Waiting Opportunities: Adolescent girls experiences of gender-based violence at schools

by

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Executive Summary

Violence against adolescent girls in South Africa takes place against a backdrop of pervasive gender violence in society and stems in part from unequal power relations and strong patriarchal values. The impact of such violence is extensive and detrimental, causing damage to adolescent girls' physical and psychological health as well as effecting school attendance and academic achievement. Efforts to address this violence need to be prioritised. This study - conducted with adolescent girls between the ages 13 - 17 - suggests that such efforts are not a priority. Findings from 17 focus group discussions with adolescent girls at nine Gauteng schools suggest that minimal to no intervention efforts are underway at schools or in communities; participants appeared frustrated and despondent at the lack of services available to them.

This lack of services is startling in light of findings from this study which highlights a disturbing prevalence of sexual harassment at school as well as an alarmingly high incidence of physical and sexual violence in the lives of adolescent girls. Although this study did not focus on violence at schools alone, the findings corroborate other studies that assert that schools are unsafe spaces for girls. Participant's experiences suggest that violence is normalised within the school environment and in communities. Inconsistent messages regarding the acceptability and normality of gender-based violence is mimicked

in participant's ambiguous responses to the perpetration of violence against them; on one hand they feel that violence is not acceptable and on the other hand they try and justify the violence by accepting responsibility. There is no clear sense that violence is intolerable and that it should not be a normal part of a relationship.

The absence of intervention efforts for this high-risk group is unacceptable. This study strongly recommends urgent intervention by schools, as well as communities and government, for youth on gender-based violence and related issues such as sexuality, rights and empowerment. Adolescence presents an opportune time for intervention; youth are navigating relationships, making sense of the world and are open to suggestions and new experiences. Not intervening at this point is to miss an ideal opportunity.

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Introduction

Research studies show that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. The effects of such abuse are far reaching, impacting on adolescent girls' mental and physical health as well as on their academic performance. Finding effective ways to prevent such violence is a priority.

This research brief presents findings from an exploratory study conducted with adolescent girls at nine schools in Gauteng. The study sought to understand their experiences in heterosexual interpersonal relationships, their perspectives on gender-based violence and the gender issues they confront at school. Findings suggest a prevalence of sexual harassment and violence at school as well as an alarmingly high rate of violence within adolescent relationships. The study also investigated the availability of interventions on gender-based violence (GBV) at schools and revealed a dearth of such efforts, with

adolescents receiving minimal to no information on gender-based violence. At the schools where this research was conducted, adolescent girls expressed a strong need for interventions.

Literature Review

Violence against women

Globally, gender-based violence is widespread, with an estimated one in five women likely to be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. In South Africa, violence against women is regarded as pervasive and endemic.[1] A study conducted in three South African provinces shows that between 19-28% of women have suffered from physical violence.[2] Violence experienced by adolescent girls in South Africa takes place against this backdrop and stems in part from a violent history, societal attitudes, patriarchal ideologies and unequal power relations.

Violence against adolescent girls

In the hierarchy of gender-based power relations, adolescent girls occupy the lowest level because their opportunities for self-development and autonomy are limited but they don't solicit the same sort of 'social protection' that younger children do. Their subordinate status in society denies them equal access to education, healthcare and employment and places them at greater risk for abuse than their male counterparts and both older and younger females.[3] Research studies show that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Between 1996 and 1998, girls aged 17 and under constituted approximately 40% of reported rapes and attempted rape victims nationally, within South Africa.[4] Further studies conducted in South Africa suggest that 60% of female teenagers are subjected to physical assault from male partners and 28-30% to coerced sexual initiation.[5] For adolescent girls aged 14 – 18, sexual violence was found to be a consistent feature of sexual relationships.[6]

The Human Rights Watch report, "Scared at School" (2001) highlights girls' vulnerability to rape from teachers and classmates as well as in dating relationships. Schools in particular are criticised as perpetuating the insidious cycle of domestic violence.[7] Studies[8] conducted in three Southern African countries suggest that schools are fertile breeding grounds for potentially damaging gendered practices, which remain with pupils into adult life.[9] Girls are trained to accept the battery and assault, while boys, by contrast, receive tacit permission to continue with the violent behaviour because their violence is not condemned or interrupted.[10]

Impact of violence against girls

Studies from developing countries suggest that such violence has far reaching outcomes in the lives of young females. Adolescent interpersonal relationships are antecedents to adult relationships; unhealthy relationship practices and the emergence of gender-based violence in these relationships is likely to signal the beginnings of unhealthy adult heterosexual relationships and may leave adolescents at risk for future episodes of gender violence.[11]

