“Sexual violence is not good for our country’s development”. Students’ interpretations of sexual violence in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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Abstract

It has been increasingly recognized that sexual violence in schools is one of the major concerns with regard to promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This paper examines how boys and girls define, experience, and interpret sexual violence in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and considers from their perspectives, how sexual violence can be addressed effectively in formal educational settings. Fifteen in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions revealed how these views can be strikingly different for boys and girls: boys sharing a theoretical and instrumental view on sexual violence, as opposed to girls’ emotional views based on their experiences. This major difference in understanding complicates teaching about sexuality, and leaves room for sexual violence to remain tolerated in schools. Nevertheless, all students express the need to learn openly about sexuality, and particularly to reflect on the contradicting messages they receive from their environment.

Keywords: gender; sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); sexual violence; comprehensive sexuality education; Ethiopia; Sub-Saharan Africa.
Introduction

Sexual violence taking place in schools is one of the major challenges with regard to promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights (Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998; WHO, 2002). It is a worldwide phenomenon, yet with the HIV/AIDS pandemic it has gained increased attention in Sub-Saharan African context (Leach, 2003; Leach & Humphreys, 2007). This is because sexual violence plays a crucial role in the spread of HIV/AIDS, increasing the likelihood of infections and spread of the virus through unsafe contact with multiple partners. For women in particular, one reason why the chance of infections are higher (alongside a higher biological susceptibility of women to HIV than men (Glynn et al., 2001)), is because they often have limited agency in deciding about condom use, particularly in the cases involving sexual violence (Mane & Aggleton, 2001; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998; WHO, 2002). Now, in a time with increasing attention being paid to the effectiveness of sexuality education, its relation to addressing sexual violence can no longer be ignored. Moreover, sexual violence can lead to devastating physical and psychological consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), fear, low self-esteem and depression, often resulting in early drop out from schooling (Bott, 2010; Gelaye et al, 2009; Gossaye et al, 2003). Nevertheless, in many schools situated in Sub-Saharan African contexts, it seems to be highly normalised and tolerated (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach, 2006; Leach, 2003; Leach & Humphreys, 2007; Mirembe & Davies, 2001).

This paper reports on research that aimed to gain more insight into sexual violence taking place in schools, by studying a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Schools constitute places where, ideally, young people learn in a safe environment. On top of that, schools are increasingly regarded as important sites to promote sexual and reproductive health
among adolescents by means of sexuality education. Ironically, the toleration of sexual violence in these supposedly safe sites supportive of sexual and reproductive health promotion causes a disturbed socialization process (Leach, 2003; Mirembe & Davies, 2001), leading to confusion for young people about for instance what it means to be a man or a woman (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009). In order to increase our understanding about the context and manifestations of sexual violence, it is crucial to investigate views of those who experience, witness, and/or perpetuate sexual violence in and around secondary schools, namely girls and boys.

This paper particularly looks at how boys and girls define, experience, and interpret sexual violence in schools, and from their perspectives, how it should be addressed in formal educational settings. It reveals how the views of boys and girls are strikingly different. Generally, boys’ views tend to be pragmatic and instrumental, as opposed to girls’ highly personal and emotional encounters with sexual violence. The lack of connectivity between most girls and boys, and diverging understanding of reality through different discursive interpretations, leads to large misunderstandings between them, allowing space for continued toleration of sexual violence. The paper suggests that sexual violence can be effectively addressed through comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programmes, but in order to be successful, these programmes should firstly take into account the varying needs and interpretations of sexual violence of young people (in line with Allen, 2005). Secondly, they should be supported by broader school policy and inclusion of community members. Reasoning from a relational approach to gender (Connell, 2002), schools can address sexual violence as sites were current (patriarchal) power relations are questioned and transformed, hostile and
misogynistic emotional relations are condemned, and symbolic relations reflect gender equal
norms. However, despite this opportunity for a school to change the current gender order (i.e.
the structure of gender relations in a given society at a given time), the perspectives of students
illustrate how schools mirror and reproduce inequalities and patriarchal structures present in
Ethiopian society.

**Gender, sexual violence, and schooling**

*Defining sexual violence*

Definitions of sexual violence vary widely among researchers, professionals, and
organizations. Because of this, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of the problem.
Secondly, due to the sensitivity of the topic, exact numbers of prevalence are hard to
determine. However, for Ethiopia, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 59% of
all women have experienced sexual violence in their life time (WHO, 2005). The WHO defines
sexual violence as:

“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” (WHO, 2011, cited in

What is essential in defining sexual violence is the unbalance of power in gendered
relations that is at the core of sexual violence (Leach & Humphreys, 2007). One of the causes of
this can be found in the patriarchal history and structures of Ethiopian society and Sub-Sahara
African societies more broadly, that favour male dominance and male sexual entitlement (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Not surprising, most violence is thus directed against girls (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; WHO, 2002; 2011, 2014). Schools are a very particular site in society where this is expressed, and as a consequence, young school girls are vulnerable to discrimination and violence (Leach, 2003; Leach & Humphreys, 2007).

