe selected by purposeful sampling and a chain referral. Data was gathered by semi-structured interviews and visual tools. Findings provide a comprehensive picture of gender-based violence in primary schools. This is manifested in acts of physical violence, particularly the unsanctioned use of corporal punishment, psychological violence and sexual abuse. School grounds harbour unsafe and poorly supervised areas where violence may occur and reporting routes for incident are ineffective. Perpetrators include teaching and non-teaching staff and peers. An insidious form of gender-based violence is embedded in child labour practices in the school and the community. Gender-based violence damages girls' health, social and psychological development and impedes learning. Further, gender-based violence is perpetuated by a culture of silence informally maintained by victims, teachers, peers and parent and by the school's weak compliance with protective policies.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is defined as violence that is directed against a person on the basis of gender, including acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or threats of such acts, coercion or other deprivations of freedom (Russo and Pirlott 2006). While any person may be subjected to gender-based violence, women and girls are the primary victims because of their subordinate status (Bourdillon 2000). Thus, the term gender-based violence is generally understood as violence against women since women are overwhelmingly victimized because of their sex worldwide (Leach and Dunne 2003). Within the context of this study, gender-based violence focuses only on girls in primary schooling. Gender-based violence in formal schooling has been identified as an urgent problem in the education systems of African countries (Leach 2003). Gender violence in schools is expressed explicitly and implicitly. Explicit gender violence is usually sexual in nature; implicit forms stem from everyday practices which reinforce and perpetuate gender differences and inequality through physical, verbal or psychological and emotional aggression (Smailkadic 2006). A wide range of implicit violence in schools is perpetrated by teachers and students and may range

from indecent touching to aggressive pressure for sexual relations (Amnesty International 2006). High levels of sexual violence against female students undermine the advancement of their education as it renders schools increasingly unsafe environments for girls (Human Rights Watch 2001).

Although Zimbabwe has made progress towards achieving gender equality in education, girls continue to face many obstacles that impede learning, including gender-based violence (UNICEF 2003). The compilation of empirical data surrounding gender-based violence in Zimbabwean schools is incomplete and national initiatives to tackle gender-based violence are patchy (Defence for Children International 2013). Legislation to promote the well-being of children and women, such as Sexual Offences Act No. 8 of 2001 (Government of Zimbabwe 2001), are virtually unknown by most school practitioners especially those living in remote rural areas (Rudd and Brakarsh 2001). The Act outlaws sexual intercourse or indecent acts with children below the age of 16 years; however, sexual harassment in schools remains problematic. The Protocol of Multisectoral Management of Child Sexual Abuse in Zimbabwe developed as a guide to interventions in cases of child sexual abuse is an important development. This

protocol highlights the roles, responsibilities and procedures to be followed by professionals from the time of disclosure by a child that an act of sexual abuse has occurred (Khan and Bundy 2003). Further, the Ministries of Education, Sport and Culture and Legal and Parliamentary Affairs have developed procedural guidelines for schools to deal with cases of child sexual abuse. Establishment of Victim Friendly Units in selected police stations is a provision whereby cases of gender-based violence can be heard in camera (Thabate 2010). Yet the weak policy compliance, low resources and entrenched gender roles has allowed gender-based violence in Zimbabwean schools to flourish unchecked and become institutionalized (Leach and Humphreys 2007).

Against the above background, this article reports on an exploratory investigation into the experiences of girls who have been victims of gender-based violence in primary schools in Zimbabwe by means of a qualitative investigation informed by womanist discourse.

Theoretical Framework

To provide a theoretical framework for the gender based violence in schools, this paper draws on feminist theory with particular reference to womanist theory. Feminist theory comprises a diverse body of research in a variety of disciplines which share certain features (Davies 2007). The main aim is the investigation of women's experiences in society (Code 2000). Women are the central subjects in the investigative process and feminist theorists seek to see the world from the distinctive vantage points of women in the social world. Feminist schools of thought are critical and activist on behalf of women, thereby seeking to produce a better world for them. Most feminists characterize contemporary societies as patriarchal, that is, dominated by men; the primary source of female exploitation is by men rather than by other factors such as class (Lorber 2000). Feminist theories focused on violence against women identify patriarchal structures which reinforce gender-based inequalities of power in society as the root cause of the problem. Giddens (2004) relates gender to power in an overarching theory of gender relations which integrates the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity. Patriarchy requires violence or a subliminal threat of vio-

lence against women to maintain itself. Children who grow up in patriarchal societies learn a variety of control tactics designed to control women from an early age and boys tend to live up to stereotypical roles expected and cherished in a patriarchal society (Brown et al. 2007). Gender-based violence is thus a natural consequence of women's second class status in society (Dobash and Dobash 2000).