However intimate partner violence amongst adolescents has largely been ignored as insignificant and transient within the literature and by adults in general. Yet, the effects of such violence may be devastating, with girls experiencing early, unwanted pregnancy, high rates of HIV infection, STDs and disruption of their education. Research studies suggest that women who are physically and/or sexually victimised when young are at risk of later revictimisation.[12] Exposure to sexual violence or harassment threatens the young woman's psychological welfare and can result in loss of self-esteem, depression, fear of personal safety, anger and increased risk of suicide.[13] Research findings from developing countries show that females who experience coercion are more likely to experience subsequent incidents of forced sex and are likely to engage in sexual risk taking with multiple partners. They are also at greater risk for poor mental health outcomes, and alcohol and substance abuse.[14] Educational effects of such violence include avoidance of school, lack of engagement in class; difficulty with concentrating, increased isolation, lower academic attainment and possible drop out.[15]

The situation has been exacerbated by the lack of action on the part of government departments, schools and society in general. Vogelman[16] contends that violence against women is so prevalent and tolerated in society that it has come to be perceived as normative and therefore goes largely unchallenged. Other studies[17] concur with this and suggest that schools have not been effective in changing attitudes or teaching students to control aggression; violence remains prevalent because it often goes uncontested. The judicial and legal systems also contribute to the problem by their failure to implement legislature that protects individuals against gender-based violence.

- In developing countries, about 40% of girls drop out within 5 years of starting school. Frequently, the reason is gender-based violence or fear of sexual violence. (Wible, 2004)
- Nearly 50% of all sexual assaults worldwide are against girls 15 years or younger (UNFPA, 2005)
- In a study conducted in Malawi, 39% of girls knew of a teacher having sex with a girl in school (DFID, 2003)
- In a study conducted in KwaZulu Natal, more than one third of girls aged 15-19 reported that they had lost their virginity through force, coercion or trickery (UNAIDS, 2004)
- Violence kills and disables as many women between the ages 5 – 44 as cancer does. (UNFPA, 2005)

Study Focus and Methodology

Focus of the study

This study forms part of a larger project aimed at strengthening school-based responses to violence against adolescent girls. In the first phase of this project, a roundtable discussion was convened at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in March 2006, bringing together key stakeholders in the gender and youth sectors to discuss current research, interventions, and responses to violence against adolescent girls. (See Box below for a summary of the discussion.)

This study fell within the second phase of the project and sought to elicit information from adolescent girls themselves on gender-based violence, their experiences in relationships, their constructions of gender violence and their thoughts on interventions.

In the third and final phase of this project, information from the roundtable discussion with stakeholders as well as the findings from the focus group discussions were synthesised with the aim of developing a resource booklet on good practices in intervening on gender-based violence at schools. (See Vienings, 2006)

In focusing solely on adolescent girls' experiences of gender-based violence the study does not seek to suggest that adolescent boys do not experience gender-based violence. However the pervasiveness and severity of violence against women in South African society as well as the particular vulnerability of young women to abuse and HIV, makes this a high-risk group. Recommendations made, however, speak to both young men and young women.

A two-day 'thinking studio' was held in March 2006 at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and was attended by 17 participants. Participants included researchers, community activists, and government representatives. During the workshop, the participants highlighted the following challenges and recommendations.

Key challenges and recommendations raised in a two day roundtable discussion

- Sexual harassment and other forms of GBV are extremely common in schools;
- Strong prevailing ideology that asserts men and boys' rights over women's bodies;
- Schools ignore violence that is being perpetrated, educators may be overworked and life skills educators do not take issues of GBV seriously enough;
- Little evidence of initiatives undertaken by the Department of Education; and
- There is a prevailing belief that violence is found outside of schools rather than within schools.

What needs to be done:

- Department of Education (DoE) needs to acknowledge gravity of situation;
- GBV issues need to be raised at teacher training level;
- NGOs need to work with and through DoE in order to ensure sustainability of programmes;
- Schools need to take up issue of GBV;
- Holistic approach that bring together all stakeholders when developing policies; school, community, learners, DoE;
- Assertiveness training for girls;
- Targeting younger learners; and
- Including both male and female learners in intervention efforts.

Methodology

Methods used

This study was explorative in nature and adopted a qualitative approach. Focus groups were used to gather data.

Focus groups were employed as a medium of data collection. This medium relies on the assumption that attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum, instead individuals rely on other people's opinions and experiences to inform and add to their own opinions.[18] Situating these discussions at schools was useful as it provided an opportunity to understand the participants in a natural rather than artificial setting and allowed facilitators an additional opportunity to explore unanticipated issues when they arose.[19]

A total of seventeen focus group discussions were held across nine schools. Trained facilitators conducted the discussions.