What should be recognized though is that with regard to gender, a binary view of girls as victims only and perceive boys as perpetrators of sexual violence should be avoided. In schools, for instance, otherwise directed manifestations of sexual violence, such as homophobic, or girl-on-girl violence confirm that sexual violence is not only performed by boys against girls, and these other forms of violence in gendered relations cannot be ignored (Leach & Humphreys, 2007).

**A relational theory of sexual violence in schools**

Connell (2002), illustrating how institutes reflect a ‘gender order’ of society, in relational theory distinguishes between 1. Power relations; 2. Production relations; 3. Emotional relations; and 4. Symbolic relations, to provide a framework of gender analysis. In short, power relations refer to structures in society that could be patriarchal: they reflect male dominance by means of the overall subordination of women. Production relations refer to the presence (or absence) of gendered division of labour. The third dimension of emotional relations could refer to sexual and non-sexual emotional attachments to an object; Symbolic relations signify meanings and symbols, such as language, that express gender attributes. These types of
relations, and the way they are constantly re-negotiated, for instance in a school, constitute a gender regime that is part of a larger gender order in society.

Schools, analysed against this framework, are firstly sites where power relations are being constructed, acted upon and played out. Common feature of this form are power relations between teachers and students, and within peer group cultures (Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Leach, 2003). These power relations could on the one side reflect the patriarchal structure of society, socializing young people according to the traditional norms of society about what it means to be a boy or a girl (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009). Conversely, education can also be a means of contesting existing power relations, in this case questioning the power differences based on gender. In fact, this paper will illustrate how CSE has the potential to inspire students to act against gender injustices they witness or experience, but at the same time how its implementation limits deeply questioning current gender regimes,

Secondly, schools are a site where production relations are reinforced or transformed, through for instance a division of labour between boys and girls, or the purposely changing of traditional divisions of labour. Thirdly, emotional relations are formed in schools, through interaction with peers and teachers, which shapes emotions about oneself, and one’s sexuality. Gender violence in this case, reflects hostile relations and notions towards a certain gender category, and can reflect for instance feelings of misogyny or homophobia (Connell, 2002). The CSE programme that runs in the school could be seen as part of the re-negotiation of emotional relations, by paying attention to sexual development and identity, and promotion of self-determination in decisions about students’ own (sexual) choices. Lastly, symbolic relations of
society are reflected in schools, in for example dress codes (e.g. rules about the length of the skirt) or language used towards or about girls or boys.

**Causes, consequences and contexts of sexual violence in schools**

Girls can suffer from sexual violence from both their teachers and their peers. In authoritarian school cultures characteristic for African societies, teachers cannot be questioned by their pupils, even if their behaviour is abusive (Leach, 2003). In fact, sexual violence can be seen as a punishment for something the student has done wrong (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, & Rose-Junius, 2005). Accounts of sexual violence directed by (mostly male) teachers to their (female) students, have been observed in the form of forced sex (rape), or manipulation for sex through students’ marks (e.g. Teachers give their students a low mark, and tell them they can “solve” this problem by sleeping with them) (Omaar & Waal, 1994; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). These examples typically illustrate power dynamics and a patriarchal societal structure that are observed in schools (Connell, 2002).

Secondly, the peer group culture influences in the socialization process of young girls and boys. In schools in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Ghana, girls were expected to be obedient to aggressive behaviour of boys (Leach, 2003). Again, this illustrates the patriarchal notion that girls should be submissive to the more powerful position of their male peers. As a result, young women experience fear (Bhana, 2012), and have limited agency in making choices concerning sexual intercourse, and with that, protecting themselves from possible STDs and unwanted pregnancies (Wood, Maforah and Jewkes, 1998). This might also apply to gendered roles within transactional sexual relationships (sex in exchange for money or valuables) among youth, but
also between young people and e.g. teachers (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Maganja, Maman, Groues, & Mkwanbo, 2007; Nyanzi, Pool, & Kinsman, 2001). Another example of the segregated experiences and expectations of girls and boys is how, in Ethiopia, young men are generally expected to have knowledge and be sexually active, whereas for Ethiopian young women this would be shameful and stay silent about this for religious, social and cultural reasons (Kebede, Hilden & Middelthon, 2014).

