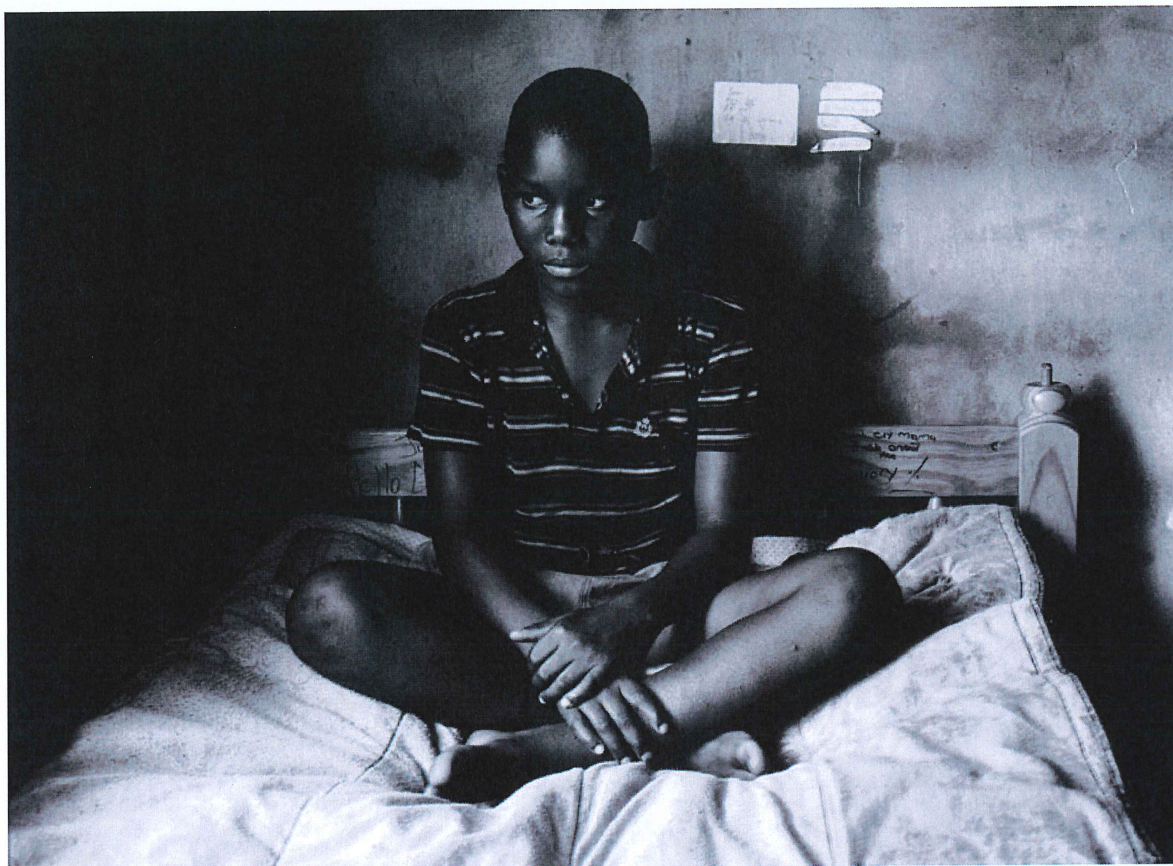


Protecting children against violence in schools



15% of rape victim-survivors in South Africa are younger than 12 years old, and 41% are under 18 (police statistics)

Child sex abuse can be prevented, as it mostly occurs with the unacknowledged awareness or undeclared witness of one or more adults. In this, neighbours and schools are key components, as found by two HSRC studies aimed at assisting schools to protect children. Among the startling facts presented to Parliament in 2002 by Prof. Andy Dawes, was the extent of the problem. Prof. Dawes, who works in the Child, Youth and Family Development (CYFD) research programme of the HSRC, quoted police statistics showing that 15% of South African rape victim-survivor are younger than 12 years old, and 41% are under 18.

Yet these cases represent only a fraction of the young children who are sexually assaulted every day, as many children and their families don't report sexual violence for fear of being blamed, disbelieved, intimidated or stigmatised. The HSRC is involved in ongoing research to assist in formulating strategies, and developing programmes

and interventions to curb this growing crisis.

In October 2002 CYFD convened a meeting in Johannesburg of leading social scientists and child protection activists from South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Delegates confirmed that their countries face similar problems of growing sexual violence against young children.

Child abuse is a complex and diverse phenomenon, as illustrated by the following examples: the preschool child raped by a drunk stranger; the 10-year-old whose father/uncle/grandfather or neighbour has raped her continuously for three years; the 12-year-old girl who is sold by her stepmother for sex; the 7-year-old boy who is groomed with attention and gifts by a pederast in preparation for a sexual relationship.