Zimbabwe is predominantly patriarchal and feminist thought is not well-received in Zimbabwean society (Chigadu 1997). In the light of this, womanist discourse was deemed appropriate to a study of gender-based violence in schools in Zimbabwe. Womanism focuses specifically on issues facing black women in the light of multiple oppressions based on their cultural, personal and social contexts, which differ significantly from those women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression (Parker 2012; Silva-Wayne 2003). The discourse acknowledges the uniqueness of each black woman's journey as it has been affected by many complex interlocking hierarchies, including slavery, imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, poverty, racism and apartheid (Etter-Lewis 2010). Womanist epistemology is grounded in the belief that concrete experiences are criteria of meaning and that dialogue is essential in accessing knowledge of women's lives (Walker 2003). Collins (2000) stresses the usefulness of womanism as theoretical framework in studies which would affirm and rearticulate the lived experiences of African women and promote cultural awareness of gender in African context. Womanism affirms African values such as family-centredness, community building, mothering, nurturing and spirituality and acknowledges the unity of sexes on which community building and collaboration hinges rather than the individuality of the sexes (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 2006). According to King and Ferguson (2011), in a traditional communal sense, womanism is concerned with both Black women and Black men. Womanism addresses the solidarity of humanity in that a womanist is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire community, both male and female, and actively opposes separatist ideologies (Walker 2005). Womanism recognises that Black men are an integral part of Black women's lives as their children, partners and family members (Gatan 2001). Walker's (2003) womanist frame-

work advocates unity, allegiance and a bias towards those values that bring promise and renewal to the black community. Moreover, womanism seeks to carefully assess the negative experiences of Black women and highlights the right to describe and use personal stories of women suffering from domestic violence and psychological trauma (Kraemarae and Spender 2000).

METHODS

The main research problem: How do young girls experience gender-based violence in primary schools in Zimbabwe?, was addressed by a qualitative inquiry. The latter was chosen for its broad exploratory nature and its capacity to provide greater insight into the motivation for meanings and dynamics of violent relationships (Elsberg and Heise 2002).

Sampling

The sample comprised twenty primary school girls who were documented cases of gender-based violence enrolled in primary schools in the municipal districts of Harare and Marondera, Zimbabwe. The participants were chosen by purposeful and snowball sampling. The first participant was identified with the help of the School Psychological Services located in the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture. The remaining participants were nominated by chain referral until a sufficient number was reached to provide an information-rich sample. In each case the participant's case history was verified by the authorities concerned. Participants were aged twelve to thirteen years; half the girls lived with parents; seven lived with single mothers; two were orphans in the care of relatives and one headed a child-headed household.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and visual participatory action research tools: mapping, the spider diagram, the cause and consequence tree and sketches. Visual tools allowed for "the participation of those affected by the issue, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change" (Green and Mercer 2001:31). The co-operative

nature of this method allowed the young participants and the chief researcher to engage in a joint process to which each contributed equally. Visual tools also assisted in addressing the weaknesses in using interviews with children: children may be constrained by the school setting when interviewed by adults, by social conventions on what are appropriate responses and by fear of victimization (Leach 2003). The inclusion of visual tools enabled the participants to express themselves freely on sensitive issues, including sexual abuse.

During mapping the chief researcher accompanied participants on a mini-transect walk in the immediate environment of the school, including playgrounds, out-buildings and paths to and from the school. Thereafter, participants drew a map of major areas of heightened risk and coloured unsafe areas in red. Spider diagrams comprised drawing a sketch of an abuse spider: each leg representing a type of violence occurring in and around the school. On the feet participants drew the people to whom they reported any abuse. In the light of abuses noted on the spider diagram, girls drew a cause and consequence tree: the roots of the tree depicting the causes of gender-based violence and branches representing their consequences. These exercises were followed by interviews with the participants based on the content of the sketches and flexible interview guidelines. All interviews were conducted in Shona and English. Recorded, transcribed and translated where necessary by the chief researcher. Data gathering took place during two data gathering workshops on the school premises after school hours and were recorded on digital recorder.

