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Sexual violence, schooling and silence: teacher narratives from a secondary school in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is recognised as a public health and human rights problem worldwide. Although schools are expected to be safe places for young people and are envisaged as institutions that challenge social injustices, they are increasingly identified as sites where disproportionately high levels of sexual violence occurs. This study seeks to understand how sexual violence in schooling contexts is conceptualised and interrogated by teachers with a focus on lived experiences, the consequences and the underlying causes. The study is based on qualitative research conducted at a secondary school in Ethiopia. The findings point to overwhelming evidence that sexual violence pervades in secondary schools, with a wide range of adverse consequences on girls' wellbeing and educational attainment. The study demonstrates how nature, culture and society are included in conceptual thinking about the causes of sexual violence and explores teachers' agency in addressing the phenomenon.

Introduction

Sexual violence is one of the most widespread public health problems and human rights violations worldwide (Leach and Mitchell 2006). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2002) estimated that 150 million girls and 73 million boys (below 18 years of age) experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence. Consequently, the organisation declared this phenomenon in a subsequent report as a silent health emergency of global importance (WHO 2004). Within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, 'it is deemed to be "un-African", "unnatural" and very rare' (Lalor 2004, 440), yet there is overwhelming evidence suggesting that sexual abuse is a pervasive problem taking place at home, school, community and in the workplace (Leach et al. 2003; Wible 2004). While the majority of available studies focus on abuse at home and in the community, schools have been increasingly implicated (Gwirayi 2012; Leach 2015). The threat to adolescent health caused by

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the AIDS pandemic has been, in part, the catalyst for turning the spotlight on schools in the past decade, helping to uncover the pervasive scale of sexual violence in educational settings (Leach 2003).

This study seeks to advance our understanding of sexual violence through a contextually located analysis at a secondary school in Ethiopia, where research on the topic is scant (Gossaye et al. 2003). It uses qualitative research methods and adopts an interpretive approach to analyse teacher perspectives on how sexual violence is defined, what causes it and its consequences. Teachers are reported in many studies as perpetrators and key actors in transforming a school culture that appears to legitimise and perpetuate violence. Yet most of the available studies focus on student perspectives and lack insights on teacher views (de Lange, Mitchell, and Bhana 2012). Understanding the role and responsibilities of teachers in addressing sexual violence is imperative since they observe, tolerate, perpetuate or confront the phenomenon in schooling contexts. The article is structured as follows: first we review relevant studies conducted within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, then we offer contextual information about Ethiopia and explain the sample involved and the methods used. This is followed by presentation of the findings, structured as lived experiences, consequences, underlying causes and addressing sexual violence. In the concluding section, we discuss our major findings and their implications.

Sexual violence, causes and consequences

Sexual violence is defined differently by different people, leading to a wide discrepancy in reporting of scale of the phenomenon. According to the most authoritative definition provided by the WHO (2014), sexual violence is:

> any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work. (2)

Although sexual violence is pervasive in most societies, it is a highly sensitive subject and often hidden. The WHO reported that between 7 and 48% of adolescent girls and between 0.2 and 32% of adolescent boys testified that their first experience of sexual intercourse was forced (WHO 2002). Schools are sites where some of the most troubling incidences relating to sexual violence take place (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). A study in South Africa reported a 54.3% prevalence rate of contact sexual abuse among secondary school students (Madu and Peltzer 2000). Various studies report schools as the third most frequent place where child sexual abuse takes places, after the child's home and the perpetrator's house (Gwirayi 2013), and for adolescents, schools are the primary site (WHO 2002). A range of studies in the sub-Saharan African context identify a consistent pattern of sexual harassment or abuse, such as Gwirayi (2013) on Zimbabwe, The Human Rights Watch (2001) on South Africa, Muhanguzi (2011) on Uganda and Leach (2003) on Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Gwirayi (2013) reports comparable rates for girls and boys in secondary schools in Zimbabwe, and some ethnographic studies point to violence against boys as well. Nevertheless, girls continue to be disproportionately the victims. Male teachers and students, and some adult men in the vicinity of schools are reported as the main perpetrators (Leach 2003).

Underlying causes and risk factors

Sexual violence is a complex problem driven by a multitude of factors at the level of individuals, relationships, family, community and the broader society. Risk factors identified by research included poverty, economic decline, rapid social change and failure of governments to abide by human rights agreement and treaties (Lalor 2004; Leach 2003). Moreover, gender relations are central to understanding sexual violence. Numerous studies point to patriarchy, masculine hegemony and heteronormativity as contexts in which sexual violence is perpetuated, tolerated and even normalised (de Lange, Mitchell, and Bhana 2012).

