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Implicit gender-based violence by boys against high school girls in South African township schools

Abstract

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a major obstacle to universal schooling and the right to education for girls. Inequitable gender norms and stereotypes, based on hierarchies and forms of subordination, amplify and contribute to the SRGBV. Extensive literature on gender-based violence in South African schools exists, and much of it explains the connection between masculinity and gender-based violence. There is a paucity of studies on the SRGBV in South Africa that focus on implicit nature of GBV. This paper draws upon semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews with girls, boys and educators at two South African township schools to examine implicit nature of GBV. The findings revealed that boys were the main perpetrators of implicit gender-based violence. The analysis showed that implicit violence took the form of joking, teasing, social bullying, alienation and spreading rumours. While in most cases, the perpetrators of the violence were boys and the victims were girls, we gained a far more comprehensive picture of how GBV was perpetrated at schools. The participants provided us with fresh insights into the complexities of GBV and highlighted the extent to which sociocultural factors have an impact on SRGBV. An important conclusion from this study is that there are multiple and qualitatively different pathways to the enactment of GBV, and it is important to understand these dynamics if school violence prevention interventions are to be effective. This study recommends an integrated, comprehensive approach by all stakeholders in the form of educational intervention programmes towards the eradication of school gender-based violence. It is vital to include boys in these programmes for them to understand the importance of healthy relationships and to break free from harmful stereotypes. Parents, educators, coaches and policymakers play a role in challenging the belief that boys and mens violence is normal.

Keywords: *gender, school-related gender-based violence*

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1. Introduction

In South Africa, gender-based violence is a widespread problem. For a country not at war, South Africa has some of the worst statistics regarding gender-based violence (Enaifoghe *et al.*, 2021). To this point, it can be argued that the apartheid legacy marginalised women and in many cases left females severely hampered. As a result, South

Africa, like other developing countries, developed policies and frameworks aimed at bridging gender equality gaps left by the apartheid legacy (Shopola, Malapane & Nokele, 2023).

The analysis presented in this paper emanates from a larger study that examined the nature and contributing factors of gender-based violence among learners at two high schools in Umlazi Township, situated in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.

The learner population of both schools exclusively consists of black boys and girls. Extensive literature on gender-based violence in South African schools exists, and much of it explains the connection between masculinity and gender-based violence. In South Africa a paucity of studies on the SRGBV focus on the implicit nature of GBV. This particular paper focuses on the implicit manifestations of GBV among learners. The current study was conducted with learners from two public schools who have been described as the Born Free Generation having been born and growing up in a fully democratic South Africa.

Research has linked beliefs about traditional gender norms to violent behaviours, particularly in women (Santana *et al*., 2006). These norms exist within the contexts in which young adolescents live and receive schooling, so they are likely to influence how they behave as sexual beings (Miana *et al.*, 2020). During students' school lives, conflict is inevitable. In addition to direct physical or verbal aggression, they may also choose indirect ways to express their dissatisfaction. This indirect form of aggression is called implicit aggression (Murphy & Oberlin, 2018). In school settings, implicit forms of aggression and violence are gender specific and are often sexual or psychological by nature (Akiba *et al*., 2002). Msibi (2013) explains that the disparate treatment of boys and girls is reinforced by cultural and social norms as well as historical traditions rooted in gender inequality.

In agreement with Msibi (2013) and Wonke (2022), in some African homes, boys are taught, disciplined and socialised differently from girls. This also influences how boys treat girls in school settings. Another compelling reason to focus on Black women and young girls is that Black women and girls in South Africa and many parts of the African continent have been subjugated and their roles subordinated (Roy *et al*., 2022).

The prevalence of gender-based violence among Umlazi residents is growing to alarming proportions; so much so that KwaZulu-Natal Premier, Sihle Zikalala announced new plans to address gender-based violence and femicide in hotspots, which included school-going youth in Umlazi. Zikalala further stated that "gender-based violence is the highest in Umlazi and redress was urgently needed" (Nyathikazi 2021:1). At the commemoration of International Men Day, the KwaZulu-Natal Premier, Sihle Zikalala again highlighted the scourge of gender-based violence in Umlazi and called on all men in the province to take a firm stand in the fight against gender-based violence (Nxumalo, 2021).