Observes Prof. Linda Richter, Executive Director of CYFD, 'As long as we fail to distinguish child sexual abuse into different kinds of crime, we will make little progress in identifying

its real underlying causes, and will continue to struggle to prevent something which we have failed to understand.'

'We need to know what is most important to protect children and prevent long-term ill effects on them, and what can wait; what works best for most children and their families, and what needs to be put aside as less useful at this stage of development,' Richter says.

An important strategy in this regard is neighbourhood programmes where child protection activists and specialists can help caring adults to protect children. Schools form a key component of such community programmes, hence the HSRC studies are aimed at assisting schools to protect children.

Violence Against Girls in South African Schools, commissioned by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and conducted by Dr Heather Brookes of CYFD, is an in-depth, participant-observation study to identify the factors that prevent or contribute to violence against girls in schools. The key findings included: the most common form of violence is bullying and beating by boys which occurs from the Grade 1 through high school; sexual harassment of girls by boys (including touching, kissing and sexual remarks) begins as early as Grade 4; girls are at risk of sexual harassment and violent crime on their way to and from school; and male educators and learners use the threat of violence to gain and maintain power over female educators and learners.

most abuse occurs with the implicit knowledge or undeclared witness of one or more adults

While some schools reported only a few incidents of gender violence, others reported many, ranging from minor bullying and verbal abuse to cases of assault and rape. •

Key factors which appear to shape the level of violence against girls in schools:

Attitudes and beliefs

In schools with a high incidence of gender violence, there is confusion about what constitutes sexual abuse and socially unacceptable behaviour towards girls and women. Females are often blamed for violence perpetrated against them. As a result, schools fail to prevent, or deal with, cases of gender violence appropriately.

Recognition and acknowledgement

In these situations, educators are often reluctant to acknowledge the problem of gender violence, or to prioritise it. At schools where sufficient numbers of educators (particularly males) publicly acknowledge the existence of the problem, preventative measures are put in place.

School policy and implementation

If there is little understanding about gender violence and insufficient acknowledgement of the extent of the problem, school policies on violence and appropriate behaviour are often undeveloped and unspecific. These schools fail to address confusion about rape, sexual abuse, harassment, inappropriate behaviour and culpa-

bility. Even where schools have developed adequate policies, these are often not implemented. There is less violence against girls where there are clearly established guidelines detailing every step of prevention and disciplinary processes. These are most effective when communicated clearly and repeatedly among staff, parents and learners, and where there are established mechanisms to report the outcome of cases of violence and sexual abuse.

School climate

The values, beliefs and practices encouraged in schools strongly influence the extent of gender violence. The lack of systems to monitor learners, the use of physical violence as a form of discipline, inconsistent discipline, poor attendance, tardiness by educators, and unequal gender roles and responsibilities within the school, all contribute to higher levels of violence against girls. In contrast, where respect, caring, shared values and common goals are encouraged, and where educators engage closely with learners' beliefs and experiences, schools show lower levels of violence against girls.

The report Violence Against Girls in South African Schools is available from hbrookes@hsrc.ac.za. Further, this report will be published by the HSRC Publishers in the course of 2003.

PROTECTING CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

A second study, *The impact of community networks on the protection of primary school children*, led by Craig Higson-Smith from CYFD, places South African primary schools under the spotlight and examines ways in which existing networks might better protect younger children. Although the study will be completed only in March 2003, preliminary findings revealed that:

- Almost all the schools surveyed are struggling with difficult and ongoing cases involving sexual abuse of children. Child abuse cases are a source of enormous stress to educators, and some prefer to ignore the signs to save themselves the frustration and distress of trying to intervene to assist the child.

- In many cases, educators do not understand the requirements of the South African law, or the departmental policy regarding the sexual abuse of children. For this reason, where abuse is suspected, it is commonly reported to parents, but no official report is made.

- Most schools struggle to get parents to participate in school activities. Questions of child protection are often seen as interference by the school in the family's

privacy. Educators are sometimes afraid to confront the situation because of the potential damage to relationships with parents, or the parent body.

- Some poorly resourced schools are unfenced and older children and adults have unrestricted access to school premises. This situation has been linked to violence against children at several schools.

- Many children travel alone through dangerous areas to and from school. Where children are collected from school by parents or carefully monitored lift schemes, children are exposed to fewer dangers.

- Many children spend substantial time unsupervised outside school property after school.

- Even Grade 1 children included in the study had a clear idea of what constitutes sexual abuse and related stories of sexual abuse that had happened to them or their friends.

- The first person in whom a child confides about sexual abuse is often another child, and the disclosures tend to remain secret.

Both studies strongly highlight the need for greater support for educators from the community and provincial departments of education in dealing with child abuse.

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