Schools play a highly important role in socialising children and young people about gender relations and sexuality. Based on a study in Uganda, Muhanguzi (2011) suggests that 'schools offer a vigorous social cultural discursive environment in which students' interaction is characterised by gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances with deep-seated lack of female sexual autonomy in sexual relationships, compulsory heterosexuality and sexual exploitation of females' (716). Based on her study in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe, Leach (2003) reports that abusive behaviour towards girls by older boys and male teachers is widespread and institutionalised. Students are socialised within a school culture that tolerates and 'normalises' gender-based violence.

Immediate and long-term impact of sexual violence

Sexual violence is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes on physical and mental health and social wellbeing (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). Negative impact on physical health includes causing physical injury or even death, teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, chronic pelvic pain and sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV infection). Its implications on mental health can be equally severe, such as guilt, shame, humiliation, anger, anxiety disorders, heightened levels of stress, eating disorders, low self-esteem, self-disgust, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and withdrawal from social contact. Moreover, sexual violence can have major negative consequences for the social wellbeing of the victims as they can be stigmatised and ostracised by their own families and others in their environment (Muhanguzi 2011; WHO 2002).

Sexual violence has negative bearings on the education system as well. When it takes place between peers or when the perpetrator is a teacher, victims might feel agony about coming to school. This might eventually lead to school alienation and withdrawal. Furthermore, the psychological ramifications of sexual abuse might impair cognitive development and functioning of victims, undermine their self-confidence and limit their capacity for concentration and comprehension (Le Mat 2016; Muhanguzi 2011). Consequently, their achievement level might decrease. In some cases, it can also lead to high rates of absenteeism, loss of interest in education, change of schools and drop-out.

Contextual background

Women in Ethiopian society are often in a lower position compared to men (the country ranks 174th out of 188 in UNDP's [2014] Gender Inequality Index). Gender inequalities include early marriages, female genital mutilation, domestic violence and fewer education and work opportunities (UN-HABITAT 2008). The country is under increasing international pressure because of such sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) concerns, and for

reasons related to human rights in general. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation law continues to severely curtail the ability of independent non-governmental organisations to work on human rights. The law bars work on human rights, good governance, conflict resolution and advocacy on the rights of women, children and people with disabilities if organisations receive more than 10% of their funds from foreign sources (Human Rights Watch 2016, 3). This has implications on the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on sexual and reproductive health (note that 'R' – standing for Rights – is omitted for this reason by many NGOs on their work on SRHR).

Ethiopia's prevalence rate of intimate partner violence is one of the highest among countries included in the WHO Multi Country Study of Violence Against Women (World Health Organization 2005). Results from community and school-based studies indicate that 50–67% of Ethiopian women experience gender-based violence in their lifetime (Gossaye et al. 2003; Mullu et al. 2015). Furthermore, in secondary schools there are serious concerns about the high prevalence of sexual violence, with one study reporting that in the east of Ethiopia, 70% of young men and 68% of young women, respectively, had offended or became a victim of sexual violence (Bekele 2012). In another study among 1401 female high school students in Addis Ababa and Western Shoa, 74% of respondents reported sexual harassment (Gelaye et al. 2009). A recent study on abuse of young men demonstrated that the lifetime prevalence of rape was 4.3% and the prevalence of sexual harassment was 68.2% (Haile, Kebeta, and Kassie 2013).

However, sexual violence is treated with secrecy, and young women in particular tend to choose silence to avoid being regarded as indecent (Kebede, Hilden, and Middelthon 2014). It is also considered shameful to disclose family matters and 'personal humiliation'. Consequently, incidences of sexual violence are rarely brought to justice. Another reason for underreporting sexual violence relates to the weaknesses in the law enforcement system (Gossaye et al. 2003). Thus, girls and women grow up in a society in which sexual violence is widespread and fostered by a culture that reinforces men's superiority over women (Berhane et al. 2001). This leaves very limited space for young girls to openly speak about their sexuality. Consequently, there have been very few studies so far on the topic in Ethiopia (Gossaye et al. 2003). Until now, studies on sexual violence in schools and communities in Ethiopia have been mostly quantitative, aiming to understand the scope of the problem and examine the connection between gender-based violence and indicators of depression (Deyassa et al. 2009; Gelaye et al. 2009; Gossaye et al. 2003). This study, however, aims to complement these findings from a more qualitative/interpretative approach, focusing on the views of teachers to better understand how and why sexual violence continues to be prevalent in schools despite increasing awareness and knowledge about the scope and urgency of the problem.

The study

The article draws on a study based on qualitative research methods to develop a deeper understanding of the 'personal' within its immediate and wider social and political contexts. A general, state secondary school in Addis Ababa is selected as a case study. The school is located close to the city's bus station and Merkato, Africa's biggest daily market. The area is known as one of the poorer neighbourhoods of the city, inhabited mostly by rural migrants. It offers the first two grades of secondary education (grades 9 and 10) and students are between 14 and 18 years old. There were 2136 students enrolled at the time of research (52%

female), mostly from low-income migrant and merchant families. Education in (SRH) is not compulsory in Ethiopia, however, this school adopted a co-curricular programme to teach on SRH related issues. However, participation in the programme remains limited to a few teachers and students. It is also crucial to note that school is located in an area where sex work takes place. According to some teachers, 20–30% of parents were involved in sex work, including some of the students as well.