**Addressing sexual violence in schools**

Schools are often seen as a crucial site to educate and address societal problems such as sexual violence, for instance through CSE, or respectful relationships education, but this claim is not uncontested (Breaken & Cardinal, 2008; Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Ollis, 2014). Braeken and Cardinal (2008) argue that CSE should include a strong gender perspective, and should promote knowledge, skills, and judgement free education. This way, young people are given the possibility for critical inquiry, crucial for thinking about sexuality, and sexual violence (Bajaj, 2009). However, firstly it can be questioned to what extent the implementation of such programmes are in line with its comprehensive design. Of use here is the framework of Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton (2011) providing three categories for conceptualization of sexuality education: scientifically informed, rights-informed and moralistically informed approaches. The differences in these approaches, (i.e. is sexuality education aimed at changing risky behaviours; enabling young people to know and think about their rights; or instilling certain (conservative) moral values?), are crucial as they bring to light underlying assumptions of the programmes, facilitators, and its intended outcomes. Secondly, from a ‘developmentalist’ approach, the focus of many programmes is on increasing health outcomes
(e.g. increased condom use, decrease in STDs or maternal morbidity) that should lead to modernization (Lewis, 2002). As will be revealed in this paper, this notion is reflected by some students as well, narrowing down sexuality education to a means for economic development. However, light should be shed on the danger that such an approach fails to fully recognize structural factors of society that are at cause of sexual violence (Ampofo et al., 2004, Miedema, Maxwell, & Aggleton, 2013)).

Secondly, whether sexuality education programmes are very helpful in acknowledging sexual violence, can be questioned given the sexually charged environment in a school and society (Leach, 2003). It is not surprising that schools, as institutions that reflect societies’ regimes, experience cultural and social constraints to successful implementation of sexuality education programmes (Iyer & Aggleton, 2013), affecting communication about and the addressing of sexual violence by teachers and students. Therefore, this should be a whole school process that pays attention to formal and informal structures in the school, and involve not only students and teachers, but also parents and community (Meyer, 2008). This means that power relations should not only be addressed and re-negotiated within the classroom or school system, but also at a broader support level, and at formal governance levels (Connell, 2002).

Lastly, it is crucial to include and respond to opinions and lived experiences of young people in the design of educational programmes such as CSE or respectful relationships education (Allen, 2005; Ollis, 2014), including on the topic of sexual violence. In the same vein, including boys and young men is a less common manner of addressing gender equality and sexual violence, yet it is crucial to include their views and voices in investigating sexual violence
(Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Varga, 2001), as presented in this paper. Their perspectives, when contrasted to those of girls, contribute to gaining understanding about the phenomenon, and informing policy and practice.

**Contextual background**

This paper concerns sexual violence in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Because of the difficulty and sensitivity of the topic, there has only been little research on sexual violence in Ethiopia (Gossaye et al., 2003). However, what is known with regard to sexual violence, is that 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 (WHO, 2005). Results from community-based studies indicate that 50% to 60% of Ethiopian women experience gender-based violence in their lifetime (Deyessa, Kassaye, Demeke, & Taffa, 1998; Gossaye et al., 2003; Yigzaw, Yibrie, & Kebede, 2004). These indications reflect norms and structures in society, which are reproduced by socialization and gendered relations in schools, as this paper reveals.

In secondary schools, there is serious concern that the prevalence of sexual violence is high. One dissertation study on sexual violence in secondary schools in the East of Ethiopia, reports that 70% of the young men and 68% of the young women had respectively offended or become a victim of sexual violence (measured along a continuum from intimidation to sexual force) (Bekele, 2012). With regard to sexual force, 38% of the men reported to be an offender, and 25% of the young women to be a victim of forced sexual intercourse (Bekele, 2012). Another Ethiopian study among 1401 female high school students in Addis Ababa and Western
Shoa, 74% had reported sexual harassment, with consequences such as physical problems, unwanted pregnancies and social isolation, fear and phobia, hopelessness, and suicide attempt (Mulugeta, Kassaye, & Berhane, 1998). It has also been shown that students who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to show symptoms of depression (Gelaye et al., 2009). Yet, in Ethiopian society it is hardly brought to justice due to the shame and taboo attached to talking about rape or sexual harassment, and because of weaknesses in the law enforcement system (Gossaye et al, 2003). This illustrates how structures in society constrain addressing sexual violence, as well as how girls’ well-being in particular can be negatively affected by socialization processes in schools.

The school of study is situated in merchant centre of Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia. It is a government school and hosts 2,136 students (52% female) from mostly low income migrant and merchant families. At the moment of fieldwork, the school has run a CSE programme since five months. The programme, on paper (classroom practice might diverge from original design of the programme), has a CSE framework (Braeken & Cardinal, 2008) and aims to empower young people to make their own decisions by giving fact-based information about sexuality, and opening up discussion around sensitive and taboo topics. Topics discussed include body change, gender relations, sexual intercourse and decision making. One of the 16 lessons covers information about sexual violence in particular. The sessions take place in mixed-sex classes, aiming to promote a positive view on sexuality. Eighty students joined this extra-curricular programme at the time of fieldwork.
Method

The results presented in this paper are based on a larger study, involving 29 interviews and four focus group discussions with teachers, students and SRH professionals in Addis Ababa. The study aimed to explore how they define, experience, and interpret sexual violence against girls in secondary schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and from their perspectives, how sexual violence can be addressed effectively in formal educational settings. This paper presents the views of girls and boys. Hence, 14 girls and 11 boys participated, of which five girls and five boys expressed their views in focus group discussions, and interviews were conducted with nine girls and six boys. All boys and girls (aged 14 – 18) were in grades nine and 10, in the same secondary school in the centre of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. By hearing and contrasting their views, voice was given to these young people, which should be essential in sexuality research as it gives insight to their experience that would otherwise not have been revealed (see e.g. Ollis, 2014).