Data from these focus groups was collated and analysed using content analysis. In this methodology, emerging themes from each of the groups were organised into categories and interpreted. Differences in opinions as well as contradictions were also noted and reported on.

Prior to entering the school, consent was obtained from the school principal. During the groups, privacy and confidentiality was ensured and girls had an opportunity to withdraw if they did not feel comfortable. Girls were provided with an opportunity to debrief with the facilitators after the group if they required further assistance or information.

Sample

To ensure that a diverse sample of girls was interviewed, schools were selected from peri-urban, urban and township areas. Selection was further stratified to ensure representativity across racial and socio-economic groupings. Schools fitting the above criteria were then randomly selected using the Gauteng Department of Education's list of registered schools.

A total of 140 girls participated. Girls from grades eight, ten and eleven were invited to participate. Their ages ranged between 13 and 17. This age group was specifically chosen as it represents different stages in the developmental cycle. The younger group are entering adolescence and high school and the older group are mid-way through both adolescence and high school. The study relied on the assumption that, given these developmental differences, the girls' experiences of relationships would be slightly different.

To supplement the transcribed information and adequately capture the dynamics of the groups, a focus group discussion was also held with the facilitators. Process observations from this discussion were fed into the findings. In addition, three follow-up focus groups were held with participants from the original sample (i.e. girls who had been part of the first round of focus groups). In these discussions, the key findings were explored and tested and the resource manual (Vienings, 2006) 'piloted'.

Limitations

The study is explorative in nature and although attempts were made to include a representative sample of schools, findings cannot be generalised. In saying this however it should be noted that findings from this study are consistent with other such studies conducted; this study therefore contributes to the body of literature on violence against adolescent girls and highlights areas for intervention.

Findings

In the following sections, findings from the 17 focus groups conducted will be presented. Findings have been clustered according to dominant themes and they centre broadly on issues of gender relations at school, constructions of relationships, violence in relationships and responses to such violence.

Gender at schools

Participants were asked about the manner in which boys and girls in school interact on a daily basis and what happens if girls do something that boys don't like. Findings are consistent with other studies[20] conducted and suggest a prevalence of multiple forms of gender violence. For example, participants across the nine schools highlighted the disturbing prevalence of sexual harassment, in various forms, including unwanted touching, name calling and labelling, threatening behaviour and inappropriate sexual innuendos.

Girls at one school reported that they were treated as sexual objects. They were subjected to unsolicited touching on their breasts or behinds.

> 'Sex talk, they treat us like sex objects' (Gr 8, F).
>
> 'I don't like it when they grab your bum' (Gr11, F).

Girls were also subjected to degrading language and were often called 'bitches' if they ignored boys. Furthermore, girls who had angered boys were often made the butt of humiliating, often untrue, stories that circulated amongst the boys.

> 'And they would say you are bitches and this and that' (Gr 10/11, L).
>
> 'Breasts, and they speak about your…. vagina…. your cake, …your poes…' (Gr 10/11, L).
>
> 'They use foul language and say 'gee my naai'' (Gr 8, W).

While many of the participants stated that boys use threats to deter girls' actions, it appeared as though boys' actions were not limited to verbal threats and could escalate to physical or even sexual violence if they do not comply with boys.

> 'If he wants to have sex with her and she refuses that is when he will rape her' (Gr 8, R).

'Sometimes the guy would beat you just to impress his friends' (Gr 8, D).

'Like when me and another boy are talking, and he wants sexual intercourse and when I refuse…..he wants to hit you' (Gr 8, L).

Researchers contend that boys use the threat of violence to scare girls into submission; it is used as a mode of control over girls, over their bodies, their dress, their movements and their social activities. Girls' lives are often limited by the threat of violence.[21]

The power that boys exerted over girls was not limited to their decisions to be in a relationship but appeared to extend, as the above statement states, to a number of other facets of the girls' lives. In this study male learners did not appear to only control female learners' decisions to be in a relationship but they also appeared to control girls' choices at school, their academic performance as well as freedom of movement.

'If you are in a bad relationship if you maybe pass…and your boyfriend fails he won't encourage you to pass.' (Gr 8, C)

Girls at one school maintained that groups of boys loitered around the girl's bathroom and if girls wanted to use the bathroom, they were humiliated. As a result girls did not use the bathroom.

'…They will stand near the toilets…they (boys) will laugh at you. Tell you stink…even if have to go to the toilet you don't go because you don't want to be humiliated…' (Gr 8, W).