The data presented in this article was collected in the spring of 2013 during two-months of fieldwork by the second author. It is based on semi-structured interviews with SRH professionals (3 from an NGO that was involved in developing and implementing the SRH programme at the school and 1 SRH expert at a bilateral donor organisation) and 11 teachers (6 female and 5 male). Moreover, two focus-group discussions involving 8 teachers were conducted (one with 3 female teachers and another one with 5 male teachers). Two male teachers were interviewed and took part in focus-group discussions (FGDs) as well; hence, in total, the views of 17 teachers were explored in this study. All teachers who volunteered to take part in the study were interviewed. Considering that there were 118 teachers (24% female) at the school, there was a self-selection bias. Their age ranged between 25 and 40 years. Two of them were involved in teaching an SRH programme and the others taught different subjects. Interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted in English, which appeared to be challenging at times. The teachers' varying levels of difficulty with English was striking as the language of instruction in the school is English. During FGDs, teachers sometimes did translations for their colleagues. During interviews, sometimes participants spoke in Amharic first, before translating to English themselves. In some cases, an additional translation was sought by an Ethiopian research assistant. No translators were used during interviews because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Interviews took between 30 and 40 minutes, while FGDs lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The conversations with teachers took place in a quiet classroom to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and interviews with SRH professionals took place in their offices. The FGDs were conducted in same-gender compositions because this makes sharing ideas easier, especially on highly sensitive topics (Bloor et al. 2001). Confidentiality was ensured and emphasised before starting the interviews and FGDs, and the participants' permission was obtained to record the conversations. Participants were free to switch off the recorder in case they felt uncomfortable or withdraw from the study without giving a reason. No reimbursements were provided to the participants.

Recordings of the interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim into narrative reports and coded by using Atlas.ti. A pre-defined code list was developed based on a literature review and this was expanded during coding process. To enhance the reliability of analysis, the coding was done by both authors separately, as they read the transcriptions and coded the texts independent of each other, and compared and discussed afterwards. Major codes included definitions of sexual abuse, causes, consequences and strategies to address sexual abuse. In addition, all interviews were read once again and a conceptual map of emerging themes and issues was prepared manually. The participants are quoted in length below to give them voice and to allow the readers draw their own conclusions.

Lived experiences at secondary schools

When asked about prevalence of sexual violence, teachers offered some contrasting narratives: a few of them argued that there was 'none' or 'not much' sexual violence at their

school, while some others claimed that there was definitely a lot. Nevertheless, there was an overall recognition of its presence at secondary schools in general, particularly in rural areas. The small size of our sample is not conducive to making statistical inferences or making generalisations about female or male teachers. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there was much more awareness and recognition of sexual violence among male teachers in our sample, or they had chosen to speak about it more candidly.

> There is no much harassment in our school …. No problem in this school. (Female teacher 6)

> I hear from my colleagues, friends about this. And even in different schools, teachers also abuse girl students for sex … this is a major problem in our country, even in the countryside. (Male teacher 4)

> I am telling you the truth. I have noticed that many teachers, not many teachers but few … some teachers that I know personally have relationship, sexual relationship with students … I know one of the teachers has a child by one of his students. (Male teacher 8, FGD)

Teacher narratives revealed that different definitions of sexual violence were at work. The discussions draw attention to boys, teachers and adult men in school surroundings as perpetrators, while identifying girls as 'passive victims'. Nevertheless, there were few references to verbal abuse of boys by girls, or boys feeling attracted to and seeking a romantic (and sexual) relationship with female teachers, or girls being infatuated with male teachers and pursuing them. None of the male or female teachers disclosed a personal experience of sexual violence either as a perpetrator or victim.

Sexual violence perpetrated by boys was framed within a broader framework of gender-based violence and a pervasive culture of male aggression. The following were discussed as violent behaviour: boys forcing or seeking to entice girls into having sex; insulting, hitting and beating girls in an effort to feel stronger and more powerful; throwing rocks at them; taking girls' property without permission; making girls carry the belongingness of boys; and forcing girls to do boys' homework or providing answers during exams. Some teachers also highlighted the excessive scale of verbal abuse to frighten and distress girls. There were also unwelcome comments on dresses and on one's appearance, girls with bigger breasts and nice hair being disproportionately targeted in such instances:

> They hit, they abuse them [girls]. They tell unnecessary words …. So many words. I hear, and I forget them. (Female teacher 1)

> Male students, boys, can always insult the girls. In most cases what you dress, what you look like … just verbal. (Female teacher 3)