Interviews and focus groups discussions were held in English in a semi-structured in-depth fashion. Open-ended questions were used, asking for instance “how would you define sexual violence?” or “in your opinion, what are the causes of sexual violence in school?” It was ensured that all participants were involved on voluntary basis: it was explained to them they could leave or withdraw at any time, and participants’ voluntary involvement was confirmed by each of them before the start of the interview or focus group discussion. Participants received explanation that all information is confidential.
As a place of venue, a quiet classroom was chosen in which no one could overhear the conversation, since it was important that participants would feel free to share and not fear being overheard by others (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Brady, 2005). Focus group discussions lasted between one hour and one hour and a half, and interviews took between 20 and 40 minutes. The focus group discussions were held after a significant amount of individual interviews with students were held at the school in the first stage of data collection. The focus group discussions served to gain additional insights in notions around sexual violence. In particular, interactions between the participants in these discussions shed light on various interpretations of sexual violence. Similar questions were asked in the focus group discussions, however with a stronger focus on finding consensus about e.g. definitions of sexual violence or its causes. The negotiations between participants offered an insight to the researcher about their frameworks of interpretation, and informed the analysis of detailed insights.

Content analysis was used to analyse the data. To be precise, a pre-defined coding scheme was developed in order to analyse how people define, experience, interpret sexual violence and how it should be addressed as respective constructs. After this initial coding phase, ‘open coding’ was used to develop more detailed insights. Construct-specific displays were developed according to organize the data and get a full view of its contents (Miles and Huberman, 1994). For instance, one display compared the responses of boys and girls about their definitions of sexual violence. With regard to gender, data analysis was done against a constructivist framework that does not treat gender as static, but as a constructed notion through interaction. This is reflected by the focus on individuals’ experiences and definitions
that construct their interpretations of sexual violence. At the same time, however, data analysis contrasted the views of girls and boys, which revealed crucial differences in interpretations between them. This could be seen as the result of different experiences of girls and boys in schools, and illustrative of the binary socialization processes of young people.

As with any study, there are some limitations that should be recognized. Firstly, the majority of students found it challenging to express their ideas in English, which sometimes led to confusion. Therefore, it is the more reason to keep this in mind and to interpret with care. Secondly, only relatively few people participated in the research. Because of this, insights only apply to this particular site of investigation. Also the geographic focus is limited to a very specific area in the city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Generalizations can thus not be made based on this study alone. Nevertheless, the aim of this study was not to generalize or to be representative, but to gain in depth insights and more understanding about different views of sexual violence in and around school.

Results

*Defining sexual violence*

In line with that of the WHO (2002), boys and girls define sexual violence as a sexual act or attempt directed against someone else (mostly girls) without their consent. Boys and girls use words such as “inferiority” and “superiority”, typically reflecting girls’ submissiveness and male dominance, to describe how they would define sexual violence. All boys and girls place this in a framework of gender notions: gender inequality is at the heart of sexual violence, and their cultural heritage of gender unequal norms and practices are mentioned as part and
context of sexual violence. In stating this, they implicitly refer to the current gender order in their society (Connell, 2002). Most students add the need to re-negotiate this order through schooling.

There are striking differences in the ways girls and boys elaborate on their definitions. Four of the 11 boys named examples of sexual violence such as hitting, insulting, unwanted touches and forced sex. The other boys could not think of any examples of sexual violence, and repeatedly said that sexual violence is a “misunderstanding” and “bad habit” of their society, seemingly recapitulating what they had learned in class. Girls however, clearly spoke from their experience and were often highly emotional in talking about sexual violence. They also mentioned insults, unwanted comments, touches and forced sex as manifestations of sexual violence, adding that fear of violence also plays major part in their lives. This is in line with earlier research of Leach and Humphreys (2007) who included fear in their definition of sexual violence, and Bhana (2012) revealing how fear of violence is a daily struggle affecting sense of freedom for girls in South Africa. Girls in this sample clearly confirm that fear is an essential part of defining sexual violence, which should therefore not be overlooked. Finally, girls mentioned their “diminished psychology” as another influential aspect of sexual violence, something not mentioned at all by boys. It seems thus that boys’ knowledge and definitions of sexual violence are often more abstract, distant, and pragmatic compared to the emotional definitions of girls affected by fear and experience.