Violence experienced by girls did not appear to be limited to schools with fewer resources; instead it appears to be prevalent in all the schools visited. Girls from different social, religious, and economic backgrounds participated in the study and the types of violence experienced appeared to be similar across the settings. It was noticeable however that the manner in which the girls engaged with the subject was to some extent determined by the manner in which gender violence was generally dealt with in the community from which they came, for example, girls coming from communities known for high levels of GBV, spoke about the topic in a more matter of fact, down to earth way than those coming from communities where GBV is kept shrouded in secrecy.

Discussions indicate that girls experienced a sense of helplessness and did not feel like they had any control or autonomy at school; boys dictated much of their behaviour and their movement. Boy's use of threats of violence, as well as actual violence, mimics adult male use of such tactics and appears to be a way to enforce control and force girls into submission. Responses from participants suggest at once both a sense of resignation at their lack of autonomy as well as anger at the status afforded to, or demanded by, boys.

Impact of GBV at school

Research studies suggest that the impact of gender violence at school has far reaching consequences for girls; it affects the girls' decision to stay in school, it affects her concentration and her sense of self. Girls in this study were asked how they feel in the face

of this harassment, intimidation and violence; their responses included use of words such as *'exploited', 'worthless', 'alone', 'scared, 'sick', 'powerless'* and *'guilty'*. These responses highlight the traumatising effect of such violence and underscore the sense of helplessness, fear and self blame that many women experience in abusive relationships.

Sexual harassment and violence in schools appear to mirror violence in South African society and highlight the prevalence of male hegemony. Female learners are subjected to degrading comments, unwanted touching, threats of violence as well as actual violence. Boys appear to use violence or its threat to control girls' movements and activities and in this way, to scare girls into submission. These varied forms of gender violence perpetrated against them at school appear to have a negative effect on their sense of self worth and appear to leave them fearful and feeling powerless.

Constructions of intimate relationships

Participants were asked what the least and most important things were in a relationship. A romantic narrative featured strongly in discussions of desired qualities in relationships, with participants in all groups stressing the value of love, respect, honour and commitment. It was noticeable that for the participants sex did not feature as a primary factor in an ideal romantic relationship. This finding differs to that found in studies[22] conducted with young men where constructions of relationships inevitably centred on sex.

Participants were further asked to describe characteristics of good and bad relationships and to provide examples of such relationships. They were then asked to identify factors that were different across these types of relationships. Dominant themes from this discussion operated at the opposite end of the romantic narrative and drew on themes centred on violence and coercion. In the majority of groups, participants immediately constructed relationships as 'good' in the absence of violence and almost all relationships that were considered 'bad' were defined as such because of the presence of violence. The following are examples of a 'good relationship':

> 'He doesn't hit you' (Gr 10, R).
>
> 'He doesn't force you to have sex' (Gr 8,W).

And of a 'bad relationship':

> 'If he disrespects you and is always drunk and beats you that is a bad relationship' (Gr 8, R).
>
> 'I think a bad relationship is when you beat your partner and leave them with a black eye' (Gr 8, F).
>
> 'The bad relationship makes you feel scared all the time, and some bad relationships do go on for a long time because we are to scared to end it…you think the person will change on the way' (Gr 10, W).

This discourse on relationships is useful in that it highlights the contradiction between the

romantic and the real. For the girls, constructions of relationships depict the fantasy of what a relationship could be like but subsequently, they highlighted the lived reality of many of the participants, i.e. relationships where violence is the norm.

Participants in all groups were able to identify relationships that were not good and inevitably all of the examples appeared to involve violence. In their frank description of the violence witnessed and/or experienced in relationships, violence within relationships appeared to be normalised. This very normalisation of violence highlights the pervasiveness of violence in South African society and speaks to the lack of alternate models for young women and young men. It highlights the responsibility of all in society to rewrite the current culture and create a different dialogue on relationships.

Violence in intimate relationships

Researchers posit that abusive behaviour is learnt in adolescent relationships and experiences of abuse in these relationships often serve as indicators for future abuse. This presents a grim picture given the evidence of abuse prevalent in the lives of many of the young women participating in this study. Anecdotal accounts and estimates from participants suggest higher incidences of violence than those found in adult groups. In two schools, participants stated that at least 80% of girls were involved in abusive relationships.

> 'I will say 8 out of 10 have been in abusive relationships' (Gr 8, F).
>
> 'At least 80% of girls in our school are in violent relationships' (Gr 11, W).
>
> 'Most of the girls are trying to hide the fact that they are in abusive relationships, because if you say anything you will just get hit again' (Gr 11, W).

