

## The Consequences of School Violence for Female Learners

Mncedisi C. Maphalala

*University of South Africa, College of Education (Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies) P.O. Box 392, UNISA, 0003, South Africa*  
*E-mail: mphalmc@unisa.ac.za*

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**ABSTRACT** Globally violence against girls is widespread. Research studies show that girls are particularly vulnerable to both physical and sexual harassment, research further highlights girls' vulnerability to rape by teachers and classmates. This study therefore sought to investigate factors associated with gender-based violence in schools as well the effects on female learners. A qualitative approach was used to explore consequences of school violence for female learners. Semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were used to collect data from 29 learners, five principals, five school governing body members, five Life Orientation teachers and five non-teaching staff from four schools drawn from four provinces in South Africa, namely Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and Western Cape. Thematic analysis was employed for the purposes of data analysis. The findings of this study reveal that female learners continue to face barriers to their learning as victims of violence perpetrated by male learners and their teachers. Interviewees (learners) saw their schools not as safe places but as primary sites for violence which has a negative impact on their education and their emotional welfare. The study proposes a synergistic approach in the form of collaborative efforts by community, administrators, teachers, parents and learners as a necessary strategy to make our schools safe.

### INTRODUCTION

School violence is sadly a growing global phenomenon, as research across the world reports the shocking effects of school violence on learners. The types of violence suffered by learners range from assault and harassment experienced on the way to and from school to bullying, sexual harassment and mental and physical abuse within the school premises, sometimes inflicted as a means of corporal punishment. School violence affects both girls and boys. According to United Nation Human Rights (2011), sexual and gender-based violence directed at girls is a particular concern. Studies from certain European countries indicate that generally boys are more often subject to violence than girls, but that more girls than boys are victims of certain severe forms of violence, including sexual violence. Amnesty International (2008) supports the view that both girls and boys of school age can be the victims of violence, a violence which violates their human rights. However, girls are more likely to be the victims of certain types of violence, such as sexual harassment and sexual assault, with serious impacts on their self-esteem, educational success and long-term health and wellbeing. Between 15 to 20% of girls are estimated to have experienced such violence before they reach the age of 16.

According to Amnesty International (2012) all girls have the right to education and this right

is essential not only for girls to grow and learn, but also so that they can become independent and make their own choices in their lives. Nowadays schools have become places of fear and violence and not just places to learn and realise potential. Some girls face violence at school at the hands of teachers, school staff or other learners. Amnesty International goes on to state that violence even stops girls going to school, the place where they are supposed to be able to pursue their education in an environment which is safe, respectful and non-discriminatory.

A school is a microcosm of the society that reflects what happens in the community. School violence particularly on female learners in South Africa should be seen in the context of the widespread gender-based violence in our country. These incidents of gender-based violence in our communities are then replicated in the schools. This statement is corroborated by shocking statistics provided by Amnesty International (2008):

- A study in the USA found that 83% of girls in grades 8 to 11 (aged around 12 to 16) in public schools experienced some form of sexual harassment.
- According to a 2006 study of schoolgirls in Malawi, 50% of the girls said they had been touched in a sexual manner "without permission, by either their teachers or fellow schoolboys".
- In Latin America, sexual harassment in schools has been found to be widespread

in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama, among other countries.

- In a survey of girls in Zimbabwean junior secondary schools, 50% of girls reported unsolicited sexual contact on the way to school coming from strangers and 92% of girls reported being propositioned by older men.
- Of the 77 million school-age children not attending school 40% live in conflict-affected areas.
- In Afghanistan, incidents of burning down schools, particularly girls' schools, and threatening or assaulting girls who attend school, have become increasingly common in recent years.

These statistics are a clear indication that violence against girls is widespread and that girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence in schools.

Numerous research studies have been conducted and reported in the literature on school violence and its impact on the learners and their education in South Africa (Akinsola 2010; Van der Westhuizen and Maree 2010; Sathiparsad 2003; Zulu et al. 2004). While some of these studies have focused on the impact of school violence on learners no study was found to have focused on the consequences of school violence on female learners specifically in South Africa. This study therefore sought to investigate factors associated with school violence as well as their consequences for female learners in an attempt to fill the identified gap.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the Model of Social-Ecological Influences on Student Victimization as proposed by Benbenishty and Astor (2008). This heuristic theoretical model places the school context at the centre of the model.