Without a doubt, sexual violence is seen as a bad thing. What is interesting though, is that sexual intercourse itself was also viewed as bad by some boys and girls. One boy even classified sexual intercourse as sexual violence, because “it is not safe for high school students”.
His discursive motive being the risk of STDs or unwanted pregnancies, which would pose educational and future economic limitations for them. These lines of thought likely reflect lessons, advices and general opinions of homes and society about sexual intercourse. As shown in other investigations, pre-marital sexual intercourse is often considered immoral, and accordingly, implemented CSE lessons in schools have typically been shaped along abstinence-only approaches (Braeken & Cardinal, 2008; Miedema, Maxwell, & Aggleton, 2011; Oshi, Nakalema, & Oshi, 2005). Despite its comprehensive framework on paper, it seems likely, from what students reflect, that classroom implementation of the CSE programme present in the school also promotes abstinence practices and judges sexual activity for high school students. These messages clearly have their reflection on the views and interpretations of boys and girls on sexuality and sexual violence.

Experiences in and around school

Before describing and reflecting upon how boys and girls experience sexual violence, it should be noted that most boys and girls emphasized that the prevalence of sexual violence is decreasing in their country, particularly in Addis Ababa as opposed to the rural sites of Ethiopia. The reason for this, as they pointed out, is that people are better educated nowadays, by which they have the awareness that sexual violence is a bad habit of their society and should be stopped. In other words, as Connell describes, gender arises in history, and can therefore also change over time, influenced by for instance feminist activism or international movements (Connell, 2002; 2012). According to students in this school in Addis Ababa, the gender order in Ethiopia is changing with modernization and education, in the capital city more rapidly than in the rural areas of the country. This can be explained by the influence of international NGOs
working in e.g. health and/or women’s rights. According to students, schooling has thus helped challenging the patriarchal structures and power relations in society, supporting the argument that gender order is a historical product, and subject to change (Connell, 2002). However hopeful this idea and tendency is, the stories of many girls and some boys in this sample rather reveal that sexual violence is still highly present in the daily lives of many.

Girls experience sexual violence in school from both boys and male teachers. All girls had stories to share about this. Firstly, girls experience sexual violence from boys when they comment on how girls look, or touch girls without their permission. One girl shares that boys in her class touch her and how this makes her feel tense. With regard to their relationships with boys, girls experience boys to be forceful and aggressive. Moreover, they find it difficult to negotiate relationships and sex. In discussing some boys’ persisting behaviour when asking for sex, one girl explains:

“If one boy loves any girl, he pleases them [referring to insisting to have sex]. He really really pleases them. So she can’t stop him. (...) He doesn’t stop. To stop him, it’s difficult. For her, it’s difficult. So, if one boy pleased her or anything, or do anything for her, she can advise him, but she can’t stop this.” (Girl, grade 9, focus group discussion)

With regard to their teachers, girls report feeling discriminated in class when teachers do not listen to them, but do listen to their classmates who are boys. In addition, girls share that especially during gym class, teachers watch and comment on the girls’ clothes and looks, which makes them shy and uncomfortable. More worryingly, girls fear and experience sexual
corruption: manipulation for sex by teachers through marks. The examples related to this illustrate how power relations between teachers and female students are played out in school, and how girls have difficulty opposing this gender regime (Connell, 2002). Previous research has shown that teachers can indeed be perpetrators of sexual violence by corrupting through marks (Omaar & Waal, 1994; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). Although it is thought to be a phenomenon typical for university, this research shows that girls in secondary school also experience this:

“(…) sometimes when students get a mark, low mark, mark decrease. Then, the teachers speak about sexual intercourse (…). The students are very afraid. When the marks are zero, or incomplete, the students are very angry. Yes, therefore, the teachers ask the students for sexual intercourse.

(...)

When my friend, she got a small mark. In Maths. In this time, the teacher asked my friend to get in sexual intercourse.” (Girl, Grade 10)

Not only do girls experience forms of sexual violence from boys and teachers, toleration of it is another alarming factor that leaves room for sexual violence to be continued and resistant to change. In this sample, girls themselves also experienced barriers to address injustices. For instance, the girl who shared her story about her Maths teacher was disappointed by the management of the school who could not do anything because the sexual intercourse did not actually take place, revealing how indeed teachers and school management, who are in a dominant power position, can obstruct addressing the issue. As shockingly, girls
themselves also seem to tolerate or accept a ‘girls-as-victims’ view of sexual violence, by stating they have to accept whatever happens to them:

“We (girls) will get difficulties from students, from boys. Or from male teachers. (...) But, if we think that, we are learning for knowledge, we have to accept whatever it is that happens to us. So, there are difficult things for females, more than for males. But we have to know that if we get trouble, doesn’t matter, we’ll get a better life if we are trying to know or if we are trying to get the knowledge that we want.” (Girl, grade 9, focus group discussion).