Approval of research protocols and written consent to conduct the study was obtained from all stakeholders. The Zimbabwean Ministry of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture afforded permission to enter provincial education offices and schools. The Police Commissioner General gave permission to view records held by Victim Friendly Units located in police stations. Written assent was obtained from the participants and written consent from parents or caregivers and head teachers. Consent documents stipulated the voluntary nature of participation, the research purpose, and protection afforded participants by keeping identities confidential, the freedom to withdraw from or refuse to answer questions at any point in the study and the op-

portunity to obtain research results. A risk management plan was put in place to address any issues arising from the study. Child-Line Zimbabwe provided free counselling services for post-workshop debriefing; the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association provided free legal assistance; and the Social Welfare Department assisted with the placement of one participant in foster care as a result of disclosures made during the data gathering.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place during the data gathering as well as after. Thereby themes were identified as they were suggested by the data and support demonstrated for those themes. Trustworthiness of data was enhanced by the use of multiple data gathering techniques, participant feedback and expert checking. Multiple data gathering techniques included visual tools, interviews and consultation of official documents. Participant checking involved cross-checking information and conclusions with actual participants for verification and insight (Johnson and Christensen 2000). Expert checking comprised discussions with head teachers of the schools where participants were enrolled, social workers and police officers as well as the checking of data interpretation by the second author. Finally, extracts from the raw data including relevant sketches were selected to illustrate the themes. The small sample size typical of qualitative research is the most obvious limitation of the study. However, the research was designed to be exploratory and descriptive in nature and is not generalisable in any way. Its primary goal was to understand how participants experienced gender-based violence in primary schools from their point of view. Yet the findings do suggest patterns that are useful particularly where they are corroborated by the corpus of literature dealing with gender-based violence which has been carried out in a variety of contexts.

FINDINGS

Significant themes emerging from the analysis of the participants' responses were synthesised to provide a comprehensive picture of the experience of gender-based violence in the primary schools in which participants were enrolled.

Forms of Gender-based Violence

Participant experiences of gender-based violence are categorised as physical, sexual and psychological. Although the topics are discussed separately, the experience of an individual participant was seldom limited to a single type of violence. Rather the different forms of violence were intricately interwoven to render the school "a house of terror" in the words of one participant.

a) Physical Violence

Physical violence is understood as the infliction of physical pain on children by a person in authority for the purposes of gaining compliance (Russo and Pirlott 2006). The most common type of physical violence encountered by the participants was corporal punishment as penalty for noise, late-coming, poor performance in school work, sports or cultural activities or coming to school without the necessary stationery, writing implements, school uniform, sports gear or shoes. Girls spoke of daily beatings administered in front of classmates, especially during oral tests of mental arithmetic and spelling classes, which took place in an atmosphere of trepidation and fear. Teachers used rope, rulers and shoes to beat girls on the buttocks, legs, knuckles, head, back and palm of hands. Participants agreed unanimously that caning was the most common punishment, followed by slapping, pulling ears or hair, kicking and punching. Caning was employed more frequently by male teachers; female teachers favoured pulling ears and hair and slapping with bare hands. A participant described a beating to accompany the following sketch (Fig. 1).

She added the following comment:

The teacher made me bend down and then beat me on the buttocks. For me it was a degrading experience, because when I bent my underwear was seen by boys who laughed at me throughout the day. The reason for beating me was coming to school late.

In another case confirmed by the Schools Psychological Services, a participant incurred permanent damage to her ear as a result of a severe beating by a teacher. The perpetrator was prosecuted and fined \$500.

The Education Act, Statutory Instrument no 362 of 1998 (Ministry of Education 2004) states:



Fig. 1. Corporal punishment administered to a girl

“No girl in a government or non-government school should be subjected to corporal punishment”. Yet this gender-specific regulation failed to protect the participants in this study. The narratives were cross-checked by examining the corporal punishment register at seven of the ten schools represented; the remaining three schools were entirely without registers of corporal punishment. The records indicated that corporal punishment is infrequent, administered only to boys and only in cases of grave misdemeanour. Yet data collected from the participants revealed the contrary.

b) Sexual Abuse

Sexual violence is defined as violence or abuse by an adult or another child through any form of forced or unwanted sexual activity where there is no consent and is often accompanied by physical and psychological violence (UNICEF 2003). Participants identified experiences of indecent touching and groping, suggestive comments about the body and dress, indecent speech, sexual harassment on school premises especially in the toilets, attempted rape, rape and incest. Groping by male peers and lifting of girls’ dresses was a daily nuisance as was teasing by male teachers and boys about their bodies. One participant sketched an incident of sexual harassment involving a male teacher.