Gender dynamics are often shaped by masculinity constructs within a school setting. Therefore, it is important to understand the constructs of masculinity and their practical expression in studies of gender violence. Hamlall (2020) and Lunnebald and Johansson (2021), for example, found that avoiding humiliation is reactive and defensive, while bolstering fragile masculinities is aggressive and assertive. Furthermore, boys try to bolster their fragile masculinity by humiliating girls and using romance to prove their heterosexuality. In some cases, violence or the threat of violence is used to ensure that girls conform to the hegemonic norm of male dominance. To understand the manifestation of implicit gender-based violence, we need to understand the ways in which being a man is understood and legitimated by boys, and the implications of these constructions for violence against girls.

2. Literature review

2.1 School-related gender-based violence

It is crucial to establish a common understanding of SRGBV and its application. Although a universal definition does not exist, the international development community is working actively to align its definitions regarding the various forms of SRGBV (USAID, 2017). A helpful definition of SRGBV has been articulated by UNESCO (2018:1) as "acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated because of gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics*".*

SRGBV may be perpetrated by teachers, students, or community members. SRGBV includes explicit threats or acts of physical violence, bullying, verbal or sexual harassment, non-consensual touching, sexual coercion and assault and rape (Parkes ***et al.,*** 2017). SRGBV can also be enacted implicitly. Implicit gender violence includes bullying, verbal and psychological abuse and teachers unofficial use of students for labour. This violence originates in the imbalance of power between males and females, the gendered hierarchy and separation of tasks, and socially accepted views of what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour (Taole, 2016).

2.2 Gender-based violence

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization (2021) in the World Report on Violence and Health (WRVH) as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself or a group that results in or has a likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. Jacobson (2023) argues that violence can be considered a form of manipulation for individuals to try and obtain what they want or need. Violence is often related to status, power, prestige and self-esteem (Stark ***et al***., 2018).

According to the National Institute of Justice (2022), the multifaceted construct of gender-based violence includes a wide variety of acts, such as physical assault and battery, physical aggression, non-contact aggression (for example, throwing things), broadly defined externalising behaviour, bullying, fighting, robbery, unwanted sexual contact, weapon possession, and verbal threats. As we have seen above, the definition of violence can be approached from many perspectives. Given its overlapping dynamics and processes, violence is complex. Implicit gender violence covers actions that are less visibly and directly gendered and emanate from everyday practices that reinforce gender differentiation. These practices may themselves be violent, or they may indirectly encourage violent acts (Leach & Mitchell, 2006). Implicit gender-based violence is violence that is symbolically sanctioned and reinforced, especially in scenarios where honour is a salient organising theme (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020). Implicit gender-based violence refers to insidious forms of violence, such as demeaning language that undermines self-esteem and includes assigning domestic tasks to girls (Mkancu, 2019; Oparinde, Matsha & Champion, 2021).

Pantaleon and Ison (2020) classify implicit gender-based violence as 'implicit' because it is a verbal or psychological manifestation of violence with a gender dimension, which may be openly sexual in the case of verbal assault. Mkancu (2019) argues that offensive language that seeks to humiliate women perpetuates violence. By using such language, perpetrators of gender-based violence objectify, demean, and inflict trauma on girls and women.

Mensch and Soler-Hampejsek (2017) found that research on implicit gender-based violence should incorporate a broader understanding of the impact of violence on education by considering cultural norms and behaviours such as sexual harassment and abuse in the community, high burdens of housework, and the 'hidden curriculum' that discourage girls from speaking out about their experiences. Some African cultural practices indirectly reinforce abuse against women (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021). Various factors, including "individual characteristics, family dynamics and socioeconomic contexts, interact with one another to form particular constructs that dehumanise women and children" (Msibi, 2013). For example, cultural practices that consider men the sole economic providers for women and children aggravate gender abuse. Considering this, Psaki, Mensch and Soler-Hampejsek (2017) propose that the focus of researchers and practitioners should shift from individuals and behaviours to an understanding of violence as an outcome of unequal power relations.