In every group participants were able to identify a relationship that was abusive; examples of people in abusive relationships ranged from family members, to friends at school and in some cases individuals themselves. A range of behaviours was identified as abusive, suggesting a broad understanding of, and disturbing exposure to, gender-based violence. This familiarity with violence again highlights the insidiousness of violence in South African society and the extent to which it is normalised. Although the range of abusive behaviours discussed varied, in almost all accounts, the women were physically beaten. Participants provided the following examples of violence witnessed:

> 'One day my father got his gun, and my mother was doing washing, he had a gun and he put it by her head, he said, 'it has a bullet in it and if you don't listen, I will shoot you'. So then I cried. (Gr 8, L)
>
> 'There is a couple here at school, the guy always beats his girlfriend and this girl refuses to tell the teachers' (Gr 8, R).
>
> 'My cousin was in a relationship; every time she said something she would get a hiding for nothing, for no reason, he used to drink and come home and fight with her, but she eventually got out of the relationship' (Gr 10/11, L).

Of consequence is some of the participants' unwillingness to label certain acts as 'violence'. Participants from one school spoke of high levels of sexual coercion and pressurised sex however, they did not label these acts as rape or sexual violence. The difficulty in naming this violence is problematic as it is only with the process of naming that reality can be constructed, meaning given and the problem recognised and eradicated.[23]

Participants from one group also spoke of the difficulties they experienced in asserting their rights to condom use; this finding is consistent with other studies conducted with youth as well as adult populations, in which women cannot safely negotiate use of condoms.[24] Once again, this finding is disturbing given the particular vulnerability of young women to HIV infection.

The pervasiveness of violence in the lives of these participants while alarming adequately reflects the pervasiveness and normalisation of violence in our communities. The girls' inability to negotiate condom use and their experiences of sexual coercion suggest an increased vulnerability to HIV/Aids.

Making sense of violence

In engaging with the issue of violence in relationships, confusion was evident in the manner in which the participants oscillated between accepting and denying responsibility for the violence. At every juncture participants' responses indicated that this was not a simple issue and there was no evidence of a resounding 'no' against violence. Experience and exposure to violence complicated participant's innate sense that they should not accept violent behaviour.

Assigning fault

In the majority of groups, participants actively engaged with the subject of violence and debated and challenged one another on the issue of violence, questioning women's behaviour and, in some instances, trying to explain/justify the violence. These debates can be seen as a way of making sense of the violence. The manner in which girls assigned responsibility allowed them to condone, condemn or accept the violence. Participants' responses centred on commonly heard explanations of *'maybe she deserved it'* and at times, appeared to buy into the patriarchal notion of men's rights over women, which serve to condone violence and excuse men's behaviour. Such responses were however not consistently endorsed, with some participants alternatively suggesting that these explanations were forced onto them by boys as a way for them (the boys) to deny responsibility.

Explaining the violence

The ambiguity with which girls attempted to explain the presence of violence in a relationship was evident in their constant attempts to justify the violence and their oscillation between taking responsibility for the violence and then denying fault. Discussions indicated that many girls normalise the abusive behaviour or construct it as a reflection of love or as a response to women's behaviour while others try and hide it. Again, however there is evidence that suggests that for some of the participants, violence is not

acceptable.

> 'The girls love the boy so much, they will not leave' (Gr 11, W).
>
> 'Most of my friends talk about their abusive partners and they don't realise how serious it is they just talk about it as if it is a normal thing to happen in any relationship. I think they are ignorant.' (Gr 8, F).
>
> 'Lots of girls...Sort of brag that her man hit…happens normally on a Monday after the weekend' (Gr 11, W).

Staying or leaving

Decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships once again highlighted participants' ambivalent feelings regarding gender-based violence. Across all groups, participants asserted that if they were in an abusive situation, then they would leave or retaliate in some way either through legal means or through the perpetration of violence themselves.

> 'They allow the boys to hit them, we have to stop it and let the boys know we will not allow it anymore' (Gr 11, W).
>
> 'I was once in a relationship, it was fine till it got abusive, I gave him a blue eye and walked away' (Gr 8, W).

Their assertiveness was moderated and to some extent contradicted with their actual experiences of violent relationships. So while many participants were saying *'I would leave'* they were also saying.

> 'The ladies they do nothing, they stay and hope things will get better' (Gr 11, W).

Experience and/or exposure had also taught them that abusive partners don't make leaving easy and help is not always readily available. Added to this was their optimistic sense that through love and communication, violence would cease, as well as a sense that, as a woman, one had to persevere and try and make the relationship work.