The girl related how the teacher had said. “I have watched you grow up over the years and I must say your body is very beautiful, can you come closer to me I want to feel you. Come and sit on my leg.” (Fig. 2). The drawing portrays the child’s helpless protestations and the imbalance in power relations is suggested by the size of the figures – the larger teacher figure contrasted with the smaller child who is weeping. This particular incident is related to child labour (see ensuing section): the teacher, who habitually compelled female learners to carry out domestic chores at his home adjacent to school premises, had asked the girl to fetch water for his personal use. After this case was reported to the head teacher and referred to the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture, the teacher was merely issued a warning and transferred to another school. Such behaviour violates the professional code of teachers as stipulated in the Code of Conduct Act. No 1 of 2000 (Government of Zimbabwe 2000) which prohibits teachers from: “Improper, threatening, insubordinate or discourteous behaviour, including sexual harassment during the course of duty”.

Participants’ stories included experiences of attempted rape and actual rape. One participant had been attacked by a herdsman on the journey home from school. She said:

“He pulled me into a nearby bush and threw me onto the ground. He started touching me all



Fig. 2. Sexual harassment by a teacher

over my body and I screamed. I was rescued by an elderly man who was passing by, I reported the case to my mother and my teacher at school."

Since the incident, the girl attends school only if accompanied by a group of friends. If this is not possible, she misses school that day. Another participant was attacked by her mother's boyfriend at home in her mother's absence. Although not directly linked to the school, the incident affected the child's school attendance and consequently school performance. On disclosure to her mother, she was forbidden to report the incident further because the man supported the family and paid school fees. However, the girl shared the story with a teacher who reported the incident to the police. A discussion with the police officer handling the case confirmed that the mother had refused to take the matter further to avoid losing financial support. At the time of the interview, the

mother's boyfriend still visited the home. Disabled children face particular problems as perpetrators believe that they are easy victims, cannot defend themselves and their stories are often dismissed. A physically challenged participant related how she had been raped by a groundsman in a storeroom for garden equipment at her urban school. The rapist admonished her not to tell anybody because no-one would believe her story: "Nobody listens to cripple people like you. People will only laugh at you." However, the girl found the courage to share the trauma with her sister and the man was arrested. The single incident of incest was an unpredicted finding that emerged from the research process. A participant, lodging with her father in a single room on a farm, had been repeatedly raped by the father over a period. In this case, the chief researcher assumed an advocacy role and, with the girl's consent, reported the incident the relevant authorities. The father

was placed in police custody and the girl placed in foster care.

According to the participants, perpetrators of sexual violence in schools are teachers, classroom peers and students in the higher grades. Support staffs such as groundsman or janitors were also mentioned as well as herdsmen working in the area surrounding the school. However, the most striking finding was that the chief culprits in schools are teachers. It was not possible to corroborate this with official documents as schools do not keep records on sexual abuse. These are kept at the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture Regional Offices and fall under the official secrecy policy; hence access to the records was denied. As the case with corporal punishment, participants explained that most acts of sexual violence go unreported. Some participants shared the view that reporting was redundant as it did not lead to any remedial action.

c) Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse involves the subjection of the victim to behaviour that may result in psychological trauma, including anxiety, and is associated with situations of power imbalance, bullying and child abuse (Pinheiro 2006). Psychological abuse, sometimes referred to as the 'invisible plague', is largely unseen and victims suffer without complaint unlike the other types of violence. Different forms of psychological abuse identified by participants included bullying, abusive language and name-calling, intimidation, humiliation and isolation.

Bullying was the most common type of psychological abuse encountered at school and involved boy-girl violence as well as girl-girl violence. Incidence of bullying was not corroborated by records as schools did not keep records of bullying. A common example of bullying mentioned was commandeering food, money and stationery by both older boys and girls and usually occurred on the playgrounds. Several participants endorsed the fact that playgrounds were poorly supervised by teachers who delegated that task to prefects. Prefects tended to misuse their position and compelled other children to carry their bags, threatening and belittling if they protested.

All the participants reported that they had been victims of abusive language at school. This

was not limited to peer altercations; teachers called participants names, such as 'thick head', 'small brains', 'fat girl', 'old mama'. This belittled the victims and peers continued to perpetuate the name-calling outside the classroom. Participants from poor families who lacked full school uniform or shoes were particularly vulnerable. One participant at a farm school was ridiculed by school mates because she regularly soils her uniform during menstruation as she cannot afford sanitary wear. Consequently she misses school for a week every month. In sum, psychological violence often accompanied physical violence or was a forerunner to physical violence.

d) Child Labour

An insidious form of gender-based violence which emerged from the girls' stories was the documented engagement of fourteen participants in illegal forms of child labour occurring within and outside of school. Child labour involves the economic exploitation of children in work that is likely to be hazardous, interferes with the children's education or harmful to the child's health, physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour 2013). In this study child labour emerged as a form of gender-based violence: labour was excessive and the type of labour expected from girls conformed to traditional stereotypes and reduced chance of school success.

