SCHOOL-BASED GENDER-RELATED VIOLENCE IN NAMIBIA: CAUSES AND MANIFESTATIONS

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ABSTRACT
Measuring the prevalence of violence and/or bullying in schools in Namibia has become a recent concern, with little available data. The purpose of the article is to uncover the causes and manifestations of gender-based violence in Namibian schools. This study employed a mixed methodology that included in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and quantitative methods of data collection such as a self-administered questionnaire targeting learners and educators. The evidence emerging from this study indicates high levels of violence and/or bullying in schools and that this violence and/or bullying is frequent, takes specific forms, and targets particular groups of learners, such as girls and those who are perceived as different in terms of their gender. It is hoped that findings will assist relevant ministries and others in the education sector in engaging further with the issue of violence and/or bullying in school and in providing support to those learners who are targeted.

Keywords: school-related gender-based violence, bullying, masculinity, silence, normativity

INTRODUCTION
Many millions of children and young people in the world are exposed to violence in and around educational settings, which undermines their rights – including the right to quality education in a safe environment – and efforts to achieve education for all children and young people. Victims of school-related gender-based violence
experience decreased self-esteem, unsure and unsafe feelings in school, avoidance of school, and eventually school drop-out (Peguero and Popp 2012). Violence in schools violates the human right to education and presents a public health problem (Zain 2012). It also undermines the capacity of the education sector to train future citizens who will respect one another regardless of differences (Department of Education 2001; Leach 2006). Evidence reveals that many children and young people who are perceived as not conforming to existing gender norms and stereotypes are often victims of violence in school (Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher and Astbury 2003; DePalma and Jennett 2010; LaFont 2010; McCormack and Gleeson 2010; Msibi 2012). They include young people who identify as or are perceived as different in terms of the gender norms. One of the most pressing concerns in Namibia is the increasing reports of gender-based violence towards women and children in Namibia in and around schools and its communities (Lamprecht 2014). One of the most recent and gruesome cases was the murder of a female grade 10 learner by her intimate teacher partner (Kangootui 2015). This raises concerns about the unprecedented violence that young people in school are facing and the inability of teachers to track and respond to it. The article, among the first in Namibia, explores the nature and scope of school-related gender-based violence in the country.

THE CONTEXT OF NAMIBIA

The realities of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) cannot be divorced from the broader context of gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia, as schools are seen as a microcosm of the broader society (Rothmann and Simmonds 2015).

As a social ill in Namibia, GBV has received much attention in recent years across all sectors of society and targets all ages, genders and levels of society. GBV is widely reported to be targeting women and girls. Between 2003 and 2011, 17 per cent of the women in the country experienced sexual violence, and 385 children were raped annually (Lamprecht 2014). In 2008 alone, police reported 939 cases of rape and 222 cases of attempted rape. Domestic violence statistics indicate that both women and men are victims of physical violence. Lamprecht (2014) further reports that in 2008, 41 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men experienced physical and sexual violence from an intimate partner. The nature and patterns of violence clearly reflect the SADC definition of gender-based violence:

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\text{… all acts perpetrated against women, men, girls and boys on the basis of their sex which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic harm, including the threat to take such acts, or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed or other forms of conflict. (LAC 2012, 34)}
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Namibia has also used various instruments to address GBV, such as legal frameworks, political platforms, religious arenas and civil society. Despite all efforts, there has to
date been a general silence on the incidence of SRGBV; hence the critical urgency to undertake research and to generate an evidence-based discourse on SRGBV.

**DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES**

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative study included semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with key stakeholders, and focus group interviews (FGIs) with key informants. The purposive sample for the study included 558 survey respondents and 163 participants in the IDIs and FGIs, making an overall total of 721 participants in the study. Survey respondents replied to the 18-item questionnaire in 10 schools in the Khomas region in and around Windhoek. In response to the question whether or not they were learners, 551 of the 558 survey respondents indicated they were learners, 525 reporting that they were grade 11 learners, while 26 were teachers. Of the 163 participants in the qualitative data collection, 10 took part in the IDIs and 153 took part in the 24 FGIs. The IDIs and FGIs included the following range of participants: learners; youth out of school who were victims of violence; teachers; parents/guardians; members of school management teams (SMTs); Ministry of Education (MOE) officials; representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs); and social workers.