Moreover, when boys proposed girls to be their girlfriends, and got rejected, they tended to feel 'defeated'. In such cases, they often treated girls in a rather hostile and aggressive manner. They harassed girls verbally and physically, sometimes together with their male friends, both in and outside of school:

> If they asked you a relationship … and you say, no I am not ready for this, they do not accept you did not want it … If they loved you and if you say no, they will come by force … [they would say] I will kill you, I will hit you. (Female teacher 4)

Such accounts were also reported in Ugandan secondary schools by Muhanguzi (2011) 'all the girls testified that their rejection of boys' invitations were always met with horrid abuse and harassment' (718). Moreover, Leach (2003) suggests similar patterns in Zimbabwe:

'Threatening or violent behaviour, or sexually explicit verbal abuse designed to humiliate her, was often the consequence of a girl turning down a boy's proposal' (390).

Teachers are also implicated as perpetrators of sexual violence, even though none of the teachers interviewed reported any wrongdoing. Some teachers sought (forced or consensual) sexual liaisons with their students, in particular to bargain sex in exchange for higher grades or financial support. Examples of teacher harassment also included going to sports classes and staring at girls and commenting on their look in ways that make girls highly uncomfortable. The following remarks are illustrative:

> Female students, without their interest, they are forced to start the love, the love relationship …. Most of the time, they do not want, but by force they do it. Because [they are] afraid of their teachers. (Female teacher 8, FGD)

> He will appoint her to come home and unless she goes home and do some things with him, he will not correct her exam results. (Male NGO expert 3)

> Some teachers kick the female students …. A teacher picks her because he wants to do this sexual intercourse with her, but she refuses, by covering that situation he only say 'she is stupid, she doesn't want to learn, so I kick her'. (Male teacher 3)

Some of the sexual relationships between boys and girls, and teachers and girls were defined as 'transactional sex', as girls received small gifts or money in return. Yet, 'transactional sex' was particularly brought up by male teachers as they discussed sexual liaisons between girls and male adults in school surroundings. For instance, some girls stood outside of school and were picked up by passing drivers during lunch time or after school. The close proximity of the school to an area where sex work takes place was perceived as facilitating such exchanges:

> The students, in the night they will dress some convenient way, they will stand over on the roads, and some guys pick them up. And they do the sexual intercourse for money. (Male teacher 3)

> I have seen with my naked eyes … at the break time and at the lunch time, they [drivers] stopped their car in front of the school and they had an appointment with girls. They had girls in their cars. And they drove away and took her. (Male teacher 2, FGD)

The participants, mainly male teachers and SRHR experts, conveyed a general sentiment that sexual violence was more prevalent in schools than people like to believe or accept. They noted that the cases of sexual violence remains disproportionately under-reported at school, which confirms similar patterns within broader society (Gossaye et al. 2003). An important reason for this is the absence of trained persons who are assigned with the tasks of hearing complaints, investigating the cases and reporting to the authorities. When the issue is left to teachers to investigate the alleged cases and take necessary actions, some believed there would be a lot of corruption:

> If there is someone who is assigned to hear all the complaints, then we would have gone to that person to report. But, one there is no law, second there is no one to hear it for you …. Because all the teachers are friends in the school. So if you are going to report the case, he can easily deceive the information and he uses to advantage and influence other teachers. (Female NGO expert 2)

The evasiveness of sexual violence was also closely related to the taboos surrounding any talk of sexuality and a range of factors that compelled the victims to remain silent, such as fear of being victimised or ostracised. During the fieldwork, we were aware of inherent sensitivities and ethical considerations in collecting data on sexual violence in a schooling

context, particularly as Western researchers. These might have influenced the willingness of the participants to disclose or discuss sexual violence at length with us. The possible reluctance of those with power (e.g., teachers in this case) to expose the extent of violence needs to be considered as well. In this regard, a NGO expert noted that when you ask teachers:

> They might say 'Ah no we have never heard of sexual violence in the school'. They could say that. But, you just tell them that there are more, because that's why you need the literature, references. Then you say that there have been many sexual harassments or violence happening in schools, but never been reported. (Female NGO expert 2)

The instances of sexual violence discussed by the participants corroborate with other studies in the region, which report male teachers demanding sexual favours from girls in exchange for higher grades and male students offering gifts or money (Leach et al. 2003). Some studies report comparably high rates of sexual abuse of boys as well (Gwirayi 2013; Haile, Kebeta, and Kassie 2013), yet in this study boys were mainly discussed as perpetrators. The narratives also point out that the participants perceived sexual abuse as being closely related to other forms of gender-based violence.