Participants described having to perform compulsory, daily chores at school without remuneration: cleaning school yards and buildings, caring for the school's vegetable, fruit and flower gardens and cleaning toilets. Most rural primary schools represented by the study did not employ cleaning services due to their location and hence girls were recruited to do heavy cleaning. A participant in a rural school walked one and a half kilometres daily to fetch water in containers to irrigate the school's vegetable and flower gardens. Other participants in rural schools were forced by teachers, who lived on or near the school premises, to fetch water and firewood for the teachers' domestic use after school hours. In more than one case this type of work, where a young girl found herself alone with a male teacher after school, gave occasion to sexual harassment (see section entitled Sexual abuse).

Participants also related how they were forced into excessive domestic work to supplement family income and to pay their own school fees. A participant related:

My mother took me to stay with a female teacher at the school to work as a domestic worker while at the same time attending school. The reason for working is so that I can earn some money for my school fees and for the family upkeep.

In a similar case, a participant was 'given' to a relative as an unsalaried part-time domestic worker in return for the payment by the relative of school fees, food, clothing and accommodation. According to the girl, the relative saw herself as providing a service and regards the child's labour as mere 'help' rather than formal employment. Out of school activities mentioned by participants and documented in their case files included street vending, gold panning and farming. As these activities occur outside the school, they fall beyond the scope of this paper. Notwithstanding, these activities reduced school time, occurred under hazardous and extremely exploitative conditions and exposed girls to additional sexual risk in the workplace. Several participants confirmed that rural primary schools are often used as recruitment centres by unscrupulous employers who seek cheap labour for gold panning and agriculture.

Schools as Unsafe Places

Schools have a legal responsibility to provide safe environments for children (Matitsa 2011). However, participants indicated that the schools concerned harboured several at-risk locations which were largely unmonitored by teaching staff. Identifying places where gender-based violence occurs is critical to combat the problem and create protective environments for girls. Information on unsafe places was collected from children using mapping.

Figure 3 is a school map drawn by participant. An alarming number of places were indicated as unsafe by red crosses: girls' toilets, behind and inside classrooms, the area around the school gate, the road to and from school, the playground and the school orchard.

Most girls identified toilets as the most risky place because male classmates followed to peep at or grope them. The location of toilets, far from the classrooms and unmonitored by teachers, heightened the risk. At one rural school, boys and girls used a single sex toilet as the boys' toilet had collapsed due to lack of upkeep. Consequently, participants resorted to use the nearby bush outside the school grounds because they feared the hazards of a single-sex toilet. The dense bush was an equally unsafe location as it exposed girls to greater sexual risk. Observa-

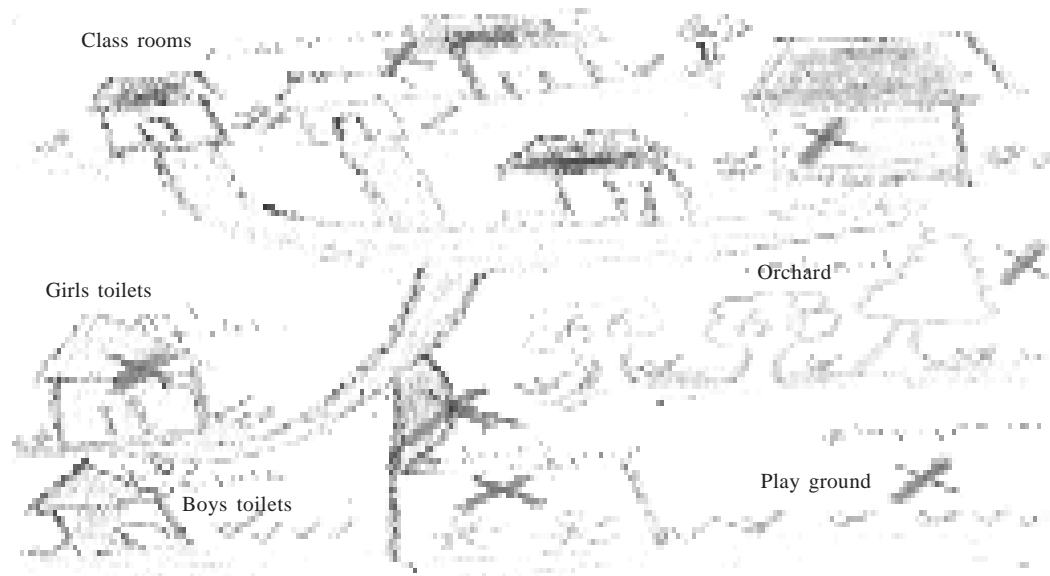


Fig. 3. Unsafe places

tion in one school showed sexualised graffiti on toilet walls. Girls endeavoured to visit toilets in groups to avoid harassment but this was not always possible.

