GIRLS AND SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT
Over the years, the disproportionate effect that gender-based violence (GBV) has on women and girls and the identified need to tackle it has gained global attention. In this paper, concentration is on a common form of GBV; School –Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV), which the United Nations asserts as affecting millions of children and adolescents all over the world. Although schools are expected to enhance learning and personal development, every year, millions of girls worldwide are victims of SRGBV. Apart from being a human rights infringement, SRGBV considerably limits the achievement of gender parity and constrains the attainment of the sustainable development goal of quality education targeted at effective learning outcomes for girls. Studies on SRGBV against girls has been focused on specific countries, resulting in a lack of comprehensive research that examines the prevalence of this issue across various regions in Africa. This paper fills this gap and contributes to the existing scholarship on SRGBV by shedding light on the distinct forms of SRGBV which is often underestimated, experienced by primary and secondary school girls across countries in Africa. It sheds light on the unique challenges faced by these girls who have been subjected to victimization. This paper proposes intervention strategies, such as implementing high-level awareness campaigns led by governments at all levels, to effectively address this pressing issue.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the issues that has gained global attention as a result of the devastating effects that it has not only on victims, but also the economic and social costs it has on countries. It is considered a pandemic that needs to be addressed, particularly because of its diverse manifestations and risks it portends for its victims and society at large. GBV has been tagged a global health issue by the United Nations and this has brought about the formulation and implementation of several policies and programmes targeted towards addressing the issue globally. Although men are affected too, global estimates reveal that more women than men are victims; with statistics showing that one out of three women experience one form of gender-based violence or the other, in their life time (World Health Organization (WHO), 2013). GBV is a human rights infringement issue that could take various forms which may be physical, sexual, emotional

or psychological. Although it is pervasive, occurring in online, public and private spaces, GBV is often underreported. Available statistics reveal that annually, 245 million girls and women aged 15 and above are victims of GBV (WHO, 2021).

Evidence from existing literature suggests that historically, GBV is a manifestation of the structural inequality of power relations between men and women, with women being discriminated against by men (Bows & Fileborn, 2020; Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2022; Muzvidziwa, 2022). It manifests when violence is exerted by men as a means of gaining control over women. These unequal power relations have compelled women into subordination in comparison with men, infringing on the enjoyment of their fundamental rights as humans and adversely affecting their full advancement. The unequal power relations are offshoots of discriminatory economic, religious, cultural and social norms and gender stereotypes that deny or restrict the opportunities available to women to make decisions that will improve their life situations (Tsapalas, Parker, Ferrer, & Bernales, 2021).

Just like women, girls experience different forms of violence online, as well as in public and private spaces. It is particularly worrisome when acts of violence are perpetuated against girls in public spaces like educational institutions which are expected to expose them to learning, enhance their personal development and give their lives a positive transformation. Irrespective of the geographical context, violence perpetrated against girls in school are intricately linked with norms and stereotypes that underpin gender inequality (Leach & Humphreys, 2007; Mayeza, Bhana & Mulqueeny, 2022; Debowska, Boduszek, Jones, Willmott & Sherretts, 2021). Different forms of violent acts perpetuated against women and girls are upheld by norms and stereotypes which are sometimes as a result of the way children are socialized. In her study on GBV across four African countries – Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Ndiaye (2021) pointed out that the different way boys and girls are socialized from childhood upholds violence against women. She explains that the patriarchal nature of these West African states upholds negative norms and stereotypes that are instrumental in socializing children. While girls learn to cope with and endure violence perpetuated in the home, boys internalize norms that make them engage in violent and controlling behavior.

GBV, its multifaceted nature and dimensions, particularly as it affects women and girls is not peculiar to a particular region in Africa, but is a phenomenon that occurs across the continent and in different countries all over the world (Schissel, 2000; Schaffner, 2007; Smith, McLean Cooke, & Morrison, 2020; Douki Dedieu, Ouali, Ghachem, Karray & Issaoui, 2021; Torres-Rueda, Ferrari, Orangi, Hitimana, Daviaud, Tawiah & Vassall, 2021). In this paper however, focus is on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) – a form of GBV, with emphasis on how it affects girls in Africa.