Consequences of sexual violence

The consequences of sexual violence were mainly discussed in relation to how they adversely affect girls, focusing on implications for physical and mental health, social wellbeing and education. Concerns about physical health highlighted sexually transmitted infections (particularly HIV), unwanted pregnancies, abortions and their possible negative implications on health. Detrimental effects on girls' psychological wellbeing included anxiety, a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity, loss of self-esteem and confidence, overwhelmingly negative self-image and depression. Furthermore, girls' social wellbeing was undermined due to self-inflicted isolation, decrease in participation in social activities and loneliness. Girls also experienced stigmatisation and discrimination within their social environment, particularly due to pregnancy as it considered a taboo before marriage. Several of these have direct consequences on girls' schooling in terms of achievement levels, the quality of educational experiences and continuation of their schooling. Participants referred to lack of concentration in the class, prolonged absences from school and early drop-out:

> The girls always, you know, give up …. Some of the students may break their learning and drop out of school. They try to solve their problems by withdrawing from the school. (Female teacher 5)

> They [girls] will not follow the education, so they fail in education. (Male teacher 3)

They unanimously stated that 'girls suffer' the consequences of sexual violence, creating in many instances a vicious circle that is hard to reverse. As discussed below, economic dependence on men and lack of education are seen at the root of sexual violence and gender inequalities within the broader society. Therefore, school drop-out or low achievement levels perpetuate the underlying dynamics of gender inequalities. Curiously, negative consequences on the perpetrators were not mentioned at all by any of the participants, such as how doing harm to another human being might impair one's moral, psychological and spiritual growth. Likewise, the studies we reviewed on the subject were characterised by such lack of insight into harmful implications on the perpetrators.

Underlying causes

The participants highlighted the embeddedness and multi-dimensionality of sexual violence in schooling contexts, and discussed a wide range of factors related to individuals involved, peer influence, families and broader society. This debate also underscored the fact that violence is not peculiar to schools. In fact, what is happening at schools needed to be interpreted and understood within its broader societal context:

> Be it at school, at the family level, or on the way, violence is there … not only forced sex … but it is mental, psychologically, everything. (Male NGO expert 1)

Individual factors

On an individual level, boys' aggression and sexual behaviour is mainly explained by their age and developmental stage, but love and attraction were also cited. Boys were described as being in the 'fire age' and having 'uncontrollable' urges. They were also seen as immature and unable to comprehend the consequences of their actions. Moreover, boys appeared to lack awareness about gender equality and they were unable to understand the dynamics of intimate relationships, for example the imperative of love and respect in relationships or how forcing girls to do things without their consent is unacceptable:

> Because these students are in adolescent age. In adolescent age they are not too matured … so in biology it is the time of this sexual violence … as you know in their biology, nature also forces them. (Female teacher 1)

> Students are in fire age. (Female teacher 2)

Concerning teachers, their young age, the small age difference with their students or not being married and feeling lonely were cited. There were also remarks indicating that teachers simply misused their power and took advantage of their older age and authority:

> Some teachers, you know, can need sexual relation with students. Students [are] scared, because they make up low results. (Female teacher 3)

One male teacher commented that there might be a range of individual or societal dynamics that explain pervasiveness of sexual violence at schools. Yet, ultimately, all sexual liaisons between students and teachers are illegitimate and reflect teachers' lack of integrity and failure to meet ethical and professional standards:

> We are professionals here. So, the problem is the teacher's problem. If a teacher has committed this mistake, one way or the other, it's totally the mistake of the teachers. (Male teacher 8, FGD)

In this regard, the lack of a teacher code of conduct articulating proper behaviour between students and teachers (e.g., prohibiting any sexual conduct between teachers and students, whether coerced or consensual) and sanctions in case of impeachment (such as suspension from school, non-payment of salaries or transfer to a different school) was brought up as an important concern. There are existing laws that forbid enforced sexual relationships, however the participants were disquieted since these laws were not well known at school, or the victims tend not to report the cases for a range of reasons, including public shame and lack of faith in the authorities:

> The mindset of policemen, the mindset of community … of the judge and court is as usual. Not yet changed. (Male NGO expert 1)

> Laws should be in place. However, in this country even when there are laws they are not effectively implemented. It is not that the government does not want to implement them but they do not have the capacity. (Male SRHR expert at a bilateral donor agency)

Similar accounts on lack of appropriate regulations, failure to enforce sanctions, fear of being victimised or 'unsympathetic, disbelieving and unsupportive' teacher responses have been reported in other contexts as well (Leach and Machakanja 2000; Muhanguzi 2011, 720).