Participants also identified classrooms as unsafe places due to the afore-mentioned physical and psychological abuse. A participant described the situation as follows:

The classroom is unsafe because it is a lot of suffering. Our teacher has made me sit in a group of what he calls 'slow learners group'. The top group consists of boys only, while the last group has girls only. I think the teacher favours boys. He calls us 'good for nothings'. The teacher beats us every day because we cannot do our English comprehension and mathematics exercises correctly.

One girl described corporal punishment, scolding, belittling and bullying as the order of the day in the classroom. She commented, "*Such behaviour has become an unavoidable part of school life for girls.*" Girls described how peeping Toms hid under desks to peep under girls' dresses and thereafter, drew obscene caricatures on the chalkboard of what they claimed to have seen. Classrooms were also rendered unsafe due to blatant sexual harassment by male teachers. A participant mentioned:

One day my teacher (male) made me stay behind while the other children went home. He had said he wanted me to assist him to dust the tables. When all the children had left, he walked towards me and lifted my dress up and put his finger in my private parts. It was very painful.

The above incident was reported to the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture and the police. The teacher was prosecuted and has since been dismissed from the teaching profession.

Tool sheds and storerooms were also dangerous spaces for girls. Storerooms are dark and often boys preyed on girls when they collected gardening tools after school hours. Overgrown access paths to and from the school formed risky locations as both boys and men sexually harassed girls on the journey to and from school. One girl mentioned: "Boys intimidate us every day. They wait for us in gangs after school on the way home and touch us provocatively." This was a particular problem in rural schools where girls feared harassment from herdsmen. Because of the scattered settlement patterns homesteads and schools are a considerable distance apart and

some girls walked up to ten kilometres to school daily. In some cases family members took turns to accompany participants to school; however, this was not always feasible. Most participants identified playgrounds as hazardous due to bullying. School orchards and vegetable gardens areas were also at risk areas since they are quiet secluded and provide hiding places for perpetrators. In addition, the area around the school gate was identified as high risk; often children chose to settle scores by fighting at the gate when they leave school.

Reporting Routes

According to Khan and Bundy (2003), once a case of gender-based violence has been reported, the child should be allowed to select the member of staff they feel comfortable to talk to. The school should actively assist the child to feel at ease and assure the child of confidentiality and realistic protection. The role of the police, hospitals and social welfare systems should be fully explained to the child at her level of comprehension if the child requires such assistance. The school is also responsible for compiling an urgent report which is sent to the police, the Education Regional Office, Education District Office and Schools Psychological Services so that administrative and counselling processes can be implemented timeously. The school should also provide counselling, case follow-up and facilitation of onward referrals if necessary; monitoring of the affected child's social and emotional welfare; and the establishment of a viable school prevention, assistance and support system against child abuse. In the light of these formal procedures, data was collected from the participants to ascertain the effectiveness of reporting procedures in practice using spider diagrams (Fig. 4) and associated discussion.

Incidents of physical violence were reported to prefects or parents. Reporting to prefects was largely ineffectual as they had little authority to take any decisive action. One girl commented: "In fact most prefects are bullies themselves." Prefects could also not be trusted: "I do not bother to report any abuse to a prefect because the last time I did the prefect was bribed by the perpetrator and nothing was done". Parents were frequently told about physical abuse but they seldom took fights among children or corporal