This ecological approach examines how external contexts in which a school is embedded interact with internal school and student characteristics to influence levels of victimisation in schools (Benbenishty and Astor 2008). These layered and nested contexts include the school (for example, structural characteristics, social climate and policies against violence), the neighbourhood (for example, poverty, social organisation, crime), the students' families (for

example, education, family structure), cultural aspects of student and teacher population (for example, religion, ethnic affiliation) and the economic, social and political makeup of the country as a whole.

A school is regarded as a microcosm of society that reflects the distinctiveness of the community it serves. Diesel (1997) in Smit (2010) contends that school violence should be seen as a community problem in South Africa and, since schools are a part of the community, they reflect the problems of that community.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Sampling

The study used a purposive sampling technique. The purpose of using this sampling technique is not to assure representativeness in statistical terms, but to ensure that data on perceptions and experiences of those who are directly involved in a phenomenon being investigated are collected. The sample for the study included the following interviewees: 29 learners, 5 school principals, 5 school governing body (SGB) members, 5 Life Orientation teachers and 5 non-teaching staff from 5 different schools drawn in 4 provinces of South Africa, namely Gauteng, Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga and Western Cape. The power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied which can be used with both quantitative and qualitative studies.

### Instrumentation

#### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 school principals, 5 school governing body (SGB) members, 5 Life Orientation teachers and 5 non-teaching staff drawn from 5 different schools.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a fairly open framework which allow for focused, conversational, two-way communication. They can be used both to give and receive information. Unlike the questionnaire framework, where detailed questions are formulated ahead of time, semi-structured interviewing starts with

more general questions or topics. Not all questions are designed and phrased ahead of time. The majority of questions are created during the interview, allowing both the interviewer and the person being interviewed the flexibility to probe for details or discuss issues (Case 1990).

In this study interview schedules were used to guide the discussion with the interviewees.

### ***The Focus Group Discussions***

The focus group discussions were conducted with a group of 29 learners from 5 different schools in order to collect data. The purpose of the focus group discussion is to produce qualitative data to provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions and opinions of participants (Krueger 1994). Consent to tape-record the interview was established with the participants. Pseudonyms were used throughout the discussion to protect the identity of learners. The focus group discussions guide covered four broad areas:

- the nature of violence in schools
- factors associated with school violence perpetrated against learners (especially girl learners)
- consequences of school violence
- strategies for dealing with school violence

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Pereznieto et al. (2010) contend that violence in schools poses considerable risks to children during important development stages in life. The present study reveals that girls are sexually harassed and physically abused by male learners or teachers and in some instances girl learners perpetrate violence against one another. Studies conducted locally and internationally report that violence suffered by girl learners at school is widespread and that this situation has led to non-attendance and early school dropouts. This goes against the initiatives by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Africa as well as Asia to enhance access to education among female learners. Human Rights Watch (2001) points out:

*Left unchecked, sexual violence in schools has a negative impact on the educational and emotional needs of girls and acts as a barrier to attaining education ... Rape and other forms of sexual violence place girls at risk of contract-*

*ing the HIV/AIDS virus [which has in turn] taken its toll on the educational system and disrupted education ... especially for girls.*

The following section provides findings from data analysis. In the process of data analysis the following major themes emerged:

- factors associated with gender-based violence in schools
- consequences of school violence on female learners
- learner performance
- truancy
- dropping out
- physical injuries
- psychological problems
- security measures in schools

### **Factors Associated with Gender-based Violence in Schools**

The recognition of violence against girls as a significant barrier to social and economic development in all parts of the world is linked with the understanding that the societal mistreatment of school girls is reflected in the culture of the nations that marginalise and diminish the value of women and their contribution to society (Wilson 2008). The study reveals that there is a belief among learners and society at large that female learners bring upon themselves the gender-based violence against them in schools and in the community. When they wear short dresses it is taken to mean that girls are asking for sex, which will in turn be regarded as either sexual harassment or rape when reported to the school authorities.