2.3 Constructions of masculinity and GBV

Maphosa (2018) suggests that masculinity is associated with access to status, power and perceptions of privilege and violence. According to Messerschmidt *et al.* (2018), power is an important feature of gender relations. Maphosa (2018) conducted a study among youth at two secondary schools in Zimbabwe regarding their perspectives on gender-based violence and found that 60% of the boys believed that they should be the head of the household, that men should be in charge of relationships, and that they should use aggression to maintain the status quo. Most of the boys believed that women were to blame for gender-based violence. Hunt and Gonsalkorale (2014) found that a threat to male supremacy may result in behaviour of sexual harassment. October (2020) posits that among South African youth, young men are more likely to control women in intimate relationships, as this is considered essential to affirming their masculinity.

Heilman, Barker and Harrison (2017), in a study conducted across three countries, found that when young men who had perpetrated sexual harassment were compared to those who had not. The strongest factor was their attitudes about what it meant to be a man. The study revealed that young men who believed the most strongly in toxic ideas of manhood were the most likely to have committed GBV. Heilman *et al.* (2017) posit that the driver of young mens harassment, more than any other factor surveyed, is how much they believe in or internalise toxic ideas about masculinity.

3. Methodology

In this qualitative, contextual study, we drew on an interpretative approach to explore teachers and learners views and experiences of the manifestation of implicit GBV at the researched schools. Our analysis revealed gender relations of domination and subordination among girls.

Twenty-four (24) learners (12 males and 12 females) and 20 educators (10 males and 10 females) were purposively selected from two Durban-based high schools in the Umlazi District. Overall, there were 44 participants in this study. These schools were selected based on their high female learner dropout rate. The 24 learners interviewed were identified from educators observations of conflict situations at the school in the classroom and on the playground, particularly between male and female learners. The educators identified those learners who peacefully diffused the conflict and those who fostered violent reactions. The learners between

15 and 18 years old were from the FET phase, and the 20 most senior educators comprised the sample of educators for this study. Seniority was determined according to the number of years of teaching experience.

Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were conducted with the learners and the educators. Three focus-group interviews for learners and three for educators were conducted at each of the chosen schools. Six focus group interviews were conducted per school, yielding a total of 12 focus groups.

The learner focus groups included separate sessions for boys and girls, each with six participants, as well as a mixed-gender session with 12 participants, consisting of the same individuals from the single-sex groups. The focus groups for educators consisted of only five females, only five males and a mixed group of 10 participants. Each school had its own groups. The focus group and face-to-face interviews were approximately 50 minutes in duration. All the interviews were conducted in English since the learners and teachers are all fluent in that language. Participation in this study was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained. The data were recorded and transcribed to ensure credibility.

4. Trustworthiness and credibility

Honesty among informants when contributing data is an important contributor to trustworthiness. Each person was given the opportunity to decline participation, ensuring that the data collection sessions only included those who were genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely. The researcher encouraged participants to be frank from the outset of each session to establish a rapport in the opening moments, indicating that there are no right answers to the questions posed. Participants could, therefore, contribute ideas and talk about their experiences without fear of losing credibility in the eyes of the researcher. It was made clear to participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without having to provide an explanation to the researcher.

This study applied qualitative content analysis as a measure of credibility for the interviews and focus group discussions. The data were recorded and transcribed. The results were interpreted and analysed against existing literature.

5. Ethical Issues

A letter of information and consent that provided details of the study to be undertaken was given to participants. The participants were asked to complete and sign a letter of consent. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data obtained and that their names, schools and principals would not be disclosed in the dissertation. The participants were also assured that no information about their participation or the interviews would be disclosed to their school principal or colleagues. Participant names were anonymised using pseudonyms to protect their identities.

