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Gender Based Violence in Zimbabwean Primary Schools: An Analysis of Reasons and its Impact on Children

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Abstract:
While women, men, boys and girls can be victims of gender based violence, women and girls are the primary victims because of their subordinate social status. This study analyses the reasons and impact of gender based violence on girls in primary schools. It uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) where children and the researcher engage as active participants in a joint research process. Research tools comprised a visual tool (cause and consequence tree) and semi-structured interviews. Participants comprised of twenty primary school girls who were victims of gender violence, ten primary school head teachers, two police officers and two social workers. The study was carried out in two districts of Zimbabwe, which are Marondera and Harare. Findings revealed that gender based violence is prompted and maintained by gender inequalities and imbalances in power between males and females whereby different forms of violence are considered an affirmation of male dominance. Cultural social norms which socialize men to be dominant, aggressive and controlling were also cited as reasons for gender based violence in schools. Some male participants believed girls are the weaker sex so boys enjoy exercising their power over them both physically and emotionally. Head teachers partly ascribe gender based violence in schools to poverty which keeps girls unschooled, dependent and academically weak. The girls are unable to escape unfair social demands as they are undervalued and not respected. Head teachers felt this could be seen by the forced participation of girls in child labour in different sectors to earn money for school fees, school uniforms and books and other necessities for their families. The impact of gender based violence was cited by participants as: school dropout, self –blame, depression, suicidal thoughts, insecurity and self-hate among others.

Keywords: gender-based violence, impact, cause and consequences, Participatory Action Research

1. Introduction
Gender based violence is a global phenomenon that impacts children in schools all over the world. It is often tolerated and sustained by social institutions like schools where children are supposed to be safe and protected. Gender based violence refers to acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools. It is perpetrated as a result of social norms, gender based stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics. In schools where violence is the norm, the education system itself may increase the chance that girls drop out, interrupt their studies, experience an unintended pregnancy, or become infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STI) including the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In developing countries, the failure to acknowledge the existence of gender based violence and to address it has allowed it to flourish.
 The discussion in this study is anchored in the theoretical framework of Patriarchal   and Social Learning Theories as these approaches expound on why gender based violence occurs. Results are presented in the form of exemplars from my field notes and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews. The relevant polices and legislation were borne in mind throughout. From these exemplars, inferential and explanatory descriptive analyses are made and I used frequency counts as illustration of incidents or themes only where appropriate. Within the context of this study, gender based violence focuses on girls only.

2. Theoretical Framework
Various theories have been advanced to expound the reasons why the gender based violence phenomenon is in existence. These include the Patriarchal and Social Learning theories. Feminist theories of violence against women emphasise that patriarchal structures of gender based inequalities of power in society are at the root of the problem. Corry (2001) posits that patriarchy requires violence or a subliminal threat of violence in order to maintain itself. Boy children who grow up in patriarchal societies learn a variety of control tactics meant to control women/girls from an early age. Boys tend to live up to the roles and qualities (e.g. of aggressiveness and dominance) expected of them and embraced in a patriarchal society. Feminist researchers see gender based violence as a natural consequence of women/girls' second class status in society (Dobash & Dobash 2000). Sociologists and anthropologists believe boys are socialised to exert power and control over girls. Almost every traditional African society is patriarchal and a woman`s place within this scheme is decidedly subordinate. Children raised within the context of this culture internalise patriarchal practices from an early age. As boys grow, they learn specialised norms and values that emphasize and justify the use of physical violence. Leach (2003)

argues that violence in society unfortunately prepares children to expect and accept it as part of everyday life, including at school. The Social Learning theory contends that aggression and violence address issues of gender-centric attitudes which are learned by boys and precipitated by a combination of contextual and situational factors. Boys and girls acquire ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are characteristic of males and females through their social experiences and most particularly through socialisation. The Social Learning Theory further posits that sexist practices embedded in society as a whole has a bearing on gender based violence (Collins 2000). In addition, children's social interactions and daily activities are contexts for the learning of culture. The theory says that the particular skills and orientations that children develop are rooted in the cultural activities of the communities in which children and their companions interact. Television advertisements reinforce aggressive tendencies in children. Bandura (1976:204) argues that individuals, especially children, learn aggressive responses from observing others, either personally or through the media, family members and the environment. He also believes that aggression reinforced by family members is the most prominent source of behaviour modelling. He reports that children use the same aggressive tactics that their parents demonstrate when dealing with others (Bandura 1976: 206). Children learn to act aggressively when they model their behaviour after the violent acts of adults, especially family members.