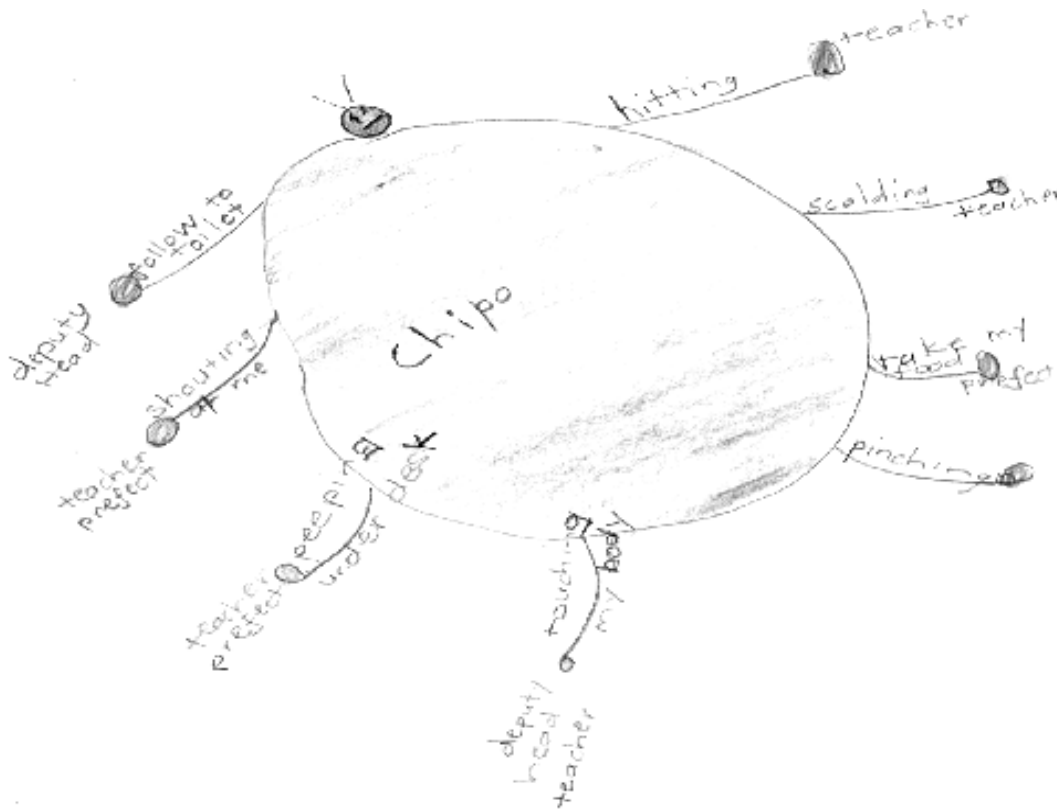


Fig. 4. Spider diagram indicating reporting routes

punishment seriously. Most participants felt that their parents supported corporal punishment at school. One girl explained that her mother had requested her teacher to beat her severely at school to force her to work more diligently. These parental attitudes discourage children from reporting cases of physical violence; when teachers realise that no action was taken by parents, they continue their behaviour. Victims of severe physical violence had reported the matter to the deputy head teachers who chair the disciplinary committees in schools. They explained that in most cases the deputy head teachers had simply issued a warning to perpetrators. One participant confirmed that the adult to whom she had reported also administered severe corporal punishment so she had thus kept silent. In other cases, children kept silent because they feared being victimised by the perpetrators.

Participants who had suffered sexual abuse shared the stories with brothers or sisters re-

spectively. Siblings were usually at a loss to deal with the complaints. In one case a participant's elder brother reacted by beating up the perpetrator and thus extending the circle of violent behaviour. One girl had reported sexual abuse to the head teacher; thirteen participants had reported sexual abuse cases to the deputy head teachers. These cases involved boys following girls into the girls' toilets, groping, sexualised language and the cases of attempted rape described in the foregoing sections. Very few participants had reported sexual violence to parents. None of the participants had reported any incident to the police; they confessed that they did not even know the locality of police stations.

Causes and Outcomes of Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence in schools is generally the most hidden and socially accepted form of child rights violations. Gender scripting and

a culture of tolerance towards gender violence in the Zimbabwean society contribute to the continued problem. This was endorsed by the participants' stories: they seemed to accept gender-based violence as an inevitable part of their everyday lives. The cycle of violence was perpetuated because girls, as victims of violence, did not always consider poor treatment at school as abuse. This was continually reinforced by the permissive attitude towards sexual harassment prevalent in schools. When participants witnessed teachers ignoring sexist and violent interactions between students and those committed by colleagues, they were seen to be giving tacit approval to such behaviour. Several times during the study some participants emphasised that teachers did not take inappropriate behaviour by male classmates seriously. One girl explained, "Teachers say 'boys will be boys'. That is part of growing up." Thus, girls do not bother to report most cases of abuse in schools because they believed teachers would only turn a blind eye to protect colleagues from disciplinary action. In particular, girls were embarrassed and ashamed about incidents of sexual abuse. According to Hyman (2000), child victims of school violence suffer from Educational Induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The cause and consequence tree in Figure 5 suggests that participants exhibited symptoms of this disorder.



Fig. 5. Cause and consequence tree

The roots depict the causes of the abuse: bullying, being chased, beatings and scolding. The

branches represent the consequences of such abuse; school avoidance; weeping bouts; hatred of school; and social withdrawal. A frequent victim of bullying pointed out, "Bullying makes me feel unwanted, useless and defenceless." A girl who had been severely beaten by a teacher on her ear avoided school by hiding in the bush while her mates proceeded to school. Other stories from the girls emphasised how the fear induced by corporal punishment robbed them of any enjoyment of learning. These outcomes extend beyond the children directly affected by it; school also becomes a nightmare for those who witness gender-based violence. Thus, education becomes an ordeal rather than an opportunity for the girls.