6. Findings and discussion

The results were interpreted and analysed against existing literature using thematic content analysis. The data obtained from the semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews were repeatedly coded and reviewed. Recurring categories that emerged from the data were noted. A list of themes was then generated from the broader categories. These themes were grouped and organized according to their similarity. The data were then divided and organised into relevant themes and subthemes. This enabled the researcher to

recognise the manifestations of implicit GBV. These manifestations are presented under two major themes. The first theme is the guileful use of language, and the second theme is the dimensions of social bullying.

Theme 1: Use of guileful language

Subtheme 1: Only joking

This study revealed that gender joking, initiated by boys and aimed at girls, was common among learners.

The interviews with learners and educators from both schools revealed the following:

> *Boys usually treat girls otherwise, they sometimes make jokes about them, because they know that girls can have no power towards boys. Even in class they do not take girls seriously* (Snenhlanhla: girl, 17, from School A individual interview)

> *When a girl gets high marks – boys would joke to say she copied, or someone gave her the answers because she kissed him, or she showed him her … just to ridicule the girl, and then they say ah – only joking* (Bandile: boy, 17, from School B individual interview)

> *Boys always compete in the class; boys always think that they are smarter than girls; they do not want to get lower marks. If it happens that a girl became the highest of the class, then they start to get jealous and put some funny remarks* (Sanele: boy, 16, from School A boys focus group)

> *Boys have great challenges when an educator praises a girl for good work. Boys become jealous when girls get praised for good work and say her boyfriend wrote for her, then the class make it a joke and laugh* (Phila: boy, 16, from School B mixed focus group)

The responses from both boys and girls indicated that jokes were used to suppress the girls at the school. These responses show that jokes can be a form of implicit GBV. Whenever a girl was seen to be advancing or displayed any hint of gaining an advantage over boys, the girls were suppressed by using jokes as a tool. The boys employed jokes to subvert any authority the girls acquired. When the boys felt threatened by the girls in terms of losing influence over them, they gained sway by using humour to ridicule the girls.

> *Boys do not treat girls with respect at school. They do not want them to have a voice in the class. They make a joke if a girl raises an idea. They make funny noises and change their words into funny words* (Sane: girl, 15, from School A individual interview)

When girls were seen to be gaining momentum by expressing themselves in class, the boys were quick to make a joke to decelerate this momentum. "*They make a joke if a girl raises an idea".* The boys used humour to silence the girls when they suspected that they were acquiring some form of status by being resourceful and astute. This is a form of gender-based violence.

Ford *et al.* (2013) found evidence that men use humour to deride females to maintain power. The authors assert that sexist humour fosters prejudice against women because of the ambivalence of society attitudes towards women. This was also evident in this study, where the boys used jokes as a tactic to downplay the academic achievement of girls. This implies that they were not ready to accept or recognise the high mental capacity of girls. They attempted to nullify girls achievements through banter and repartees. The boys were dismissive of the girls successes by accusing them of dishonesty or of using their sexuality to forge academic success.

A number of studies show how gender-based violence is enacted by means of making women subscribe to notions of being mentally weak, foolish or unwise (Masinire, 2015, Dzinavane 2016, Zuma 2018). Snenhlanhlas response, for example, contains hints of internalised oppression or subordination, which may very well be at play among the girls at the research schools. However, an interrogation of this phenomenon is very broad and complex and falls outside the scope of this paper.

Gender stereotypes are pervasive and shape how men view GBV. For example, Muluneh *et al*. (2020) argue in a study of gender-based violence against women in Sub-Saharan Africa that gender violence can be used to perpetuate male authority, particularly when a man feels threatened by a woman gaining higher status in education or the labour market than himself.

Subtheme 2: "Just for fun" – Teasing

While talking to the boys about incidents of violence against girls in school, there was a certain level of insensitivity, as many did not perceive their actions against girls as incidents of sexual harassment, but merely as teasing.