3. Methodology
The research problem was: What are the reasons for gender based violence in Zimbabwean primary schools and what is its impact on the health and educational outcomes of children? An empirical enquiry using a qualitative research design was used to investigate the problem. Qualitative research is useful because of its broad exploratory nature which investigates a variety of phenomena such as symptoms, interactions, processes, pain, emotions and sensitive inquiry.

3.1. Sampling
The target population in this study consisted of head teachers, primary school girls, social welfare officers and police officers from the two districts of Marondera and Harare of Zimbabwe. The districts comprised urban and rural primary schools. The number and category of participants is as set out in the table below:

Category	Number
Head teachers (5 from each district)	10
School girls (10 in each of the two districts)	20
Social Welfare Officers (1 from each district)	2
Police Officers (1 from each district)	2
Total number of participants	**34**

Table 1: Number and category of participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. In this kind of sampling, participants are chosen deliberately because of their relevance to the study (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell,2005). Only school heads and girls who had experience of incidents of gender based violence at their schools were part of the sample. The girls involved in the study were drawn from children in Grades six and seven, that is, children from twelve to thirteen years of age because they are at the stage of child development when an understanding of, and views on female sexuality and identity develop rapidly. This age group can articulate views and describe experiences on gender based violence. Two Social Workers were also chosen using purposive sampling. Social Workers are relevant to the study because according to the Children`s Protection and Adoption Act (Zimbabwe, 1990, Chapter 5:06) they are in charge of the protection and care of abused children.   The police officers were chosen using purposive sampling. Two police officers from the Zimbabwe Republic Police who work in the Victim Friendly Unit constituted the sample.

3.2. Data Collection
Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies which include semi-structured interviews and visual tools were used to collect data. Specifically, a Cause and consequence tree was drawn by children as a data collection tool. The roots of the tree depicted the cause of the abuse and its branches represented the consequences of such abuse. PAR methodologies are designed to find out about children`s perspectives whilst taking into account children`s relative lack of power in society, the fact that they cannot use words as well as most adults (or use words differently, or invent words) and do not have so much worldly experience. In compliance with Article 13 of the UN (1989), it was important to use techniques that are less dependent on words. This states that: 'The child has the right to freedom of expression, this freedom shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either in the form of art or any other media of the child`s choice (UN, 1989, article 13). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with head teachers and social workers to explore the reasons why gender based violence exists in schools and its impact on health, social development and educational outcomes.

3.3. Data Analysis
The researcher engaged in a simultaneous and iterative process of analysis while still in the field. Coding options for the themes were identified. Data was displayed and the variations or richness of each theme was captured, organised into sub-themes and examined to find evidence to support each sub- theme. Trustworthiness of data was enhanced by use of multiple data gathering techniques, participant feedback and expert checking. Multiple data gathering techniques included visual tools and interviews.

4. Findings and Discussion

Gender based violence in schools is generally the most hidden and socially accepted form of child rights violation. Girl participants, head teachers and police officers suggested reasons for this situation. Head teachers indicated that gender based violence is prompted and maintained by gender inequalities and imbalances in power between males and females whereby different forms of violence are considered an affirmation of male dominance.

A female head teacher cited cultural social norms which socialise men to be dominant, aggressive and controlling. Her male counterpart believed girls are the weaker sex so boys enjoy exercising their power over them both physically and emotionally. Another head teacher explained her view: *'Boys dominate because society expects them to. Hence beating up girls and touching them inappropriately is all part of what is expected.'* This illustrates the tenets of radical feminist theory whereby gender based violence is seen as a consequence of a direct power relationship between men and women in which men have fundamental and concrete interests in controlling, using, subjugating and oppressing women. A female head teacher highlighted the fact that:

- Boys who do not show off their masculinity by engaging in public sexual encounters and physical violence are laughed at and are called weaklings.

Thus, boys have to live up to societal expectations and end up hurting the girl child in the process. Another head teacher posited that the media plays a crucial role in promoting gender based violence among children: boys always portray a hero who rescues a female victim. Gender scripting and a culture of tolerance and acceptance of gender violence in the Zimbabwean society contribute to the continuation of violence.