Over the years, extensive research has been conducted on SRGBV in Africa, with a particular focus on its impact on primary and secondary school students. For example, Badri (2014) examined the prevalence and consequences of SRGBV on primary school girls in Sudan, while Onoyase (2019) conducted a similar study in Nigeria. Additionally, a study in Kenya explored how SRGBV affects both primary school boys and girls, shedding light on the culture of silence surrounding this issue (Barasa, Wamue-Ngare & Wanjama, 2021). In South Africa, research has delved into the reporting patterns of adolescent boys and girls in high schools (Rasool, 2017). Furthermore, research has been conducted across 14 Eastern and Southern African countries to explore the relationship between SRGBV and school absenteeism among boys and girls (Lee & Rudolf, 2022). Beyond examining prevalence and consequences, other studies have focused on policy initiatives aimed at addressing SRGBV in countries such as Zambia, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo (Parkes, Ross & Heslop, 2020). Despite the extensive research on SRGBV in Africa, there remains a gap in the literature that consolidates instances of SRGBV experienced by girls across different countries on the continent. This article aims to address this gap. Issues such as the diverse nature of SRGBV, its prevalence on girls in Africa, available statistics across different regions on the continent, the consequences of SRGBV on girls and strategies to combat the menace are articulated in subsequent sections.

An Overview of School-Related Gender Based Violence

School-Related Gender Based Violence encompasses acts or threats of sexual, physical; or psychological violence which takes place in, or around a school, often upheld by gender norms and power imbalances ((UNESCO/UNGEI 2015).

SRGBV can be perpetrated by teachers, school staff, peers and persons that students come in contact with, in or around the school premises. Physical manifestations of SRGBV include bullying, corporal punishment, slapping, biting, pinching, boxing or pulling, with the intention of inflicting pain or discomfort on the victim. Any form of sexual activity that is unsolicited by the victim, often without consent such as rape, explicit sexual language, teasing about body parts, initiating moves for sexual activity and refusing to allow for the declination of such invitations, unwelcome touch or other forms of sexual gestures which may be expressed verbally or enforced through coercion are considered as sexual forms of SRGBV. Most of the time, sexual forms of SRGBV take place in lonely paths on the way to school, staff quarters, classrooms, toilets and on school grounds. Research shows that apart from the home of the victim or perpetrator of sexual violence, the rates at which students are abused sexually are high in schools (Bonar et al., 2022; Devries & Meinck, 2018; Coker, Bush, Clear, Brancato & McCauley, 2020). Psychological SRGBV can take forms including teasing, unjustifiable criticisms, humiliating punishment, bullying, refusal to praise for good efforts, and other acts with the intent of exerting control or causing mental or emotional harm. SRGBV is a violation of rights and one of the major obstacles to learning and to accomplishing educational goals. In schools, both boys and girls are affected by SRGBV, however, studies reveal that girls are more disproportionately affected (Itegi & Njuguna, 2013; Parke et. al, 2016, Keith, Hyslop & Richmond, 2023).

Scholars have identified various contextual factors that determine the prevalence and manifestations of SRGBV. For instance, Leach (2002) points out that there are instances when schools promote a culture that upholds masculine and feminine stereotypes, resulting in higher chances of SRGBV. These could be evident in the way the curriculum is designed with certain jobs, vocations or activities tagged as being for boys or men, and others for women and girls. Another way that schools unknowingly uphold gender stereotypes is when certain words like “bravery” and “courage” are used to describe masculinity while “homeliness” and “submission” are expressed as expected feminine traits. Without sexist intent, the use of words can propagate ideas that reinforce gender stereotypes. Not just these, in situations when there is an absence of concerted efforts in creating awareness on what gender-based violence entails in schools, especially in the curriculum, SRGBV will be prevalent (Vanner, 2022).