Furthermore, a wide range of casual explanations related to girls were also proposed to explain their vulnerability to sexual violence. Some suggested that girls are 'weak' to stop abusive acts and they learn to accept it as the 'norm' since 'it happens all the time'. Most of the claims about girls point toward some personality characteristics that create an environment in which sexual violence is tolerated and perpetuated, such as lack of confidence and assertiveness, submissiveness, obedience, low self-esteem, sense of inferiority or inability to express or protect themselves. These narratives portray a 'deficit' model of girls:

> They [girls] do not have respect for themselves. (Male teacher 4)

> They are too shy and they are too afraid to defend themselves if they are asked in such a way. They don't have the intention to report the issue to the concerned body also. (Male teacher, 2 FGD)

> As you know in nature, female do not resist the power of the male. Because of that they can attack. (Female teacher 1)

> She does not have any chance to stop it, so instead of [getting] angry on that thing, she smiles and goes. (Male teacher 3)

The narratives also pointed to female complicity, for example girls seeking transactional sexual relationships because they wanted a 'luxurious life in Addis' or because it offers some other advantages:

> I mean, it's just like selling sex with a grade, transactional sex. So I don't know whether they are forced to do it, like one girl I told you she had a relationship with her teacher. But … I can't tell you whether she's forced, or she wanted to have it. But it's a win-win. Some girls also take that advantage …. They don't have to study or work hard to get an A. (Female NGO expert 2)

Moreover, another study conducted at the same school demonstrated that girls were often referred to as a 'distraction' and blamed for the poor behaviour of male peers and teachers because of the way they dressed (Browes 2015).

Peer influence and family

The influence of peers was brought up, particularly the way girls might influence one another into seeking transactional sex:

> When you see a friend of them, when she gets money from a guy, and when she spends it on buying clothes and wearing shoes something like that, it is easy to understand how her friend could be influenced … yes, it's a common thing in schools. For little time they spend, they get big money. (Male teacher 1)

The powerful socialisation effect of the home environment, effectively 'normalising' gender inequality and gender-based violence, was also debated in this regard:

> Even the person who tells you that women in all aspects … are equal to men, if you go to his home, he may do the same thing what he accepts from their parents or from this culture. (Male teacher 1)

Moreover, the 'big gap' between parents and children is pointed out in Ethiopian culture, making it very difficult to have open communication on sensitive issues (see also Browes 2015). For instance, one teacher noted that when girls share their experiences or apprehensions, they do not necessarily get support from their parents. Talking about sex remains a taboo. Moreover, parents do not allow boys and girls to be friends; such encounters are not viewed 'decent', often having (or fearing) adverse consequences for girls:

> A lot of things are in our culture, most words we can never talk. Even talking about sex is … yes. So, most of them [girls] are scared. (Female teacher 3)

According to some teachers, the silence surrounding sexuality and its suppression at a societal level is counterproductive since it leads to acting out and experimentation in unhealthy ways.

Societal factors

The participants also discussed broader societal and economic factors to analyse the pervasiveness of sexual violence. These included gender inequality, poverty, adverse cultural practices and norms, religion, lack of education and the impact of globalisation and modernisation. They referred to deeply held gender perspectives and norms that treated women and girls unfairly and accorded them little voice and rights. Many perceived sexual violence as a symptom of such inequalities that are deeply ingrained within society:

> I think the basic cause for sexual violence is gender inequality … most of the time males feel superior than females and nothing will happen if he performs any kind of sexual violence on girls. (Male teacher 4)

> Men are expected to be dominant and they are aggressive. Many husbands hurt their wives. It's clearly shown in Ethiopia. (Male teacher 7, FGD)

Hence, elimination of sexual violence required transforming gender norms and attitudes, which in turn necessitated a major change in the Ethiopian culture:

> One saying in Amharic [for woman] is 'personal belongingness'. Women are like if this [grabs a mobile phone] is yours, if you're a man, then this is the woman …. A woman is just like that …. Personal belongingness to a man. Or, to a family. Like a woman cannot say anything, or [have] power. (Female NGO expert 2)

The role of religion was also underscored in perpetuating beliefs and conceptions that legitimised gender inequality:

> Even sometimes some religion will support females to be dependent on her husband and the like things. So that has to be solved. (Male teacher 4)

Gender inequality was upheld not only by cultural norms and traditions, but also through poverty. In fact, poverty was the most cited reason by both male and female teachers as a contributing factor to sexual violence, in particular to 'transactional sex' and girls being involved in prostitution. Poverty appears to compel some to exchange sex for money to support themselves or others in their family, or it prevents them escaping from abusive relationships and situations. These arguments highlighted the importance of educating girls and supporting them to be economically self-reliant:

> If a girl is not educated, if she doesn't have income, I don't think there will be a solution. (Female NGO expert 2)

Moreover, some participants suggested that increasing globalisation, modernity and penetration of Western values and images through the media compound the problems of sexual violence. Accordingly, pop music videos with sexually charged messages, movies or pornographic videos, which have became widely available, were viewed to have very negative influences. Some argued that they were 'encouraging' young people to engage in sexual activities. Some others framed it as modernisation influences, for example young people engaging in sexual activities because these make them feel 'modern' or that 'they are trendy':

> They are exposed to pornography, they are exposed to foreign films, movies … to songs like rap. So when they are watching that, they directly perceive things and they try to. (Male teacher 7, FGD)