> 'If he always beats you and when you tell him you are going to the police station he threatens you with a gun'(Gr 8, R).
>
> 'She won't say anything because she is afraid that if she talks he might kill her, maybe he threatened her' (Gr 8, R).
>
> 'If it happens to me, I will give my boyfriend another chance because I love him' (Gr 10, W).

The normalisation of violence within society was adequately reflected in the majority's perception that the only way to stop the violence perpetrated by young men is to be violent against them. Essentially for many the only recourse against violence was/is violence, there

was little sense that violence is not inevitable and that other means of conflict resolution are possible.

Many contradictions are apparent in adolescents girls attempts at making sense of violence in relationships; they tend to oscillate between feeling powerful and assertive and suggesting that they will not condone violence to accepting the violence as deserved punishment and buying into hegemonic narratives that suggest violence is a reflection of love and as a result of women's behaviour.

This very grappling suggests that adolescence is an opportune time to intervene, before incorrect, blaming attitudes and beliefs are entrenched. Adolescent girls' sense of confusion is palpable, urgent action is required to inform and educate this group.

Voices unheard

Responses from participants reflect the sense of hopelessness, fear, resignation and finality of being in an abusive situation. Participants articulated their sense of being left alone to address the violence. Girls in a minority of groups knew what resources were available to them (resources such as the protection order); however this knowledge was tainted with the knowledge that nothing will get done if the matter is reported.

> 'The thing is we know what to do if you are in an abusive relationship, we know that you can go to the police but we don't because we are scared of what he might do. You feel threatened by every move he makes' (Gr 11, F).
>
> 'You won't seek help and you won't get out because it is not easy' (Gr 8, F).

Across the groups, facilitators noticed the slight variations between the Grade 8 participants and their Grade 10/11 counterparts. The younger learners appeared more optimistic and somewhat more assertive than the older participants, who appeared to be more cynical and less sure of their rights. This difference is important and highlights the need for a range of interventions suited to developmental needs, as well as experiences, rather than one homogenous intervention.

Participants' plea for help and their sense of frustration at not being assisted is disturbing as it echoes the same sentiments expressed by female participants in a study conducted more than 6 years ago (CIET 1999-2000). Young women in that study asked for fora to discuss sexual violence, requested participatory approaches to better engage with this issue and insisted on the need for practical information. Six years have passed and the plea remains the same. Are the young girls correct in their perception that they are not being heard? How do we convince young women to assert their rights and respect their bodies when no one else seems to respects their rights or hear their voices?

Responses indicate a growing sense of despair and a sense of finality; experience has taught many that violence is to be endured. The noticeable difference between younger and older girls suggest that opportunities for interventions are being missed and the effects are detrimental; within the two years between Grades 8 and 10/11, experiences are showing

girls that their lives are not that worthwhile and their sense of self is being diminished.

School responses to violence

It was alarming to note that despite the known vulnerability if adolescent girls and the prevalence of violence against women in South Africa no interventions were underway in any of the schools that participated. The young women interviewed indicated that they had received minimal and, in most instances, no input on gender- based violence. The most that some had had, was one discussion on the topic during a life skills lesson.

Participants further suggested that within the school not much is done to recognise the abuse they are subjected to.

> 'If a guy looks under a girls skirt he should be immediately suspended instead of asking him clean the toilets and even inform his parents about his behaviour at school' (Gr 8, F).
>
> 'Most of the teachers, when a boy does something wrong, they know the parents, so they just leave the boy' (Gr10/11, L).

Participants' responses indicated that, for many, the school was not a safe place. They were harassed when they went to the toilet and when they stood in the tuck line; at these sites they were exposed to unsolicited touching and abusive language, and teachers did not appear to take such harassment seriously. This lack of action on the part of school officials once gain left girls feeling that their experiences were being discounted. These findings are consistent with findings in the literature that suggests that often schools are unsafe places; girl's toilets, in particular, are seen as sites of potential hazard.

Participants also appeared to distrust teachers and felt that there would be no confidentiality if they disclosed abuse in their relationships. As a consequence, many requested that outside counsellors be invited to speak to participants or be available to counsel victims.

Schools are regarded as unsafe places and school responses to abuse are seen as unsatisfactory. No mechanisms are in place to protect or educate girls on gender- based violence. If anything, this issue is treated flippantly and dismissed. Schools as sites that house captive adolescents on a daily basis need to be at the forefront in promoting equal rights, empowering young women and teaching both young women and young men about the non-acceptability of violence.

Community responses to violence

It was clear from all discussions that the young women did not feel that violence was taken seriously enough by the community. Findings from discussions at one school suggest that girls perceive that they are subjected to more abuse and disrespect from men (within and beyond the school environment) because the community condones such behaviour.