All head teachers partly ascribe gender based violence in schools to poverty which keeps girls unschooled, dependent and academically weak. The girls are unable to escape unfair social demands as they are undervalued and not respected. Head teachers felt this could be seen by the forced participation of girls in child labour in different sectors as described earlier to earn money for school fees, school uniforms and books and other necessities for their families. Poverty stricken homes are also more likely to exhibit violence. Head teachers are supposed to report any cases of child abuse to the relevant officers so that appropriate action can be taken, but in most cases, they do not. Social welfare officers also have the responsibility to stop child labour by reporting any cases which are brought to their attention and educating communities about child labour. This has been difficult for social welfare officers because of staff shortages. One social welfare officer commented:

- We are short changing our clients because our services are substandard; there is a shortage of both material and human resources. We no longer make follow up visits.

The girls seemed to accept that gender based violence is a part of their everyday lives. A female head teacher commented that:

- Girls encounter gender based violence every day and teachers are not doing anything about it. Reports of violence made to teachers are never taken seriously.

The cycle of violence is perpetuated because girls as victims of violence do not always consider poor treatment as abuse. Their lives have been so scripted and they have internalised abuse; to the girl's abuse is part and parcel of their everyday lives. One social worker confirmed: *'Girls do not understand what constitutes gender based violence, hence they do not know when to seek help.'* Girls experienced the outcome of a permissive attitude towards sexual harassment prevalent in schools. When schools ignore sexist and violent interactions between students, they are giving tacit approval to such behaviours. Several times during the study some of the girls made the point that teachers did not take inappropriate behaviour by boys seriously because as one girl said: *'Teachers say boys will be boys, that is part of growing up.'* Thus, girls do not bother to report most cases of abuse in schools because they feel teachers will only turn a blind eye. The study confirmed that this *laissez faire* attitude is shared by head teachers who did not take gender based violence seriously enough in spite of their familiarity with most gender policies and their responsibility to raise awareness and enforce policy. The findings suggest that the school culture promotes gender based violence. Evidence also suggests that teachers protect each other to prevent professional misbehaviour coming to the attention of the school authorities. A head teacher commented that:

- Teachers conceal cases of gender based violence by their colleagues because they are all culprits. An example is of a teacher who poured dishwashing liquid into the mouth of a pupil who was making noise in the class – this was done in the presence of another teacher who never reported the case.

Teachers choose to ignore what is going on. Girls also refrain from reporting incidents as they are afraid of being laughed at by their peers, especially if it is sexual abuse.
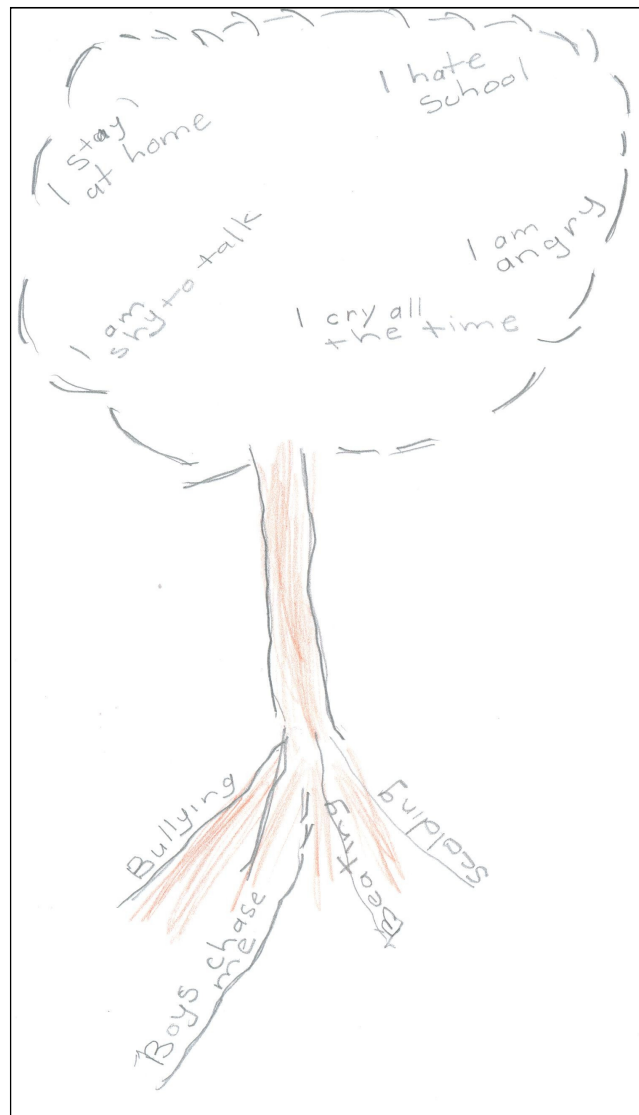
Figure 1: Cause and consequence tree