Gender biased discourses also present avenues for making derogatory gender comments, unsolicited sexual comments and provide opportunities for sexual harassment in schools (Taole, 2016). At times, during break periods when there are no classes, students may engage in conversations or debates amongst themselves that may lead to the use of offensive gendered comments or the boys touching the girls in suggestive sexual manners. An additional contextual factor that accounts for SRGBV is a poor understanding of what love or relationships are about among school boys and girls. To explain this, Cole (2023) points attention to how heteronormative interpretations of “relationship” and “love” limit the understanding of teen girls when they are faced with abuse; they consider it as the normal intricacies that come with love relationships.

Also, in situations where sex is traded for academic grades or in exchange for money, especially between a teacher or any other adult staff of a school and a student, SRGBV is said to have taken place (Postmus et al., 2015). This happens when students, especially girls, transact their bodies to get good academic grades, or for money so as to be able to meet their needs both within and outside the school. Although, this is transactional, it is considered an abuse because such an act can prevent girls from reaching their full potential in life. It is also considered an abuse because the adult teacher or staff is expected to take responsibility to care for students under their care, and not engage in any form of sexual interactions or relationships with them.

The intersection of gender with other forms of vulnerabilities can make girls to be inexplicably victims of SRGBV. In instances where attacks are launched on schools or educational institutions for religious, military, political, ethnic or criminal reasons, girls are often the targets. Such instances have been witnessed in countries including Nigeria, where school girls in different locations have been abducted by the deadly *Boko Haram* sect (Adekoya & Beredam, 2021, Verjee & Kwaja, 2021). While not all girls may be abducted, some may be sexually molested or suffer physical and emotional harm during attacks on their schools. Not only do girls experience a lot of difficulty during periods of conflict, unrest and disaster, the prevalence of SRGBV for them heightens even after periods of disasters. This is because

when girls return to school after disasters, the unavailability of basic infrastructure such as access to clean water and adequate security, puts them at a higher risk of being victims of gender-based violence (Thurston, Stöckl & Ranganathan, 2021). In essence, as a result of harsh economic conditions during and after disasters, girls are more likely to be victims of exploitation in order for them to access the basic necessities. SRGBV often has diverse physical and psychological effects on victims, contributing negatively to their overall wellbeing. These effects include poor academic performance, absenteeism from school, depression, injury, suicidal attempts, loss of body parts, death, low self-esteem, anxiety, school dropout, fear, sexually transmitted infections, sleep disorders, social isolation, unwanted pregnancies and teenage motherhood, (Garner, 2014; Lee & Rudolf, 2022, Kim, Sanders, Makubuya & Yu, 2020, Tantu, et al., 2020). Despite the numerous effects of SRGBV, global statistics of its prevalence are hard to come by as a result of the diverse nature of data collection methods across countries. Nonetheless, in the next section of this chapter, focus will be on available estimates of the incidence of SRGBV, particularly on the experiences of girls in Africa.

School –Related Gender Based Violence against Girls in Africa

Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims at ensuring that boys and girls get quality education, but SRGBV is a major impediment to its achievement because it creates an unsafe learning environment. An unsafe learning environment may lead to absenteeism and school dropout, lowers academic performance, hampers students' ability to focus and learn effectively. Undoubtedly, in schools, both boys and girls are victims of SRGBV but more girls are disproportionately affected as established in the existing literature (Brookings Institution, 2020; Dlungwane & Hamlall, 2024; Amaral et al., 2024). Many girls have been victims of physical SRGBV in Africa. Research indicates that a significant percentage of adolescent girls in African schools have been subjected to some form of SRGBV. In a study involving over 60,000 Grade 6 learners across Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, Lee and Rudolf (2022) asserted that girls were disproportionately affected by SRGBV, including verbal harassment, physical abuse, and sexual violence, with the experiences significantly impacting their mental health, attendance, and academic performance.