> 'You know our community is the problem, this is the example we get from

> people in our community, they treat girls and wives bad, and the young men think this is the way it should be' (Gr 11, W).

Girls in another school maintained that community-based organisations as well as the police do not take their reports of violence seriously. Girls' responses once again pointed to a sense of frustration and despondency at not being heard and not being helped.

The influence of the community context is clearly evidenced in the manner in which adolescents engaged with and constructed violence in relationships. In communities where violence was openly witnessed, perpetrated and spoken about, discussions about violence appeared to come freely, with participants stating that violence was a commonplace occurrence. Participants from a different school, situated within a different social setting did not engage as easily with the topic and responses indicated that within the community itself it was not a subject that was easily discussed. Despite these different ways of approaching the issue, it was apparent that gender-based violence occurred in both of these apparently different contexts and in both contexts it was not being addressed.

Violence against women appears to be normalised in communities. This normalisation appears to be a source of confusion for young women:, on one hand they denounce the violence perpetrated against them and on the other, examples show them that it is something that cannot be challenged; this forces them to construct violence in such a way that it is acceptable. Information on the non-acceptability of violence against women needs to be fed to community leaders, faith organisations and parents so that they can be adequate role models to the youth.

Government responses to violence

Additionally, findings highlight the girls' cynicism with the criminal judicial system, with participants from at least three schools asserting that reporting violence often resulted in nought. Police officials did not take the matter seriously and often attributed blame/responsibility for the abuse to the woman reporting the crime.

> 'The police have to change. They must treat us better, we are not the criminals but the victims' (Gr 11, W).

Responses indicate that when reporting incidents of violence to police, the violence was either glossed over as a trivial incident between children, or participants were reprimanded for being in relationships at such a young age and were told to take the matter to their parents. This finding is consistent with findings from research conducted with adult populations in South Africa. Victims of violence who seek help from the state often encounter unsympathetic or hostile treatment from the police, court clerks and prosecutors. Complaints to the police are often not taken seriously and women are left to address the abuser themselves. Police often appear to misunderstand the magnitude of the problem and appear to favour conciliatory approaches over direct intervention.[25]

Government responses, like school and community responses, were perceived as inadequate. Participants expressed disdain at the manner in which they were treated and

articulated a need not be re-victimised by police officials. Police and other state agencies that do not treat the matter of violence against women with the gravity it requires again send messages as to the inevitability of being violated and reinforce women's belief that violence is normal and to be accepted. It is the responsibility of these people in positions of authority to consistently reinforce that gender-based violence is not acceptable. They need to implement existing legislature and be seen to actively denounce violence.

Interventions – what has been done and what is needed

As indicated, participants' responses suggest that they had received little to no information on gender-based violence either from the community or from schools. Their sources of information appeared to be primarily via television and other media, such as billboards or magazines. Television programmes, whether lifestyle, soaps, or educational appeared to have had the most impact.

When asked what type of interventions they would like, participants in all groups mentioned the need for interactive, engaging interventions, such as dramas, plays or information by people with personal experiences. Responses indicated that learners wanted more frank, open discussion regarding the subject. Participants further highlighted the need to involve both male and female learners in intervention efforts, with girls suggesting that boys be given information as well.

Participants suggested that schools have counsellors that pupils can access when necessary. Furthermore, there appeared to be a slight derision at the lack of involvement of school personnel in general and a sense that the school should do more to protect female learners.

The role of the media, as an influential source of information, is clear from participants' responses. Information on gender-based violence appeared to come primarily from this source and appeared to have the most impact. Effectively utilising this medium therefore appears to be a prudent strategy for disseminating information on gender-based violence, women's rights and their recourse from violence. Responses further indicated a need for interactive participatory approaches that included both sexes. The responsibility of the school was once again highlighted as participants called for additional resources in the form of independent counsellors.

Handy Resources

Research studies	**Current Interventions** **Nisaa Date Rape Campaign –** **objectives of the campaign are to:**
• Exploring school girls' experiences of violence – Abrahams, N. • UNISA Safe Schools Project – a Review of Schools Based Interventions • CSVR Itsoseng-Nageng	• Create a greater awareness of date rape; • Circulate comprehensive information on date rape; • Provide verbal information to learners; and • Encourage learners to be participants in their own

Project (see Vienings, 2006) • CIET – Youth Survey on Sexual Violence and HIV/AIDS	empowerment. (http://www.nisaa.org.za) **Girlsnet: information and Communication Technologies for Girl's Development** Girlsnet focuses on communication tools and seeks to develop girls as content developers and content partners. The project is informed by the belief that girls need to be able to access information that is relevant to their development; they need an enabling environment, and they need to hear their own voices. The target group is girls aged 12-18. (http://www.womensnet.org.za/Girlsnet)

Discussion

Findings from this study mirror findings from other studies conducted in South Africa; it highlights a prevalence of gender-based violence and male hegemony in relationships. Young women appear to be at risk of being physically and sexually victimised both within the school as well as outside of school. While this study did not focus solely on violence perpetrated at school, it was clear that for the young women involved, school is not seen as a safe place. Instead it appears to be a primary site for sexual harassment. Responses to gender-based violence from the school and outside of the school appear to be non-existent and inadequate.