*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. I am just saying because people are attracted to these things, and there are perverted minds out there that think otherwise; while you think such and such won't happen ... it will happen (Learner, North West Province).*

*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? (Learner, North West Province)*

Similarly, in Limpopo boy learners said that they feel encouraged by how the girl learners are dressed:

*There is sexual harassment at the school and 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 (Male learner, Limpopo Province).*

This kind of thinking is absurd; women cannot be blamed for any form of abuse that they suffer just because of what they wear. Such stereotypes can only perpetuate gender-based violence in society.

### **Consequences of School Violence for Female Learners**

The incidents of school violence against girl learners are widely reported in South African media (both print and electronic) but less is reported about the negative consequences of these incidents. School violence in general interferes with the smooth running of the school by disrupting teaching and learning activity. For the purposes of this study the focus is on the consequences of school violence for female learners. The study reveals that school violence leads to poor learner performance, school dropouts, truancy, drug abuse and psychological problems.

### **Learner Performance**

The study reveals that the consequences of school violence for learners usually manifest themselves in the form of poor or deteriorating learner performance. These learners lose interest in their schoolwork as a result of the violence perpetrated against them at school or outside the school premises. Perezniето et al. (2010) contend that school learners who experience school violence may suffer from difficulty concentrating and distraction and, as a result, perform less well academically than they would have otherwise.

Sexual harassment also has negative consequences for the female learner:

*[A boy pulls up the skirt of a learner who refused to kiss him.] The boy literally exposed the learner's private parts ... Matter was reported in the principal's office. This however affected the girl's performance ... I'm not happy, more effort was supposed to be focused on the victim; instead the perpetrators got all the attention (Life Orientation teacher, Mpumalanga Province).*

### **Truancy**

When learners do not feel safe at school they resort to truancy and their schoolwork suffers in the process. Because of reduced school attendance and less class participation the performance of these learners is negatively affected. Perezniето et al. (2010) believe that truancy as a consequence of school violence directly undermines children's learning because they spend less time at school and have less contact time with teachers. As a result, educational attainment suffers, sometimes leading to having to repeat a grade and even eventually dropping out.

*When girls are sexually harassed they don't get protection from the school [and] as a result they skip school. They lose interest in their schoolwork and fall behind at school; this is sad because they feel helpless and they can't do anything about the situation (Life Orientation teacher, Western Cape Province).*

### **School Dropout**

Learners who believe that violence is tolerated in their schools feel very unsafe, disheartened and hard done by, and may eventually give up and drop out of school. Perezniето et al. (2010) point out that school violence has been shown to discourage children from attending school as well as discourage parents from sending their children to school. They further point out that more severe effects on children's education are characterised by dropping out altogether.

*A girl was forced to kiss a boy. The more the girl learner refused to kiss the boy, the more the violence. The girl was prepared to give the boy sex and put the problem behind her. I'm not happy because the learner that was violated couldn't stand the humiliation from other learners; she eventually dropped out of school. Learners are between 14 and 15 years (Life Orientation teacher, Gauteng province)*

*It's a huge barrier and you know, it can be seen on their results you know, the school delivers at the end of the year externally and internally and you can actually see that a lot of kids are not coping with the curriculum and our huge problem is especially grade 9 and 10. The drop is much higher because they are not coping and either in their lives personally devel-*

*oping mentally at that stage you know it spills over to can't cope with schoolwork so I'd rather opt out (School principal, Western Cape province).*

A learner who drops out further limits his or her right to education as enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. Education is a basic human right and has been recognised as such since the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

If school violence against girl learners in South Africa continues unchecked women's education, their empowerment and the development of the country will be dealt a heavy blow. Women as citizens of the country need to be accorded the same status as men and be encouraged to participate in the political, social and economic spheres so that they also contribute to the betterment of the country.

### **Physical Injuries**

The study found that learners sustain minor to severe physical injuries when they fight among themselves. Learners need medical attention for severe injuries and some have to spend a lot of time in hospital, thereby losing out on learning. Both girl and boy learners have died on school premises due to school violence. In one school two learners were shot dead when caught in the crossfire of gang fighting, following which both learners and teachers opted not to go to school until the situation was calm — with a negative impact on teaching and learning. They felt they were not safe at school or when travelling to and from school.