Although often used as a method of discipline despite a growing discourse on its ban, studies have shown that school girls in several parts of Africa including South Africa, Tanzania and Ethiopia, are sometimes subjected to physical violence in the form of corporal punishment (Nkuba, Hermennau, Goessmann & Hecker, 2018; Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020; Kumar & Teklu, 2018). To maintain order, teachers resort to the use of beatings, floggings, slapping, hitting and other forms of physical abuse. Not only these, female students are frequently targeted for violence by their male peers who view them as easy targets. In a study comprising of junior secondary schools in Ghana and Botswana, Dunne (2007) asserted that during non-instructional hours, older boys have been reported to engage in behaviors such as bullying and taking money or belongings from girls, as well as attempting to exert control and discipline over them. Girls who resisted these attempts were often embarrassed and demoralized.

Another form of physical SRGBV that girls in Africa face within the school environment is forced labor. In countries like Malawi and Zimbabwe, Chisamya et al., (2012) asserted that girls are frequently coerced into performing physically demanding tasks such as fetching water, cleaning, or running errands for teachers. These exploitative practices not only reinforce gender stereotypes but also take away valuable learning time from these girls. As a result, their educational opportunities are undermined, perpetuating systemic inequalities.

Several girls who experience physical SRGBV are also victims of the psychological forms. Research has indicated that girls who reject advances from boys seeking a relationship may be at risk of experiencing physical and psychological abuse. For instance, in Muhanguzi's (2011) study on secondary schools in Uganda, it was found that girls who rejected relationship proposals from boys were often met with verbal abuse and hostility. This included beatings, spreading of false rumors to tarnish their reputation, and body-shaming through derogatory comments about their appearance, including their physical features such as their looks and buttocks.

Another illustration of this, is the violence carried out by authority figures, including teachers and school staff. In certain situations, female students are subjected to physical coercion and psychological assault when they reject sexual advances from authority figures. To buttress this, Msambwa et al., (2022) in their research conducted in secondary schools in Tanzania, have brought to light instances where girls have been physically punished or psychologically assaulted by teachers for refusing inappropriate sexual demands, showcasing a power dynamic that enables such abuse to occur. Such forms of abuse include beatings, threats of failure, victimization, and derogatory name-calling. Literature has shown that the physical and psychological abuse perpetrated by authority figures and male classmates has been correlated with the high rates of girls dropping out of school (Rammbuda, 2023; Gbordzoe, 2024). Many girls choose to halt their education rather than continue to endure persistent abuse.

Sexual SRGBV perpetrated against girls is widespread but available statistics likely underestimate its prevalence, as a result of the pervasive culture of silence surrounding it. Research has brought to light rates of victimization, with studies conducted in countries such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda, Morocco, Senegal and Sierra Leone, to mention a few, showing that many female students are subjected to sexual violence in educational environments (Moundene, 2023; Anwar et al., 2020; Reilly, 2014, Dlungwane & Hamlall, 2024; Beyene et al., 2021). A study conducted by Reilly (2014) in Sierra Leone revealed that female students in junior secondary schools are subjected to abuse by male teachers, older male students, and other men, such as motorcyclists commonly known as *boda-boda* riders near the school premises. The girls have been subjected to various forms of abuse, including unwanted touching of their bodies, inappropriate gestures, and in severe cases, sexual coercion. The most frequently reported form of abuse, however, comes from teachers. Due to poverty, some teachers exploit students by demanding money in exchange for better grades. For girls who cannot pay, they are coerced by the teachers to offer sex for good grades.

It is particularly worrisome that sexual harassment is not only carried out by peers but also by authority figures in schools. In a study conducted in Uganda, findings revealed that 1in 20 (4.9%) schoolgirls reported being sexually molested by their teachers (Parkes et al., 2023). Shockingly, among girls with disabilities, this number rose to 16%. The girls shared with researchers how they had bravely resisted unwanted advances, even when faced with the threat of further punishment or lower grades. Concerns have been raised on the urgent need for increased action to address this issue. In their study, Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2020) made reference to a longitudinal study conducted in Kenya between 2003 and 2009, which found that out of 12,660 girls who were sexually abused by their teachers, only 633 teachers were ultimately convicted. Sexual abuse has a lot of adverse effects on victims. Dwelling on experiences of sexual harassment between educators and learners in high schools in Morocco, Aboulkacem (2023) identified the effects it has on girls who are victims to include loss of concentration, poor academic performance, trauma and emotional distress. Rejecting sexual advances from schoolteachers and other authority figures in schools can result in feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-doubt for girls. They may begin to question their own judgment, worth, and boundaries, while also grappling with feelings of guilt and responsibility for the teacher's behavior. These experiences can have lasting psychological effects on the student, impacting their self-esteem, trust, and relationships with authority figures.