DISCUSSION

This study, albeit small scale succeeds in painting a picture of gender-based violence in Zimbabwean primary schools from the point of view of the victims. A womanist stance to the research process was successfully demonstrated by giving voice to the pain and struggles of girl victims through documenting their concrete experiences as vehicles of meaning. The main source of information in this study was thus the abused girl herself. The girls' stories and their sketches suggest that gender-based violence in schools is engendered and sustained as a way of disciplining girls and as means of exercising socially sanctioned male dominance over girls by teachers and peers. Beside the illegality of corporal punishment administered to girls as means of discipline, such violence by teachers was casual, cruel and unremitting. Significantly, girls felt most at risk in the privacy of school toilets reserved for girls; boys were able to follow them into this female space without restriction and without teacher control. Further, the type of child labour expected from girls by the school authorities and by individual teachers socialised them into pre-ordained roles that they can expect to assume as adults.

A thread penetrating all the themes of the findings was the prevailing culture of silence in schools; shocking conditions were known to all stakeholders including victims, but by tacit, communal and unspoken consensus these were seldom talked about or acknowledged (Tinbald 2011). In this kind of school culture little positive change can be expected, irrespective of poli-

cies and intervention programmes to address the problem. The culture of silence is perpetuated outside of the school where girls are socialised in families to be submissive to men and to accept abuse as a normal part of their lives. Mothers feared the loss of a breadwinner if a father or spouse was reported for violence. As one young girl commented, "Women suffer in silence because they want to keep their families together." Girls also maintain silence for fear of social stigmatisation, shame and embarrassment. Girls are also accused of inviting sexual harassment. One girl who reported sexual harassment by a teacher was told by another teacher: "Don't dress in ways which provoke men and boys. Then they will leave you alone." Implied by this culture of silence was the complicity of most teachers in violence in the schools at worst; or their apparent inertia at best. If teachers were not identified as perpetrators of violence, they appeared on the whole to be neglectful in reporting colleagues who violate the professional code or tardy to report incidents to the appropriate authorities.

Breaking silence on incidents of gender-based violence in schools and accurate record keeping of incidents is the first step in developing prevention strategies. Breaking silence enables early identification of patterns of violence in schools and proactive action to prevent the problem becoming entrenched. Although Zimbabwe has achieved gender parity to access in education, the study showed that a learning environment for girls in which gender-based violence is tolerated creates many other gender inequalities. Educational legislation alone is insufficient to eliminate the multiple oppressions suffered by the participants in the cultural, personal and social contexts of the family, community and the school (Berman 2003). In particular, the study highlighted the powerful role of school culture in socialising patriarchal gender roles using violence as tool of control. The school creates its own culture and ethos through norms of teacher-child interaction, explicit and implicit rules and codes of behaviour enacted and reinforced in the everyday life of the classroom and playground. Certainly the study confirms Leach's (2003) finding that in many Zimbabwean primary schools a harsh 'gender regime' is constructed daily through unquestioned routine practices.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to document the experience of gender-based violence in primary schools system in Zimbabwe. Gender-based violence in schools is a concern in the education system and in broader society as it threatens basic human rights and the physical and psychological well-being of children. Gender-based violence against girls is a complex problem which requires co-ordinated solutions, involving the participation of the state, the community, the school and the family. The study highlights the urgent need for mobilizing all stakeholders in education for formulating policy and programmatic interventions to change everyday practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would also like to acknowledge the following stakeholders who contributed to the execution of this project, *The Dynamics of Violence in South African Schools*:

1. University of South Africa (UNISA) for funding this project
2. Staff and students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal who took part in the conceptualisation of this project. These members also played an active in preparation of tools that were finally used when the project was executed. These are Dr Inbarnath Naicker, Dr Sithabile Ntombela, Mr Siphwe Mthiyane and Dr Nsizwakhona Chili.
3. In addition, the following students contributed to the project: Bawinile Mthanti (PhD student), Gideon Msezane (Full thesis), Rajen Murugan Reddy (Full thesis) and Sindi Mnguni, E Chikwiri (Full thesis).
4. We also acknowledge the contribution of Prof Pierre du Plessis from University of Johannesburg.
5. The six Provincial Departments of Education from which data was collected namely KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and Western Cape.
6. All schools that participated in the project for qualitative and quantitative studies
7. Prof Martin Kidd (statistician from Stellenbosch University)
8. Lungile Mabaso (data capturer)

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