Above is a cause and consequence tree which was drawn by one of the girls. The roots depict the causes of the abuse: bullying, being chased, beatings and scolding. The branches represent the consequences of such abuse; avoiding school by staying at home, constant bouts of weeping, hatred of school and social withdrawal.

4.1. Impact of Gender Based Violence on Girls
The negative impact of gender based violence in schools goes beyond the children who are directly affected by it; it also becomes a nightmare for those who witness it and creates an atmosphere of anxiety and insecurity which hinders the girls' learning. Thus, education becomes an ordeal rather than an opportunity.

The impact has both short term and long term consequences on the children; this is tabulated in Table 5.10

Emotional impact	Social impact
Self-hate	Loss of positive gender role in society; school dropout
Self-blame	Social stigma
Insecurity	Social rejection
Depression	Feminisation of poverty
Suicidal thoughts	Increased gender inequality

Table 2: Impact of gender based violence

Data collected from head teachers confirmed the negative impact witnessed on girls' education, health, social, psychological and physical development. Head teachers of farm schools participating in the study confirmed that frequent dropout of girls is often the

result of unsafe situations in and around the school. Head teachers revealed that some parents prefer to keep their daughters at home rather than expose them to danger during the journey by foot to school.

One head teacher in a rural school stated that:
- Parents of children who live far away from schools sometimes take turns to take children to school, but at the peak of the farming season they cannot do it because they will be busy in the fields – so they keep the children at home.

Dropout is a violation of the girl child's right to education and hinders their future ability to participate fully in the national economy. It promotes illiteracy and poor female health. Furthermore, the benefits of education trickle down to the next generation. The implications of girls missing out on education are therefore serious and wide-ranging. Responses also show that abused girls are often depressed and suffer from anxiety. One girl commented, *'My teacher attacks me verbally every time because of the size of my body. As a result, the other children use hurtful nicknames on me.'* Bullying results in frequents absenteeism which leads to poor academic achievement, a loss of motivation, depression and loneliness. A girl who has been a frequent victim of bullying pointed out that, *'Bullying makes me feel unwanted, useless and defenseless.'* The bullying of girls by boys perpetuates the unequal power relations between them. One social worker mentioned that instead of learning, children concentrate on personal safety issues. Bullying has serious repercussions for the victim and the perpetrator alike; the cycle of violence and intimidation results in greater interpersonal difficulties. One head teacher commented: *'Bullying instils fear in the victim.'* Other head teachers confirmed that victims of bullying had difficulties in forming friendships and taking leading roles in and outside the classrooms. An outcome of gender based violence is undermining ability to perform well academically. Hyman (2000) asserts that children subjected to severe corporal punishment develop Educational Induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This is a mental health imbalance induced by significant stress. Such victims can have difficulty sleeping, fatigue, feelings of sadness and worthlessness, suicidal thoughts, anxiety episodes, increased anger with feelings of resentment and outbursts of aggression, deteriorating peer relationships, difficulty with concentration, lowered school achievement, intense dislike of authority, a tendency for school avoidance and school dropout. A head teacher described a case which meets Hyman's (2000) criteria for this syndrome:
- One young girl who had been subjected to severe corporal punishment avoided school at all costs. She would leave home for school with other children every day and would never arrive for lessons. Instead she would stay behind at a nearby small forest, find a place to sleep while she waited for those who have gone to school to come back and join them back home. Her parents never knew she was not arriving at school until the school authorities asked the parents why their daughter was not coming to school.

This girl exhibited high risk behaviour by hiding in the bush alone while her friends proceeded to school and joining them after school, pretending that she was returning from school. The teacher who had administered corporal punishment to the mentioned girl was summoned to appear before a disciplinary committee and given a warning.