> *You see there was a girl who was coming from a poor family and that girl did not have the T-shirt for PE. She wore this loose shirt. When we saw her, we started calling her "loose boobs". Other boys now tease her "loose boobs". There is nothing bad – we just having some fun* (Sanele: boy, 16 from School A boys focus group)

> *In my class, there is a girl who is very black in complexion. She is very naughty. Boys call her "Kiwi Black Polish" when she is making noise in class to stop it. We just laugh about it* (Lebo: boy, 16, from School A boys' focus group)

It is important to understand what motivates boys to harass girls. Common reasons include power, control and sexual attraction. Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) describe scenarios where men who harbour negative attitudes about women harass them in public to assert their power and control over them. Their study revealed that boys used the notion that they teased girls for fun. Studies show that when men are asked why they tease women, they believe that teasing is fun or trivial and that it does not hurt the victim (Akhtar, 2013; Nahar, Van Reeuwijk & Reis, 2013).

The majority of girls reported feelings of shame or humiliation when they were teased by boys. They did not perceive teasing from boys as merely having fun, as indicated by the statements below.

> *When a girl enters the class if she is short, the boys tease Ugqinsi* (meaning short and fatty). *If she is tall, they call her Ukhozi* (eagle). *They always have something to say because you are a girl. We feel really embarrassed* (Sisanda: girl, 17, from School B girls focus group)

> *Boys only treat girls better if they are in the same class with them; if a girl from another class walks into their classroom, the boys would tease that girl and call her "Zumba!", which means that girl is ugly. Even if she is not, this is the way used by boys to tease girls. So mostly we do not go to the other classes if even a teacher asks, we send a boy* (Ayanda: girl, 17, from School A girls focus group)

Crouch (2010) reports that ignoring harassers is a common defence tactic and it leads to more aggressive harassment. Given the social stigma of teasing victims, it is reasonable to assume that women will generally try to avoid confrontations with harassers to reduce attention and

focus on the situation. Ayanda mentioned that "*mostly we do not go to the other classes even if a teacher asks*", which is an indicator that she sought to avoid abusive situations. Similarly, in this study, the majority of the other girls also indicated that they sought to avoid abusive situations by using various techniques. Teasing is a form of implicit gender-based violence, as found by other studies (Kraus *et al*., 2014; Espelage *et al*., 2015).

So-called fun teasing at the selected high schools included aggressive verbal messages targeted at any characteristic at the core of a learners sense of identity. For example, girls who displayed physical characteristics that were different from other learners were teased. The importance the boys placed on appearance was apparent in the words that they used when teasing, for example, "*loose boobs*", "*Kiwi Black Polish",* "*Mkhishini",* "*Ugqinsi",* "*Ukhozi",* and "*Zumba*". Mncube and Harber (2013) found that teasing led to humiliation and was a form of gendered violence.

Theme 2: Social bullying

Social bullying, sometimes referred to as relational bullying, involves hurting someones reputation or relationships. Social bullying includes leaving someone out on purpose, telling other children not to be friends with someone, spreading rumours about someone, and embarrassing someone in public (Stuart-Cassel, Terzian & Bradshaw, 2013). This type of bullying was very prominent among the learners at the selected schools. This was more evident with boys bullying girls. Learners as well as educators of both genders indicated that social bullying was rife at their schools.

Subtheme 1: Distancing and alienation of girls

In this study, learners highlighted in both the semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions that social bullying was rife, especially by boys towards girls. They stated that social bullying was mainly retaliatory by nature. This study revealed that alienation and spreading rumours were the two major forms of social bullying among learners.

> *You see the boys here; they have a way of getting to the girls. Sometimes they have a reason and sometimes they just do it because they are bad. I do not know why they choose a girl and ask others to leave her alone. So these boys are popular, and the children listen. Then, she has no friends. Boys know that they have more power, so they take advantage of them* (Mfundo: boy, 18, from School A mixed focus group)

> *Boys are fine with girls for as long as girls know their place as girls and respect boys. Otherwise, they are out of the friendship groups. The girls know this, so they do what they must do to stay in the group* (Ayanda: girl, 17, from School A girls focus group)

> *Girls have greater challenges. They are abused by boys because they know that if they react, then they are made to feel alone* (Andiswa: girl, 18, from School B mixed focus group).

> *Boys are aggressive towards the girls; they shout at them and have attitudes towards girls. But girls are different. Some of them have attitudes but those attitudes are pushed aside. The boys say that those with attitudes must have no friends* (Andiswa: girl, 18, from School B – individual interviews).