In reference to Connell’s (2002) relational theory of gender, the above examples illustrate struggles within emotional and power relations. The girls strongly emphasize the role of fear in their emotional attachments towards peers, teachers, and disappointment in their learning opportunities and relations with school management. At the same time, power relations between the girls and boys, teachers and school management (negatively) influence this fear, disappointment, and hope for actual change. The example of how girls are not listened to in class (but boys are), and how some girls conclude to have to tolerate oppression in the form of sexual violence for a better life afterwards, illustrate the dominant power positions teachers and boys have in relation to these girls.

What is surprising given the stories and experiences of the girls, however, is that most boys were convinced that sexual violence does not happen in their school. Apart from gender inequalities that might occur at the homes of the students, most boys could not think of any examples in school that relate to sexual violence. Their argument was based on the fact that
they are educated, plus there is a “school rule” (codes of ethics) stating boys and girls are equal in the school, as well as a new constitution which states that everybody is equal in the society too. This is why, according to them, the prevalence of sexual violence is low, and therefore sexual violence cannot happen in their school. Contrary to the girls, these boys did not seem to be aware of the imbalance in emotional relations, or their dominant power positions that these girls were negatively affected by.

Interestingly, there were three boys that had different views. Some of them expressed anger and frustration about their experiences with sexual violence. One boy, for instance, had heard from one of his female friends whom he attends CSE class with, that a teacher tried to manipulate her through her marks for sexual intercourse. After hearing this story, the boy got very angry, visibly sympathized with the girl, and went to the school board to do something about this. He added that in his opinion, the school should do much more to address the issue and prevent sexual violence to happen. It seems that by sharing experiences with his friend, this boy came to understand more about the emotional turbulence girls go through as a result of (or fear of) sexual violence. The emotional attachment to his friends’ well-being, made him actively re-negotiate gender patterns within the school.

The two other boys describe their observations of how boys in school try to influence and manipulate girls to have sex with them, explaining that “when boys want something, they make sure they get it”. This observation is interesting, as the boy clearly reflects on ideologies of male sexual entitlement, and sees this as an explanation of violent behaviour. He seems to be well aware of the dominant power positions some boys make use of. So, despite their raised awareness through education, and accordingly the idea that the prevalence of sexual violence is
decreasing in Addis Ababa and schools, the behaviour of boys in school still reflects what is considered a “misunderstanding” in society. This contradiction is interesting and raises questions about what it means to be aware of sexual violence, and how this does or does not translate into different behaviour or reflection. To be precise, applying these findings to Connell’s (2002) framework, it seems that these two boys who pointed out this notion were aware of emotional and power relations in the school that result into different experiences for girls than boys, whereas the majority of the boys were mainly concerned with the legalistic and pragmatic results of gender equality in school and later in life. Consequently, it seems that it is crucial to have critical reflection skills that are crucial for a thorough understanding of sexual violence, its manifestations, causes, and consequences.

**Causes of sexual violence**

When it concerns causes of sexual violence, all girls and boys refer to the influence of society’s beliefs about the roles of men and women, and saw this as the major explanatory factor of sexual violence, recognizing the patriarchal power structures in society being reflected in their school (Connell, 2002). In addition, explanations were given for why boys and teachers show such behaviour, and some mentioned the role of fear, and taboo to talk about sexuality.

First, for explaining why boys violate girls, reasoning was very simple: it is considered “bad behaviour” of boys, or they have not understood teachings about gender equality which is why they perform such actions. Girls explain that boys are aggressive, forceful, and want to prove their powers. One boy has indeed observed this behaviour:
“In school, some boys have bad behaviour. Boys, you know, as high school students, boys want different things. We want to have a girlfriend. And they decide something for the girls. (...) If she is not decide to do sex, boys push it.”

(Boy, Grade 10)

When turning to explanations for sexual violence between teacher and student, however, these are often viewed from a completely different angle. In particular with regard to sexual corruption, their relationships with girls are interpreted as a love relationship: the teacher must like the girl, which is why he wants to start a relationship with her (this was brought up by several boys). One girl explained that teachers must be lonely, and therefore try to convince a girl to sleep with him. From another perspective, some (boys) would say it is the girl who wants something from the teacher (such as books or money). This is qualified as bad behaviour of the girl, and judged by these students. In contrast to these interpretations, girls fear teachers and feel not able to say no to his advances.