Every effort was made to ensure that the survey achieved a high response rate. The strategies used to ensure this included: (a) notifying relevant stakeholders prior to the survey that a survey would be conducted and explaining the study to potential respondents and school officials; (b) informing the respondents that the data would be anonymised; (c) ensuring privacy when conducting the interviews; and (d) limiting disturbances at schools. In terms of the qualitative study, snowball sampling was used to recruit teachers, learners and parents to the study who had been referred to the study by participants in the quantitative study, including teachers and principals who had participated. The schools engaged in the qualitative study were also selected on the basis of their convenience of access, in addition to the purposive sample criteria already mentioned.

The raw data was analysed through thematic analysis of the material emerging from the IDIs and FGIs as well as a content analysis of the available documents, particularly policy reports and existing legislation. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study found high reported levels of different types of violence and/or bullying, including verbal violence (84%), physical violence (71%), social violence (84%), diversity violence (40%) and sexual violence (25%). While the reported prevalence of these types of violence in this study was high, the nature and types of violence
and/or bullying in schools in Namibia cannot be divorced from broader issues of violence and GBV in the country as a whole.

The findings indicate that the victims of violence in schools include but are not limited to the following groups: learners in lower grades and of younger age; learners who are physically small in stature; learners who perform well and learners who underperform academically; female learners; male learners who are effeminate and female learners who are masculine; learners with delayed physical development, such as boys with soft voices; and learners who are financially well-off as well as learners who are poor.

Clear links between violence, gender and gender diversity emerged in both the survey and the IDIs and FGIs. For example, participants often referred to and explained violence as being a result of gender inequality, so that girls and effeminate boys were often the main victims of institutionalised violence. The sorts of violence committed against these groups were reported in IDIs and FGIs to be as follows: physical, such as hitting and corporal punishment; sexual, such as by boys and male teachers on girls and effeminate boys; and social, whereby teachers aggressively reinforce stereotypical roles for girls and boys. In short, gender norms and hierarchies continued to be inscribed and reinscribed by violent means if necessary in schools.

**PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AND BULLYING**

I don’t think in schools, or at least not in our schools you could say gender based violence. Gender based violence relates to violence towards a particular gender and we don’t have that. We have violence across the board. It is girls hitting boys and boys hitting girls and boys and girls and girls hitting each other. It is not a singled out gender that is exposed to violence. It is all around. (Life Skills teacher)

Measuring the prevalence of violence and/or bullying in schools in Namibia has become a recent concern, with little available data. In the present study, almost 80 per cent (n=404) of survey respondents reported violence other than corporal punishment in their school.

Furthermore, 51 per cent (n=215) of survey respondents reported violence and/or bullying happening on some days in school and a further 12% (n=50) reported violence as occurring every day.

In terms of the perpetrators of violence, 48 per cent (n=354) of survey respondents indicated that older boys were the perpetrators of violence in schools, and a further 15 per cent (n=114) of survey respondents indicated that the perpetrators of violence were older girls.

Differences on the basis of respondents’ sex emerged in terms of reporting who were the victims of violence, with 36 per cent of female respondents as compared with 25 per cent of male respondents citing ‘younger girls’ as the victims of violence and/or bullying.
In terms of the victims of violence, survey respondents indicated that violence impacted as follows on numerous groups in schools: girls (15%; n=85); boys (22%; n=124); younger students (37%; n=211); older students (7%; n=41); students who are perceived as different in terms of their gender (15%; n=83); and others (5%; n=26).

Participants in the IDIs and FGIs reported that violence often starts with subtler forms that then increase in intensity, even leading to death. Participants’ views on violence were analysed into the themes highlighted above.

**Physical violence**

One of the most common forms of violence reported by almost all participants was physical or bodily harm by others. It was interesting to note that if violence was not of a physical nature, it was often not perceived as violence. Similar findings were reported by Postmus, Hoge, Davis, Johnson, Koechlein and Winter (2015) in their study on Liberian school students. There is a need for legislation and policy to be more inclusive in their definition of violence and bullying so as to include verbal forms of bullying. Participants in the IDIs and FGIs reported that physical violence could be triggered by a number of factors, including name calling, grabbing of belongings, and issues of race, class, gender and sexuality. For example, an SMT participant reported:

> We have instances where girls bully girls, instances where girls reported how older girls took their belongings. The same happens with the boys. They would take mobile phones from the others and it leads to fights… Two years ago it led to gang violence as boys from outside came to protect the smaller ones in school. (School management team member)

**Sexual violence**

This form of violence was rarely mentioned by participants in schools but was raised as a concern by social work participants, as they deal with such cases in their scope of practice. Postmus et al. (2015) found that young women were blamed for being materialistic and chasers of transactional sex. What is to be understood is the complex association between violence and economic hardship, poverty, cultural patriarchy, masculinity, power and control, which diminish the power to make sound decisions among girls and sexual minority individuals (Bhana and Pillay 2011; Bhana 2012). As mentioned earlier, the social impact of SRGBV on schooling cannot be ignored in unpacking its nature. A participant mentioned that incidents of sexual violence are reported in pockets, and there appeared to be a silence around sexual violence:

> I also think of teachers who have relationships with children. To me that is also violence. They are in a position of power and they abuse that. We hear a lot of stories of teachers who
impregnated children. It is very rare that anything is done. It is only when it comes out that the teacher is suspended but it is very rare. To me that is a form of violence. (Social worker)

Abuse by figures of authority

Participants in the IDIs and FGIs reported that violence was perpetrated by those in authority abusing their power. Participants reported that although learners would retaliate to such forms of violence, they often found themselves to be victimised later as a result.

So teachers hang out with the senior boys and a boy could walk by who is so called ‘different’. They will start calling him: ‘Hey sister, hey girl, sissy.’ The teacher will also just laugh along and they will join in on the whole joke thing. (Female learner)

The moment the boys are in Home Economics class cooking so the girls would laugh at them and also maybe teachers asking them why are you doing cooking or doing needle work? Teachers are saying Art is not for girls but for boys. We had one boy who did Home Economics last year and it was strange to teachers and learners. I even asked the learner: What do you want? In class I would refer only to girls. I did it deliberately because we believe cooking is only for girls. (Female teacher)

Psychological violence

Participants in the IDIs and FGIs reported varied forms of psychological violence, including defamation of character and self-harm because learners are not accepted by others.

We have a classmate who is new. We just had a case now she doesn’t look like as if she is coming from a wealthy family. So last week when she went for the language class Oshindonga (Namibian tribe) learners from other classes were taking pictures of her because of her looks. I would not say she is not presentable but she doesn’t look like she is coming from a good home. The learners were taking pictures of her saying they will upload it on Facebook that made her feel bad but she reported it to one of the teachers. (Male learner)

Emotional bullying, people call other people bad names, they judging people by the colour of their skin, their weight, just simple things. (Female learner)

Social exclusion

Schools are places where learners not only acquire new knowledge but also interact with others and develop a sense of belonging and citizenship (Potgieter and Reygan 2012). Participants in the IDIs and FGIs reported that learners perceived to be different are also excluded from social and school activities and often experience rejection. Teachers too are perpetrators of social violence in schools.
I wanted to do needlework but I was told I am a man and cannot do it. If you are male you can only do what men are supposed to do. I really was interested in needlework but I was denied the opportunity. (Male learner)

I don’t take it at a level of consideration [to teach about gender diversity] for I know there will be no positives from it. For if you talk about reproduction we need learners in Grade 1 next year. How will a gay and lesbian bring kids to grade one? Who will you teach? (Male teacher)

Normalisation and silence of violence
Participants’ reports indicated that violent activities in schools in Namibia were often regarded simplistically as play activities and interpreted as part of normal human development. Violence was also perceived as a tool to validate masculinity, as an exhibition of power and control, and as a form of discipline (Bhana 2012). Participants’ reports indicated that violence could be useful in redirecting non-conforming individuals towards normality and conformity. As a result, participants’ reports indicated that conversation around certain forms of violence was silenced, which led to victims suffering alone.

Sometimes this violence is perceived as normal in the sense that if someone is different from the norm which is different from the hetero-normative then it is perceived to be normal to bully or to correct this person. Then the victim is unable to report, you get more violated and you would go back to your shell and think it is normal. (Male youth out of school)

When I was bullied, I didn’t really feel bad. In Grade 7 [final grade in primary school] we were already told that we will be bullied. So I expected this stuff to happen. (Male learner)

Overall, these findings trouble the notion that there is only one main category of perpetrator or one main category of victim when it comes to violence and/or bullying in schools in Namibia. For example, both older boys and older girls were cited as being violent, albeit it more so in the case of older boys. Similarly, girls and boys were almost equally reported as being the victims of violence and/or bullying, which disrupts the notion of unidirectional or only male-on-female dynamics within the broader spectrum of SRGBV.

Consequences of violence and/or bullying
I saw a gay guy who was sitting in front of him. Another guy became mad and started pushing him off his chair and wanted to beat him. (Male learner)

Findings from the IDIs and FGIs in the present study indicate that the reported consequences of violence and/or bullying for victims include: isolation; early school leaving; retaliation; and poor school performance. Both the survey responses and the reports from the qualitative study indicate that learners who experience violence
and/or bullying are at higher risk of school drop-out or, at the least, lower academic achievement. Just over 40% of survey respondents (n=225) reported that the bully is suspended from school when reported; over 20% (n=125) indicated the violence and/or bullying stops; 18% (n=100) reported that nothing happens; and 8% (n=46) reported that the violence worsens.