*Last year we experienced random shooting in front of the school gate, whereby two gangs were shooting at each other and a stray bullet hit a learner and up till today we don't know who the person is that shot the girl. In the community that we live in a lot of our kids during the time of gang violence in the area get caught in the crossfire and they miss out a substantial amount of academic time. We have learners who have been shot in the leg or stomach and some paralysed for life because of stray bullets during gang shootings. Last year we buried two of our school kids and they were shot in the gang-related violence; I mean last year was a particularly bad year for us as a school when it comes to violence from outside in the area (School Principal, Western Cape Province).*

According to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED 2003), gangs appear to choose the arrival and departure times of educators and learners deliberately, and they wait for learners at the school gate. This brings with it a terrorising “fear factor” which traumatises educators, learners and parents. Threats, intimidation and harassment engender fear, and result in the absenteeism of both educators and learners (Segoe and Mokgosi 2006:5).

Carrying of knives, guns and other weapons is part of daily school life. *Eye Witness News* (1 March 2012) reported that a 16-year-old boy was killed at Beauvallon Secondary School in Valhalla Park, Cape Town. The learner was stabbed by another learner during break time. Three others were wounded. Two learners fled the scene and a third one was treated on the school grounds. In another incident *The Citizen* (2 March 2012) reported that an 18-year-old boy was stabbed once in the neck and died outside the Vorentoe High School gates in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, allegedly in a fight over a ball. If learners get injured or die at school due to school violence, other learners and teachers are affected emotionally and the basic ability of the school to function is also impaired. In extreme cases such as loss of life at school psychologists are called in to provide counselling to both learners and teachers with an aim of normalising the situation.

### **Psychological Problems**

The study shows that learners who have been exposed to incidents of school violence over a period of time develop psychological problems. These psychological problems manifest themselves in the form of aggression towards fellow learners and teachers, withdrawal from school activities and lower standards of hygiene.

*Let's first start with the learners, the one thing that we have noticed you know on the psychological part, is that violence has huge impact on them ... and what we have discovered is their incapability to deal with it or come up with the coping mechanism. I mean something that would be emotionally draining to me, to them it would seem as if nothing had happened and tomorrow they are back here at school, but we don't know how it's gonna affect their lives later on. To us the coping mechanism for the short term seems to be fine but obviously the long-*



*term effect is something that we aren't sure about. When it comes to the educator the huge thing is obviously the stress, you know. For learners, it's even worse because sometimes they display strange behaviours such as not taking care of themselves, short temper and easily start a fight with others or just keep quiet (Life Orientation teacher, Western Cape Province).*

Pereznieto et al. (2010) argue that sexual abuse and violence commonly result in a range of psychological impacts with lasting consequences. They quote a study conducted in Ethiopia which confirms that, of those who reported a history of sexual abuse, the most commonly cited psychological consequences were as follows: 3.2% blaming themselves, 2.7% suffering feelings of worthlessness and 2.7% feeling suicidal.

Sexual abuse during adolescence can have severe consequences for identity formation and developmental processes, which can last well beyond adolescence and into young adulthood or beyond.

### **Security Measures in Schools**

#### ***Random Search and Seizure and Drug Testing in Schools***

Despite the fact that the Education Laws Amendment Act of 2007 clearly states that no person may bring any dangerous objects, alcohol or illegal drugs onto the school premises during or after school hours, the study found that learners are commonly caught in possession of these objects and substances. The Act which was passed in January 2011 empowers any school principal or his or her delegate to search any learner, or the property of any learner, for any dangerous object, alcoholic liquor or illegal drug, if the principal reasonably suspects the presence of a dangerous object, alcoholic liquor or an illegal drug on the school premises or during a school activity. If there is reasonable and reliable evidence that a learner is concealing a dangerous object or illegal substance on his or her body, the principal may request a member of the South African Police Services to conduct a more extensive search of that learner's person, which may entail the removal of clothing.

The Education Laws Amendment Act of 2007 which provides for random search and seizure

and drug testing in schools is designed to allow schools to stop weapons and drugs being brought by pupils into SA's public schools; this is aimed at curbing the violence in South African schools which has led to numerous deaths, through strengthening principals' powers.

As part of the intervention strategies to curb violence schools have resorted to search and seizure and drug testing on their premises. One school has a standing agreement with the local police station that from time to time during the course of the day police would patrol the school area and also conduct search and seizure in the school.

