

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **The perceptions that grade twelve learners have about sexual violence against girls in the school context**

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Accepted 28 July, 2010

**There has been increasing levels of sexual violence against girls in South African schools. Girls continue to face obstacles to their learning even though some progress has been made in terms of gender equality in education. The opportunities that girls have to learn should in no way be compromised by their gender. Sexual violence leads to dropping out, interruption of studies, unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS. Attitudes towards females feed in to the notion that coercive sex is not a violent act. Although this study focuses on the girls and recognized that boys are also being sexually assaulted.**

**Key words:** Attitude, girls, learners, school and sexual violence.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This research study shows that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual 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 three schools in Cape Town, South Africa (Belhar Secondary School, Chris Hani Secondary School and Gardens Commercial High School) (Hallman, 2004; Abrahams, 2003; Hallman and Monica, 2004). The study sought to understand Grade 12 learner's perceptions about sexual violence against girls in the school context. 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 sexual violence at schools and revealed a dearth of such efforts, with adolescents receiving minimal to no information on sexual violence. At the schools where this research was conducted, adolescent girls expressed a strong need for interventions from the Government, community and school officials.

## **METHODOLOGY**

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 (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). 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 (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). A total of three focus group discussions were held across three schools. Trained facilitators conducted the discussions. Data from these focus groups was collated and analyzed using content analysis. In this methodology, emerging themes from each of the groups were organized 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 (Belhar Secondary School), urban (Gardens Commercial High School) and township area (Chris Hani Secondary School). Selection was further stratified to ensure representativity across racial and socio-economic groupings. Schools fitting the above criteria were then randomly selected using the Western Cape Department of Education's list of registered schools. A total of 90 girls participated. Girls from grades eight,

nine, ten, eleven and twelve were invited to participate. Their ages ranged between 13 and 18. This age group was specifically chosen as it represents different stages in the developmental cycle. The younger group is 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, three focus groups discussion were held with the facilitators. Process observations from this discussion were fed into the findings. In addition, all three focus groups were held with participants from the original sample (that is 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'.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Globally, violence against women 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 (Vogelman and Eagle, 1991). A study conducted in three South African provinces shows that between 19 to 28% of women have suffered from physical violence (UNAIDS, 2004). 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.

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 do not 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 (UNFPA, 2005).

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 (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Further studies conducted in South Africa suggest that 60% of female teenagers are subjected to physical assault from male partners and 28 to 30% to coerced sexual initiation (Maforah et al., 1998). For adolescent girls aged 14–18, sexual violence was found to be a consistent feature of sexual relationships (Wood and Jewkes, 1998).

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 criticized as perpetuating the insidious cycle of domestic violence (Mirsky, 2003). Studies (Leach et al., 2003) 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. Girls are trained to accept the assault, while boys, by contrast, receive tacit permission to continue with the violent behavior because their violence is not condemned or interrupted.

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 violence against girls in the relationships is likely to signal the beginnings of unhealthy adult heterosexual relationships and may leave adolescents at risk for future episodes of sexual violence (Swart, 2002).

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 victimized when young are at risk of later re-victimisation (Mirsky, 2003). 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 (Mirsky, 2003). 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 (Population Council, 2004). 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 (Mirsky, 2003). The situation has been exacerbated by the lack of action on the part of government departments, schools and society in general. Vogelmann (1991) 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 (Human Rights Watch, 2001) 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 sexual violence.

1. 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)
2. Nearly 50% of all sexual assaults worldwide are against girls 15 years or younger (UNFPA, 2005)
3. In a study conducted in Malawi, 39% of girls knew of a

teacher having sex with a girl in school (DFID, 2003)

4. 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).

5. Violence kills and disables as many women between the ages 5– 44 as cancer (UNFPA, 2005).

Research study (Arriaga and Foshee, 2004) suggests 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 traumatizing 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.

Researchers (Ferguson and Mullen, 1999; Mather, 2004) posit that abusive behavior 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, one of the focus group discussion member stated that at least 80% of girls were involved in abusive relationships.

*'8 out of 10 have been in abusive relationships' (Grade 11).*

*'At least 80% of girls in our school are in violent relationships' (Grade 12).*

*'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' (Grade 12).*

In every school, focus group discussion members 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, sexual violence. This familiarity with violence again highlights the insidiousness of violence in South African society and the extent to which it is normalized. 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. (Grade 12).*

*'There is a couple here at school, the guy always beats his girlfriend and this girl refuses to tell the teachers' (Grade 11).*

*Of consequence is some of the focus group discussion members' unwillingness to label certain acts as 'violence'.*

Participants from one school spoke of high levels of sexual coercion and pressurized 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 recognized and eradicated (Tang et al., 1999).

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 (Population Council, 2004).

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 normalization 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.

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 behavior.

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 behavior 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, condemn or accept the violence. Participants' responses

centered 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 condemn violence and excuse men's behavior. 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.

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 normalize 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' (Grade 11).*

*'Most of my friends talk about their abusive partners and they do not realize 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.'* (Grade 8).

*'Lots of girls...Sort of brag that her man hit...happens normally on a Monday after the weekend' (Grade 11).*

Decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships once again highlighted participants' ambivalent feelings regarding sexual harassment and 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' (Grade 12).*

*'I was once in a relationship, it was fine till it got abusive. I gave him a blue eye and walked away' (Grade 12).*

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

*'The ladies do nothing; they stay and hope things will get better' (Grade 12).*

Experience and/or exposure had also taught them that abusive partners do not 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'(Grade 8).*

*'She would not say anything because she is afraid that if she talks he might kill her, maybe he threatened her' (Grade 8).*

*'If it happens to me, I will give my boyfriend another chance because I love him' (Grade 10).*

The normalization 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 condemn 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 behavior.

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.

Responses from interviewees reflect the sense of hopelessness, fear, resignation and finality of being in an abusive situation. Interviewees 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 do not because we are scared of what he might do. You feel threatened by every move he makes' (Grade 10).*

*'You would not seek help and you would not get out because it is not easy' (Grade 11).*

Across the groups, facilitators noticed the slight variations between the Grade 10/11 interviewees and their Grade 12 counterparts. The younger learners appeared more optimistic and somewhat more assertive than the older interviewees, 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.

Responses from the school that learners participated to the interviews concerning sexual violence against learners 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 three years between Grades 9 and 11/12, experiences are showing girls that their lives are not that worthwhile and their sense of self is being diminished.

Additionally, findings highlight the girls' cynicism with the criminal judicial system, with participants from all three schools asserting that reporting violence often resulted in naught. 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' (Grade 11).*

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 favor conciliatory approaches over direct intervention (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

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 victimized 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 sexual violence is not acceptable. They need to implement existing legislature and be seen to actively denounce violence.

As indicated, interviewees' responses suggest that they had received little to no information on sexual 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.

Interviewees suggested that schools have counselors 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 interviewees' responses. Information on sexual violence appeared to come primarily from this source and appeared to have the most impact. Effectively utilizing this medium therefore appears to be a prudent strategy for disseminating information on sexual 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 counselors.

## Conclusion

Findings from this study mirror findings from other studies conducted in South Africa (Chisholm, 2004; Chisholm and September, 2005; Higrón-Smith and Brookes, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2006); it highlights a prevalence of women violence and male hegemony in relationships. Young women appear to be at risk of being physically and sexually victimized 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 violence.

Responses to sexual 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, normalization 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 normalization 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 still have 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 sexual violence 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.

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