> Even in small towns you can easily get Internet …. So those information are very biased, for example, the music we see, like this Western American music, all naked girls. It gives them the wrong impression about growing up. You have to be like show your boobs or your ass and all these sexual messages are biased …. Because of that, young people are very sexual now at the time then it was before. (Female NGO expert 2)

> They get these things from globalization. They see different kinds of films. So, that's why they do this sexual violence. (Female teacher 8, FGD)

In this respect, Lalor (2004) argues that 'It might be reassuring to imagine that child sexual abuse is a recent phenomenon, attributable to modern, Western values, but there is very little evidence for (or against) this widely held view' (451). Interestingly, in our study, even if globalisation and modernisation effects were mainly discussed as having negative implications, some female teachers also noted positive effects on transforming gender inequalities and according more rights and freedoms to women.

Addressing sexual violence

Female teachers were more reserved in acknowledging sexual violence, recognising the scale of it, and attributing responsibilities to teachers. One of the rare studies on teacher voice on the subject also documents similar tendencies among female teachers in South Africa, 'with women teachers from the same school, we heard a more tentative voice, hesitant in identifying and ascribing blame to males in an outright way' (de Lange, Mitchell, and Bhana 2012, 500). Relative silences among female teachers might be informed by the patriarchal nature of Ethiopian society, and a culture that does not encourage women to speak up, criticise and confront injustices, particularly when they concern male behaviour. Such socialisation and conditioning are likely to impede female teachers' determination and capacity to address sexual violence in their schools. Nevertheless, when we asked teachers how they reacted to the instances of sexual violence in their daily work, female teachers were more articulate about how they intervened:

> I will interfere between them: 'Don't touch her!' Then, they will also argue with me. 'Why not teacher, why? You are female so you will support them.' (Female teacher 1)

Some other female teachers also noted how they monitored their classrooms in order to make sure that appropriate behaviour is observed by everyone. They talked about the importance of education, how education is for all and that both sexes are equal. They also offered guidance and specific advices depending on the situation. A female teacher who had training in psychology had many girls coming to her to talk about their concerns, instances

of rape or deliberate low grading by teachers to ask for sexual favours. She informed the management and sought a solution. Yet, she was also concerned that many girls were scared, that so many instances went unreported. She also had girl representatives in all classrooms who acted as mediators between the teacher and the girls who were hesitant to talk about their experiences of sexual violence. The representatives would speak to their classmates to encourage them to speak out and seek help. In some cases, the management involved parents as well. Furthermore, female teachers emphasised the importance of approaching boys in a peaceful manner not to fuel their anger or to be the target of their aggressiveness. One teacher particularly noted how some of the boys were much bigger than themselves and how they could be physically intimidating.

Male teachers, however, reported few instances of girls seeking their support, which is not surprising considering the gendered roles and the culture of silencing girls in the presence of men. Girls were perceived as shy and not knowing how to express their feelings. This created a dilemma for male teachers: they wanted to help, but how could they if girls did not talk about their problems? Several male teachers talked about the importance of girls' clubs that inform the girls as well as train them in specific competencies.

Furthermore, lack of counselling services for students who experience sexual violence remained a concern. The counsellors were mostly preoccupied with students coming late to school and there were few students who consulted them about sexual abuse. According to a male teacher, this was mainly due to discomfort and unease they felt in approaching counsellors and discussing issues involving sexuality. During an FGD with male teachers, some argued that students should be able to approach counsellors even when they were in love, or attracted to someone, just to express their feelings and seek advice. Yet, such matters were hardly ever discussed openly and mostly kept hidden.

Overall, addressing sexual violence was viewed as a complex, multifaceted and challenging undertaking by the participants. They discussed a range of strategies in this respect, including sexuality education, involving parents, training teachers and installing clear rules and regulations. A general sentiment pointed to the need for an inclusive and holistic approach and assigning clear responsibilities to the respective stakeholders.

> You can't ignore that there is the issue, but all the issues, all the plans, goals, objectives, and all this efforts, remain only on paper. So nobody is accountable to perform it in action, to solve the problem. (Male teacher 2)

The role of education was debated in this context as an important tool to promote gender equality through equipping girls with skills and knowledge to seek employment in adulthood, and to instil egalitarian values and norms among young generations:

> If the person is an educated person, he will understand you that you do not want … if you study, if you develop yourself, your future is always bright. It goes bright. (Female teacher 4)

Furthermore, it was considered important for schools to provide comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), that is, provide the 'right information' to young people about male and female anatomy, different types of contraceptives and the consequences of unsafe sex. Yet, there were criticisms on how the few available programmes were mainly focused on offering 'technical information' and neglected important subjects such as love, relationships, friendship, emotions and desire. Furthermore, as Heslop et al. (2015) argue, the discourses of female innocence and girls' lack of interest in sex, commonly articulated by teachers and promoted in schools, provide a context that is vulnerable to tolerating sexual coercion. Thus,

educators need to move beyond providing 'technical information' and help renegotiate such taken-for-granted gendered relations (Connell 2002; Heslop et al. 2015). Some teachers also called for a school-wide approach and training of all teachers to be accountable and informed about the means and knowledge about what to do when instances of sexual abuse come to their attention. Moreover, inclusion of the voice of youth in strategising action on sexual violence and including not only girls but also boys was highlighted for the programmes to have any lasting effect.