The words and perceptions of the young women included in this study clearly suggest that they were aware of the power differentials in their relationships. However, challenging the status quo is not simple, as many alternatives do not exist. Ambivalent feelings regarding decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships were created by a number of factors, including a prevalence of community violence, normalisation of the violence, peer pressure, desire to be in a relationships, love, poor self esteem and the lack of a clear, strong message that violence is unacceptable, as well as a tacit acceptance of violence by communities and schools.

The manner in which adolescents perceive their own value and potential is strongly influenced by family, friends, community, school and media. If these influences suggest that violence is normal and acceptable and ignore the violence perpetrated against girls, the message being delivered is clear; *you are not valuable/violence is deserved*.

Data indicates a need to address male self-control and the normalisation of violence by providing adolescents with alternative frameworks. Alternate constructions and narratives of relationships need to be created. There is an urgent need to empower young women, to instil a strong sense of self as well as individual rights. Given the participants lack of

certainty about ending abusive relationships, a need clearly exists to empower young women and create an awareness of their rights; this can be done through participatory workshops that not only cover GBV but also aspects of self-esteem. There is a need to demystify relationships and sex and provide consistent messages that denounce violence. Schools in particular need to be at the forefront of such interventions. Parents and community members can provide supportive guidance as adolescents navigate the new challenges in their lives.

Recommendations

Findings from this study (corroborated by other studies[26]) suggest that a holistic approach is needed to tackle violence against adolescent girls; schools, civil society, parents, young people and the state need to act in a coordinated manner and send out the same message, i.e. that violence is not acceptable.

Schools in particular have a role to play in protecting girls' rights to education in an environment free from harassment and intimidation. At schools, information on the unacceptability of violence can be disseminated and programmes implemented that foster gender-aware youth.

Although schools present an opportune space for intervention, they are but one of many intervention sites. Parents and society in general need to denounce violence. Parents need to teach youth through behaviour and action that gender-based violence is not an option and should adopt a more proactive stance in schools and in their children's lives.

At a micro level, the Department of Education and other government departments need to consistently reinforce that violence and aggression have no part in our society. This can be done by stricter implementation of existing legislature and monitoring of state officials.

Based on the findings as well as a review of the literature and most importantly taking heed of the violence perpetrated against girls and the lack of support afforded to girls, the following broad recommendations are suggested.

Schools

- Schools should adopt a zero-tolerance stance for all types of violence, including gender-based violence;
- Acknowledge the problem;
- Recognise the vulnerability of youth - both boys and girls at school;
- Create systems that monitor the magnitude of the problem;
- Provide opportunities for learners to engage on the subject of GBV;
- Create awareness of the problem amongst learners, teachers and community;
- Provide information to learners, teachers and parents on identifying violence as well as information on possible remedies and organisations that offer help;
- Identify hot spots where girls are most vulnerable and put mechanisms in place to protect girls at these sites; for example, teachers or community members could monitor these sites;
- Create a code of conduct that addresses issues of GBV and clear guidelines to deal

with offenders;
- Develop a safety plan for girls in the event of abuse being reported;
- Ensure adherence to policies and procedures that exist;
- Provide counselling and support services;
- Offer awareness programmes that target both boys and girls and that cover issues of GBV as well as conflict management, assertiveness training, self respect, self-esteem and rights;
- Clear consistent messages to boys that violence and aggression are not acceptable;
- Network with organisations, including other schools, to brainstorm creative preventative strategies; and
- Involve community-policing forums.

Parents and community

- Greater parental and community involvement in school as well as in the lives of young people; and
- Send consistent messages that violence is not be tolerated.

Government

- Greater involvement of the Department of Education in schools regarding gender-based violence;
- Greater enforcement of school policies by the Department of Education;
- Stricter penalties (and their consistent application) for both teachers and learners who perpetrate violence;
- Ensure adequate resources and support for legislature;
- Ensure implementation of legislation; and
- Monitor police responses to GBV.

Notes:

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