Not only does this illustrate how, in terms of power relations within the framework of Connell (2002), the behaviour and intentions of men and boys are not questioned and tolerated by means of subordination and blaming of girls. But also does this painful contradiction in views reflect the gap of misunderstanding between boys and girls. In fact, it is due to different experiences and according socialization processes, that boys and girls have such contrasting interpretations of the causes of sexual violence, and thus misunderstandings. What is interesting, however, is that students obviously learn about gender equality in school, and some even consider themselves as responsible to pass on “the awareness”. However at the same time they reinforce existing power relations (Connell, 2002) by not critically questioning
behaviour of offenders, who are typically in a dominant position, but rather shaming the ‘inferior’ girls. Linking this to the students’ education, and more specifically the CSE programme in school, a worrying observation is that one of the powerful lessons seems to be what is silenced and what is not explicitly questioned, i.e. the behaviour and authority of the ‘dominant’. This again can contribute to continuing toleration of sexual violence between teachers and students.

Lastly, the taboo of talking about sexuality is brought up as another cause for the high toleration of sexual violence. By not learning or speaking about sexuality, young people experience a lot of room for misinterpretations of messages they receive from media, their peers, and their homes. Girls share, for instance, how their parents tell them not to speak about their experiences when they try to bring up the topic. This discourages them from bringing to justice cases of violence, as they learn to associate it with shame. The school programme also gives them limited information about bringing to justice cases of sexual violence: it focuses its attention on prevention, but gives little to no information about what steps to take in case of violence.

**Consequences of sexual violence**

When asked about the consequences of sexual violence, girls elaborated on the deep emotional turbulence they suffer from as a result of a range of forms of sexual violence. Not surprisingly, sexual violence in the form of rape or forced sex is traumatic, and leads to devastating consequences such as depression, isolation and low self-esteem (Bott, 2010; Gelaye et al., 2009; Gossaye et al, 2003). Girls also report that sexual violence in terms of unwanted
comments, touches, or manipulation make them fearful, tense, and for instance take a detour from school to home. This again confirms that fear plays a major role with regard to sexual violence (Bhana, 2012): not only in defining sexual violence, but also in experiences, emotional, psychological, and relational consequences of these. Moreover, this fear and severe emotional consequences can lead to girls skipping classes, not paying attention in school, and lower academic performance (Dunne et al, 2005). Indeed, one girl mentions for instance how she skips classes of one particular teacher because she feels tense in his classes. Although not mentioned by these respondents, sexual violence and the fear thereof is thus bound to have a long term implications on the emotional well-being and academic performance of its survivors. Accordingly, it negatively affects performances of gender equality to, within and through education (Subrahmanian, 2005), having its effect on production relations (Connell, 2002). In other words, sexual violence in schools for girls are interpreted within a framework of emotion relations, their sexual identities and emotions attached to their male peers or teachers being violated. Consequently, this has an effect on their academic performance, and through underperformance and school dropout the current gender order in society that gives men powerful positions, is reinforced (Connell, 2002).

Boys, on the other hand, had a completely different perspective on consequences of sexual violence. Interestingly, their views are not fully in line with their definitions: although they defined sexual violence as a range of unwanted sexual acts that can vary from unwanted comments to forced sex, the consequences they mentioned only apply to the latter one. To be precise, they mentioned possible physical health consequences of sexual violence such as STDs, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions. Some added that this can lead to
shame, stigma, and drop out of school. They did not mention consequences of other forms of sexual violence such as teasing, insults, unwanted touches or kisses.

What is interesting is that boys also mentioned their country development to be affected by sexual violence. By doing this, it again seemed that boys repeated the knowledge they had learned in classes of gender inequality. Their line of reasoning is that when women are discriminated, this leads to division of labour and less economic participation of women. Similarly, when girls are victims of sexual violence and have to drop out of school as a result of e.g. pregnancy, this negatively affects the country’s development. By stating this, boys saw this as a reason for why sexual violence is bad. Their approach to sexual violence, and its relation to the importance of CSE, thus seems mostly pragmatic and focused on the results for equal production relations (Connell, 2002), which again is completely different from the highly emotional views of girls. The lack of boys’ reflection on the emotional consequences for girls, and an emphasis on the productive (labour) aspects of a gender order in society, testifies of the huge differences in understanding and reflecting on sexual violence.

Addressing sexual violence in school

Despite their enormous differences in views on definitions, experiences, and interpretations of sexual violence between boys and girls, their views are surprisingly similar with regard to addressing sexual violence in formal education. First, girls and boys express a great need of talking about sexuality, without taboo or judgement. They put forward that discussions in the classroom and co-curricular clubs are the best means for them to share thoughts and learn about sexuality related topics, including sexual violence. In line with the
work of Allen (2005), it is not surprising that when hearing young people’s views, their ideas of what is effective diverge from what adults and programme designers conceptualise as effective or appropriate. As a crucial note, students emphasize that during class discussions, their views should be accepted and taken seriously. However, teachers often find it difficult to teach about sexuality when it differs from their social and cultural ideas (in line with Iyer & Aggleton, 2013; Oshi, Nakalema, & Oshi, 2005). Students recognized this and expressed the need to break such taboos and speak freely in class.