Conclusion

Our findings point to overwhelming evidence that sexual violence is persistent in secondary schools and in other social contexts in Ethiopia. Although some studies report how teachers downplay or dismiss sexual violence (Mirsky 2003), teachers – particularly male teachers – in our sample were forthcoming in revealing its scale and nature. Within the context of this discussion, we found two observations rather intriguing. First, as teachers were discussing grave implications of sexual violence on young girls, they appeared to be detached emotionally from the topic, displayed little empathy with girls and rarely expressed a sense of outrage at the injustices. Rather, their approach seemed to be quite pragmatic and their views on how to address the problem were almost technical at times. This may explain in part why school-based interventions, such as CSE programmes, have had so little impact. While the CSE programmes contributed to more sympathetic peer relations (see Le Mat 2016), future studies might explore how teachers and their responsibilities can be better incorporated and consulted in addressing sexual violence.Second, the implications of sexual violence concerned only the 'victims'. There seemed to be no adverse effects on boys or teachers as long as their case is not 'successfully' brought to the court, which happens very rarely. We believe that in order to move the discussion further on sexual violence, there needs to be more attention on how undermining the dignity and well-being of a fellow human being compromises the mental and spiritual development of perpetrators as well. Interdisciplinary research and interventions could further explore such consequences. For instance, CSE programmes could create opportunities for boys to undertake such self-inquiry, or they might be invited to have open and candid talks with girls to enable them to better empathise with their lived experiences. As Davies (2008) remarks:

> Gendered violence is not just a problem for the 'victims' nor even for the perpetrators, but for culture and society generally. A society that ignores it, or normalises it, has something deeply amiss for all its citizens and for its future as a peaceful or progressive society. (646)

The discussions on the underlying causes illustrated how context informs sexual violence, rendering some groups or individuals vulnerable. These debates also pointed to the importance of nature, culture and society in sexual socialisation and 'normalisation' of violence. On an individual level, sex was seen as a natural force, most dominant in adolescent boys and young men. Such understanding almost 'excuses' boys and male teachers, since they are in 'fire age' or because single teachers need sex. Interestingly, in these narratives sex emerges as a biological and psychological imperative only for boys and adult men. In contrast, for girls, explanations were sought in a 'deficit' model of their behaviour, for example lack of confidence or assertiveness. Moreover, a range of societal factors, such as poverty, economic dependency of women, gender inequalities, adverse cultural norms and practices, religion and globalisation influences, were debated as key contextual realities that reproduce sexual

violence. Discussions on these debates revealed some contradictions: for instance, modernisation was perceived as a threat to Ethiopian culture and even a factor that magnifies the phenomenon of sexual violence. At the same time, Ethiopian culture itself is highly problematised, and pervasive gender inequalities, strong patriarchy and male aggression were seen as the root of sexual abuse.

The role of education in this debate was paradoxical. Teacher narratives confirmed a reverse relationship between sexual violence and education, demonstrating a lot of trust in what education can do to eliminate sexual violence. Because of its surrounding context (high poverty levels and the close proximity of sex work), our case study school was keen to raise awareness of young people on sexuality and prepare them for a healthy sexual life. Nevertheless, many teachers noted that schools mirror the injustices and inequalities of the broader society. In fact, young people continue to experience more sexual violence at schools compared to other contexts. This contradiction sends highly mixed messages to students: on the one hand teachers were perceived as an authority, as knowledgeable and wise beings. On the other hand, they were among the perpetrators of sexual violence, and often failed to intervene or demonstrated indifference when such harassment took place. Consequently, schools fail to have a transformative role in the lives of young people. Particularly for young girls, such experiences seem to lead to a strong sense of alienation and frustration (see also Le Mat 2016).

As a final note, we like to point to the silence and indifference that surround sexual violence. Even if there is increasing attention paid to the issue, particularly at the level of the international donor community, silences surrounding sexuality and violence need to be overcome to acknowledge the scale and nature of the problem and develop strategic solutions. This is also imperative to challenge the permission given to male students or teachers to commit sexual violence. Furthermore, discussions on the underlying causes of sexual violence reveals a tendency to externalise the problem, which inadvertently denies individual or institutional responsibility. Admittedly, sexual violence is a contextual phenomenon and its elimination requires a concerted effort at many levels (Parkes and Unterhalter 2015). Nevertheless, this should not lead to a sense of powerlessness or indifference among teachers or denial of their own agency as persons in position of power.

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Disclosure statement

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