Reports from participants in the IDIs and FGIs indicate strong punitive approaches to learner transgression in schools in Namibia. In this regard there is limited discussion or dialogue to make perpetrators aware of the transgression and of the impact of their behaviour. Those learners who are guilty of violent acts are often given extra chores as a form of punishment, and a series of offences leads to expulsion. Perpetrators of violence are reprimanded, and educators who are guilty of violence could face disciplinary hearings.

Learners are often not aware of or ignore the serious nature of bullying. In some cases learners do not even perceive bullying as wrong:

I don’t think bullying is a serious situation at school, we are just doing it for fun. Even if you report it at the office, they will take it as a joke. (Male learner)

As a result there needs to be much greater sensitisation of and discussion with both learners and educators of what constitutes violence and bullying in schools. Participants reported that feelings of isolation, depression, self-hate and at times suicide ideation resulted from experiences of violence and/or bullying, which were again implicated in poor academic achievement and early school leaving. Participants in the IDIs and FGIs also indicated that supportive response mechanisms were dependent on the victim speaking.

Most of the time in the primary school I would fight a lot even with the teachers. I was very emotional and at one stage I was depressed. I had to see a social worker. You only see fighting as a solution and I started taking alcohol from Grade 7 because I had a lot of stress: this was simply because of the discrimination. (Learner who dropped out at Grade 8)

It made me feel lonely. At times I felt like jumping the fence and just leave. (Male learner)

CONCLUSIONS

Bullying is not just physical, it is also verbal. You found the clowns in school and everything they say is funny. The class clown might say someone has a big head and you might think it is a joke but the person is hurting even though the person is smiling but you don’t know how they feel on the inside. That is also bullying. (Female learner)

The present study aimed to generate evidence that would assist government, policy makers and professionals in the education sector, as well as civil society organisations and other key stakeholders in Namibia to strengthen existing education sector policies and practices that aim to tackle SRGBV and promote inclusiveness.
The evidence emerging from this study indicates high levels of violence and/or bullying in schools and that this violence and/or bullying is frequent, takes specific forms, and targets particular groups of learners, such as girls and learners who are perceived as different in terms of their gender. These findings are important because the study aimed to assist in the process of ensuring that schools in Namibia are a safe environment for all young people. The study aimed to collect data on the nature, extent and consequences of SRGBV, and the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data assisted in elucidating the nature and types of this violence, the consequences of violence and/or bullying, the availability (or lack of thereof) of supports for learners, as well as possible curriculum entry points for engaging with issues of SRGBV.

What is encouraging is the fact that Namibia is advanced in terms of legislation and strategies aimed at protecting children and other vulnerable groups of people. In this regard, Namibia has made much progress in developing policy and response services in relation to GBV. Despite this progress there continues to be insufficient protection of all vulnerable children, including learners who are perceived to be different in terms of their gender. At this juncture, a similar and concerted effort is necessary in respect of GBV in schools, as the findings from the present study indicate. Violence and/or bullying in Namibian schools and communities has been accepted and in some cases reinforced by teachers, parents, peers and officials. This violence and/or bullying takes many forms, including physical, verbal, sexual and diversity violence. The latter two forms of violence in particular occur as a result of the socially constructed and patriarchal understandings of gender that lead to the targeting of girls and learners who are perceived as different in this respect. While authority figures such as teachers and principals are points of referral when violence and/or bullying occurs, the literature more generally also indicates the grave problem of teacher-on-learner violence, particularly sexual violence, in schools in Namibia. In the absence of clear policies on SRGBV and in the absence of clear, standardised and implemented reporting mechanisms, learners who experience violence and/or bullying often appear to be left with few support and little recourse to assistance.

Nevertheless, and despite the high reported prevalence of violence, this study also found that participants (including teachers, principals, SMTs, learners, parents, chiefs, and civil society) are aware of the necessity for policy, programming and support for victims as pressing concerns in schools in Namibia. They indicate the need for robust teacher training programmes and for clearer guidelines from the Ministry on how best to respond to and prevent violence in schools. Finally, the low reported levels of sexual violence in this study need to be further interrogated. While the extant research base points to generally high levels of both GBV and sexual violence, the reported 25% rate of sexual violence in this study is cause for concern as it points to possible under-reporting of this form of violence. This could speak to the normalisation of GBV in schools to the extent that inappropriate touching, petting
and name calling and anything short of rape and sexual assault is not considered to be sexual violence.

REFERENCES


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