*We always conduct search and seizure any time; we have a community forum they call the cluster committee; in this committee there is a police officer who is the commander of the cluster committee, so about 2 times in the month I call him to request his visibility and they will bring all the forces that they have, like the sniffer dogs and everything. Then they will say we are here for about 7 days and he will ask which classes are problematic; then we will send them to those classes and then they will go and conduct searches in those classes. Through this we are sending a message to the learners that carrying of weapons and drugs on our school premises will not be tolerated. We never had a gun on our premises. I'm not saying that these boys don't have guns because I don't stay with them in the townships but they never get exposed to us because they know that if they get exposed they will be arrested, so the police in that way they actually help me (School Principal, Western Cape Province).*

While teachers hail random search and seizure as a deterrent for school violence, learners view the practice in a different light. According to the learners the random search and seizures rob them of valuable time for learning and they sometimes feel their rights are violated in the process.

*Now on the point where the police are searching the learners, this is my personal opinion that it is also stealing time off our education whether the search is for our safety; but I personally think if they have search for 3 to 4 hours, how many hours is left on the clock for our learning? That is a point that I have to make, so if it is possible for the department of education that they can provide the schools with metal detectors ... [it can] save time (Learner, Western Cape Province).*

Another learner lamented the treatment of learners during search and seizure sessions.

*The police haven't done searches for this term, but last year they did it up to 4 times in a month and if they wanna come now they can and they don't tell us when they are coming and for me it's almost like they just come whenever they feel they want to come, and they disturb us in our classes and also they disrespect the learners because when they talk to you they use filthy language. I mean it's not good for those who come from an environment that is not violent and now they have to come and witness the violence by the police, who are the people that should protect us and they also disrespect learning during the session of the search (Learner, Western Cape Province).*

In some instances search and seizure proves to be a difficult exercise because of easy access to the school due to lack of fencing around the school. The principal of School A lamented the fact that learners and teachers generally don't feel safe within the school premises because drugs are easily available, weapons are easily sneaked in and untrustworthy people gain free access to the school. This was confirmed by a learner in School A, who stated:

*Fencing, that is the one important thing and the fence is for our own safety and the safety of our teachers and if there is no fence we don't feel safe and we as learners feel that our safety has been taken away from us, which means our education cannot continue because if you sit in the class wondering what's gonna happen, when is the gangster gonna come in and open fire on the learners — that is what is going through our minds as learners and I think the fence plays a big role in the safety of the learners and the teachers in our school, so that is one thing that must be changed at the school (Learner, Western Cape Province)*

### CONCLUSION

The study reveals that gender-based violence is still prevalent in South African schools, where girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and physical abuse by male learners or teachers. Most behaviours are learnt responses to circumstances and situations that are exhibited in our everyday life. The study concurs with the social-ecological theory which infers that involvement in violence is the result of the com-

plex interplay between individuals and their broader social environment. Gender-based violence in South African schools undermines girls' self-esteem, educational success and long-term health as well as their well-being.

If left unchecked school violence has a potential to reverse the gains made thus far for women's empowerment in South Africa.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following to curb the impact of school violence on learners, particularly on female learners:

- The subject of nonviolence should be incorporated in the school curriculum to sensitize young people about effects of violence and how to manage conflict in a nonviolent way.
- The long-term solution is to address the socio-economic conditions that engender the problems of violence, as many learners come from situations where unemployment, poverty and abuse are the norm.
- The scourge of violence in schools is not just an issue that should be left to the government to deal with alone. A synergistic approach among the stakeholders, including the community, administrators, teachers, parents and students, is necessary to make our schools safe. Otherwise, prevention and punishment will not be effective. Research highlights that like all the problems of today's society, school violence will not go away overnight. It is a concern that will require diligent work from all parties combined. Parents, teachers, police, counselors and communities need to work together with the students, guiding them in the right direction and giving them the necessary tools to become non-violent individuals.
- Increased supervision is needed around the school. Often learners are not supervised at all times and violent incidents take place in class, in the corridors and toilets when the learners are not under supervision.

This study suggests that there is still much to be done in the way of educating male learners about sexual harassment and encouraging them to think about the types of masculinity that are not based on sexual entitlement and violence. The government cannot fight the scourge of vio-

lence in our schools alone; it needs the support of the community at large.

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