The educators also indicated that many boys used friendship groups as a tool to restrain the girls and to force them into complicity. This is highlighted in the statements below.

> *Boys will always want to be bossy against girls. They want to be in charge. If a girl says or does something that they do not like, then they use other children to distance the girl. They have friendship groups and tell the groups to leave out this girl* (Mr Mtshali: educator, 44, from School B mixed focus group)

> *When boys are being provoked, they want to deal with the situation because should you not, you get seen as being weak. You have to solve it yourself that way you are going to be seen as a man. The boys use friendship groups of the victim to distance her from her friends, and the girl feels embarrassed by not getting support from her friends (*Mr Siba: educator, 55, from School B mixed focus group)

> *Usually, you find a boy dating a girl within the school, and they sometimes fight, and boys are the ones who always react badly. When it comes to relationships and something goes wrong, the boys try to get other children to isolate her* (Mrs Shibe: educator, 42, from School B mixed focus group)

> *We find many cases coming to the office where a girl tried to harm herself. When we investigate, we find that it is often the case where some boy is involved in trying to make the girl feel alone and abandoned because she had rejected him* (Mrs Dlamini: educator, 38, from School A individual interviews).

Stuart-Cassel *et al.* (2013) observed that social bullying can occur within the context of large social groups as well as within small networks, close friendships or romantic relationships. Social bullying can be proactive and used to achieve or maintain social position, gain attention or alleviate boredom, or it can be reactive or retaliatory by nature in response to a perceived threat or to feelings of anger, jealousy or betrayal. The testimony of the educators indicates that the boys felt a certain degree of humiliation when girls did not comply with their requirements and expectations. The boys retaliated by using other learners at the school to alienate the girls, thereby making them feel unaccepted, disdained and disparaged.

Analysis of this subtheme suggests that boys are influenced by stigmas of male superiority and sex-identified stereotypes and are unable to interact with girls at an egalitarian level. Instead, they use alienation as a tool to maintain their dominance over girls. Stereotyped by their gender, girls are isolated and oppressed by boys if they do not conform to the expectations of male dominance.

Alienation is argued by many feminists to be a form of female oppression (Kain, 1993). It is important to understand that violence against women manifests in unequal power relations between men and women, and the factors that increase the risk of violence occurrence are grounded in the broader context of systemic gender-based discrimination against women and other forms of subordination.

Subtheme 2: Spreading rumours in school

In a study conducted by Nahar *et al.* (2013) on the sexual harassment of girls, the learner and teacher participants spoke of patriarchy, power and emotional bullying by boys in their expressions of romantic interest and relationships. Nahar *et al.* (2013) found that boys spread rumours in an attempt to smear girls reputations within the school community if they were romantically spurned by a girl.

In this study, we also found similar evidence of boys using rumours as a tactic to denigrate girls.

> *When a boy wants a romantic relationship with a girl and the girl refuses some boys believe that when a girl does not comply, he must degrade her to lose her self-esteem. The boys then start all these rumours about her* (Winnie: girl, 16 from School A girls focus group)

> *For me, friendship groups with boys is not good because they take advantage if you become friends with them. They end up wanting to date you and spreading rumours if you do not agree with him* (Sane: girl, 17, from School A girls focus group)

> *Once a girl breaks up with a boy, we usually dislike that girl in the class as we are boys and avoid her. We tell everyone that she is used goods. That way no one will want to date her* (Phelelani: boy, 17, from School B – boys' focus group)

> *Girls are confronted by a group of boys when they want that girl to date one of the boys in the group. The girl feels threatened to say yes; otherwise, those boys start to spread bad things about her* (Ayanda: girl, 17, from School B girls focus group)

The educators provided similar responses.