A disturbing finding was the ambivalence towards corporal punishment demonstrated by head teachers. On the one hand, they fully recognised the effect of corporal punishment and yet they condoned its daily use in their schools and failed to implement regulatory policies and procedures. Reports from the girls emphasised repeatedly the effect of corporal punishment. One girl was hesitant to ask questions in class and could not learn freely because of fear of beatings or verbal abuse. She pointed out that when she failed to answer a question correctly, the teacher shouted, *'You stupid fat girl! Sit down.'* The girl now refrains from class participation. Corporal punishment constructs an environment of education that can be described as unproductive, nullifying and punitive. Overuse of corporal punishment has very undesirable, dangerous and long lasting effects on children who may develop negative personality traits such as disliking the punishing person, developing strong fears and anxieties, experiencing obstacles with learning, and learning to escape and avoid people, places and things associated with harsh punishment. It can stimulate aggression and cause the person to imitate the methods of punishment used by their parents and teachers (Pandey 2001).

As mentioned, child labour in schools exposed children to dangerous and in some cases unhygienic conditions. Another outcome was school absence and arriving late for school as illustrated by the following comment by a head teacher:
- Children from poor families who are engaged in work come to school late. Their attendance is inconsistent because for parents, raising money for food and inculcating in children future survival techniques is more important than going to school.

A further outcome is fatigue, headache, health problems and underachievement. A head teacher pointed out, *'Working children rarely did their homework or any extra reading and this impacts on their school achievement.'* This was corroborated by the social worker who found *'Young children who are engaged in child labour are unable to receive normal education while working.'* Her colleague mentioned:
- Usually, the tender bodies of children are affected by the working and living conditions and occupational risks. Children cannot cope with it for a very long period of time giving rise to a high mortality rate. The higher mortality among the adult family members forces children to seek their own livelihood.

She further points out that higher mortality leads to higher fertility as parents want at least a couple of children to survive to look after them in old age and many children in large families are kept out of school to work to supplement the family income. These children cannot find adequate employment as adults and so this vicious cycle of child labour continues in subsequent generations.

Overall, the effect of gender based violence on the girl victims was their unconscious learning of the role and power of violence in shaping social roles. According to social learning theory, children exposed to violence internalise these values and come to see violence as an inherent part of their childhood, a valid strategy to achieve the imposition of discipline and, consequently, an appropriate means by which to negotiate their own status and position with their peers. Through being subjected to violence, children begin to view it as a weapon used by the strong and aggressive to get anything they want from other people who are not as powerful as they are. In a similar vein, the International Labour Organisation (2009) posits 'To the extent that society values violence, attaches prestige to violent conduct or defines violence as normal or legitimate or functional behaviour, the values of individuals within that society will develop accordingly.'

In economic terms, the costs of gender based violence are considerable for households and communities. At household level, gender based violence results in out of pocket expenditure for poor parents to access health, legal and other essential services. An example of a case where parents had to foot a bill for gender based violence is a child whose ear drum was damaged from a beating by a teacher. Teachers in Zimbabwe are among the lowest paid, hence he could not afford medical expenses. This stretching of resources for the poor households negatively impacts on the family's ability to adequately cater for other essential needs like food, school fees and books. Achievement of the Millennium Development Goal 2 which reads 'Achieve universal access to education' is being constricted by high levels of gender based violence in schools and related insecurities faced by girls both in schools and on the way to and from school.

5. Conclusion

Gender-based violence in Zimbabwean primary schools is recognised as one of the impediments to the girls' education. Young girls' education is hampered by obstacles at access, social and retention levels. The road blocks in terms of access include the distance of schools, geographical barriers, inadequate infrastructure and a lack of basic facilities. Social factors include inhibiting social norms, social exclusion, and poor social positioning. There are also potent economic factors which lead to child labour. These critical factors emanate from family and cultural traditions, and social, educational, political or legal contexts. The study concludes that girls are denied educational opportunities compared to boys because of clear cut discriminatory household behaviour. School environment and community attitudes perpetuate the stereotypes of girls. The gender dimensions of gender-based violence in Zimbabwean schools reflect those embraced in the society as a whole. The subordination of women at home and in society runs parallel with the subordination of girls who are socialised into the pre-ordained role that they will assume as adults.

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