The impact of SRGBV on girls in Africa is significant and complex, impacting their physical health, mental well-being, and educational success. Victims may experience physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections, unintended teenage pregnancies, maternal health complications associated with teenage pregnancy. Their mental health well-being may also suffer as they are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, loss of concentration substance abuse and emotional distress. SRGBV negatively impacts on their educational success, resulting in increased absenteeism, lower academic achievement, and higher dropout rates, as the school environment becomes hostile and detrimental to learning. Beyond the immediate harm, SRGBV is instrumental in perpetuating cycles of poverty and hindering educational and empowerment opportunities.

From the foregoing, the absence of comprehensive statistics on the prevalence of SRGBV is a stark reminder of the deep-rooted

systemic failure in putting up safeguarding mechanisms to effectively address it. It's an issue that requires a multi-pronged approach to address. It is therefore imperative to recommend policies to address this pressing issue in order to achieve the goal of providing quality education for all, with a specific focus on empowering girls. When girls are educated, it has a multiplier effect on development.

Conclusion and Recommendation

By examining the dynamics of SRGBV, particularly as it affects girls in Africa, this paper has drawn attention to the menace, and its effect on the lives of girls. SRGBV continues to pose a major obstacle to achieving gender equality in education throughout Africa. Despite the existing data shedding light on the seriousness of the problem, the true extent of SRGBV is often obscured by underreporting. Resolving this systemic issue necessitates comprehensive interventions at the policy, institutional, and community levels to guarantee that all girls have secure environments in which to learn and flourish, devoid of the specter of violence. To address it, it is crucial to implement comprehensive strategies including:

1. It is crucial for schools to establish a safe and supportive environment for students to report inappropriate behavior from teachers and other authority figures. In order to establish safe learning environments, empowerment programs for students where they get information on their rights as well as the appropriate channels for reporting violence should be put in place in schools.

2. Governments across all levels in Africa should embark on high-level awareness campaigns against SRGBV on mass and social media platforms, amplifying the dangers inherent in it, and enlightening people to disabuse their minds of harmful norms and beliefs that contribute to various forms of violence.

3. There is an urgent need for states in Africa to have agencies that train school authorities to effectively identify, prevent, and address SRGBV. This training should emphasize the importance of implementing gender-sensitive strategies within the school environment, in addition to utilizing positive discipline techniques.

4. The importance of accurate data cannot be overemphasized in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of SRGBV and for informing targeted interventions. There is therefore a need for data collection agencies across states in Africa to adopt effective data collection processes which are pre requisites for checking the progress and efficacy of implemented strategies to combat SRGBV.

5. There is a need for legislations that forbid SRGBV and its enforcement by governments across African states. It's not enough to have laws that prohibit it, the laws should be implemented by putting in place mechanisms for ensuring that offenders are punished.

6. Community engagement that entails bringing together community leaders, parents, organizations and other stakeholders to engage in conversations and collaborations tailored towards addressing societal norms that perpetuate violence.

7. These suggested measures, if well implemented, will bring about far-reaching implications not only for the well-being of girls, but also for the broader social fabric in which they exist.

Author's Biography

Dr. Adebusola Okedele teaches Political Science. Over the years, her research has focused on women in politics, gender studies, human rights, transnational advocacy, development and most recently on children's gendered political socialization in Nigeria. She has presented her research findings at national and international conferences, and her articles have been published in journals, books and newspapers.

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