> *Sometimes you find a girl reporting that a boy was trying to date her, and when she refused, then the boy ended up abusing her by spreading rumours about her. Boys are like that towards girls* (Mr Dludlu: educator, 57, from School A individual interviews)

> *Boys do not play fair when it comes to romance. Mostly girls are victims because they are afraid of getting a bad reputation by falsely accusing them of things* (Mr Xolani: educator, 34, from School A individual interviews)

> *Most boys want to be in a relationship with the girls here at this school. Boys are aggressive about this. If the girl they want does not agree, then the boy is embarrassed. He spreads rumours that he had her and left her because she was not good. We get a lot of complaints about this* (Mr Mpanza: educator, 50, from School B individual interviews)

Contemporary feminists refer to the practice of criticising a womans real or perceived sexual promiscuity as slut-shaming. This concept manifests itself in the spreading of sexual rumours in school or the workplace. In effect, accusing a woman of being sexually promiscuous calls into question her desirability for other men. Increasingly, courts recognise this gender-based insult as offensive, because it is based on gender stereotypes that good women are not sexually promiscuous (Neal, 2019).

The responses of the girls and educators in the current study revealed that the boys demonstrated their resentment towards the girls who refused their gestures of romantic relationships by spreading rumours. The boys attempted to shame the girls and denigrate their reputations by creating the perception that the girl was sexually promiscuous. We see that boys are implicitly enacting violence against girls.

The responses above clearly demonstrate the gendered nature of social bullying in both schools. Nieman (2011) confirmed that girls are more prone to social bullying at school than boys are. Stuart-Cassel *et al*. (2013) argue that for schools to identify and respond to incidents of social bullying appropriately, school policies must recognise social bullying as a form of aggression and must contain clear prohibitions against these behaviours.

For the girls at both schools, implicit gender-based violence was inherent in their everyday school lives. Although this paper has highlighted incidents of implicit gender-based violence, Mkancu (2019) warns that implicit violence must not be ignored, because it can act as a precursor to physically harassing behaviour.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

A significant finding of this study was the use of humour by boys to regulate and control girls. The boys participated in a form of duel play where they would make statements under the guise of joking that might otherwise be interpreted as abuse. If the joking provoked confrontation, they disclaimed malice by saying that they were "*just joking*". Many boys also used this claim to silence objections or to ward off confrontation. However, the girls had a different view of such humour, perceiving it as offensive, unpleasant and hurtful.

The manner in which the girls experienced alienation is significant. Firstly, alienation occurred within the context of large social groups (a larger school population) as well as small networks (close friendships and boys fidelity groups). The targeted girls found it difficult to endure this type of collective condemnation. Secondly, this systemic gender-based discrimination and punishment for not conforming to certain gender role expectations led to girls feeling unaccepted, disdained and disparaged, which in turn forced them to succumb to subordination. Slut-shaming victims were also rife at both schools through the medium of spreading rumours. Although they formed part of their everyday school lives, they had a serious impact on their psychological well-being in that rumours battered their self-confidence and lowered their self-esteem so much that for many of the girls, schooling became a negative experience.

The argument made by Messerschmidt *et al.* (2018) that strategic structuring of gender relations within a gender order in which some groups of males constantly seek to secure power over females was very evident at both schools. It is, however, important to note that while it is assumed that masculine gender role socialisation intrinsically fosters aggression and violence, boys who subscribe to hegemonic norms of masculinity are not always violent but rather may act violently at particular times under particular circumstances.

We need to develop prevention strategies that involve both boys and girls in the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Schools need to promote a gender-equal, respectful, non-violent culture actively with a gender-aware pedagogy among learners, teachers and other staff (Fergus & Vant Rood, 2013). Furthermore, the potential for young people to act as agents of change provides one of the greatest hopes for achieving the social transformation necessary to end GBV and can be unlocked through high-quality, gender-sensitive education.

This study recommends an integrated, comprehensive approach by all stakeholders in the form of educational intervention programmes towards the eradication of gender-based violence at schools. It is vital to include boys in these programmes for them to understand the importance of healthy relationships and to break free from harmful stereotypes. Parents, educators, coaches and policymakers play a role in challenging the belief that boys and mens violence is normal. Thus, intervention programmes must work with boys on issues of gender and violence with a focus on the way in which violence, domination and oppression are implicated in the construction of toxic versions of masculinity and advocate ways that deconstruct this type of masculinity.

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