One regularly reoccurring topic concerns the conflicting messages in society about modern and traditional values, and gender relations associated to that. There seems to be a need among students and teachers to pay attention and have discussions around these messages that shape their ideas and sexual identities. These messages are sometimes a strong traditional judgement of sexual activity, accompanied by a judgement of modernity. To illustrate, some students and teachers judge modernity to be a cause of sexual violence as watching films, porn in particular, and going to khat (a local stimulant) houses is bad for boys, as “it makes us want to have sex” (and at the same time, this comment rests on the assumption that girls do not go there in the first place). Some girls commented on influences such as modern hairstyles and bracelets, because it would give the wrong messages to boys. At the same time, other students and teachers feel there is a need for more tolerance of this modernity, and recognition of the desire for modernity for some students. For some teachers, it is essential that students learn how to deal with this influence through their sexuality education, and importantly, a need for awareness that wearing make-up and bracelets does not equal interest in sex. These are examples of symbolic relations within the gender regime, with
porn videos and stimulants being concerns for boys and their sexualized nature, and beauty products associated with girls and seduction. This illustrates again the segregated relations and attributions between boys and girls, which could be a possible explanation for the completely different experiences and interpretations of gender relations and sexual violence of boys and girls. However, for the purpose of addressing sexual violence in schools, it is questionable to what extent addressing these symbolic relations (and in the opinion of some, causes for sexual violence) are sufficient to also pay attention to the more dominant and pressing matters of unequal emotional relations and power relations in school.

A second important finding around discussions in CSE is that students have learned that boys and girls can be friends in a “brotherly and sisterly” manner. This makes them more open to interaction with each other, which is normally quite uncommon in Ethiopian schools where students prefer same-gender friends (Rose & Tembon, 1999). This would make the gap in socialization processes smaller, by having shared experiences and interpretations of what happens around them. It also has the opportunity of transforming emotional relations (Connell, 2002) between the two sexes to more respectful ones. An example of this is the boy who stood up for his female friend when he heard that the teacher was trying to talk her into unwanted sexual intercourse.

Alongside discussions, girls found that the boys should be taught to be less aggressive, and that teachers should pay more attention to giving girls self-confidence. One boy believed that all students should be taught about causes and consequences of sexual violence. Most other boys rather shared the opinion, together with many of the girls, that it is the society that needs to be educated too: awareness raising programmes should not only reach students, but
also families and communities, who function in the same patriarchal power structures and
gender order in society.

With regard to the school level, both boys and girls expressed their disappointment in
the school management for addressing sexual violence, and found it should be higher priority in
school-wide policy and should be more strictly regulated. The two boys that once went to the
administration office of the school to express their anger about instances of sexual violence
that they witnessed, were left disappointed and angry about the inaction of the school board.
The girl who shared how her Maths teacher tried to corrupt her friend for sex through her
marks was also left powerless when she received the news the school board could not do
anything about the situation as the sexual intercourse had not actually happened, and she was
deeply affected by this approach. These students found that the school board could and should
act much more strongly against such injustices.

Not only these students who directly experienced lack of action, but most students
actually expressed the need for a codes of ethics in the school. In their opinion, these should
forbid relationships between teachers and students, and have a policy for punishing
perpetrators of sexual violence, whether they are students or teachers. Moreover, as some
students added, school board should contact parents of offenders, and cooperate more closely
with communities and other NGOs to address problems in the school. In other words, a
comprehensive approach needs to be adopted in the implementation of CSE, and beyond in the
whole school and surrounding society.
Conclusion

Summary of findings

As illustrated by the discussions on the definitions, experiences, and interpretations, views on sexual violence can be remarkably different among and between boys and girls in secondary school. Generally, boys’ views were rather pragmatic, as opposed to the highly emotional, and perhaps more realistic stories of girls. Interestingly, though, boys who had a more critical look, had heard stories from their girlfriends, or had observed instances of sexual violence, showed more affection to the topic than their male peers who were quite distant from the topic in their descriptions.

The most striking differences can be summarized as follows: First, girls include fear as an essential dimension of defining sexual violence, whereas boys do not mention that. Second, almost all girls recognize the influence of sexual violence in their daily lives. On the contrary, most boys seem to live in the illusion (or at least present themselves to do so) that there is no sexual violence in their school, thanks to education on this topic and gender equality. In terms of causes, boys typically view sexual relationships between teachers and girls as a romantic or transactional relationship, whereas girls again emphasize fear of teachers. Of crucial notice is though, that two boys did have a different view on this. They recognized the unjust treatment by a teacher and its effect on their female peer, because of which they took action. The explanatory close relationship between these boys and their female peers, however, seems unique for their school and for Ethiopian adolescents in general (Rose & Tembon, 1999). The contribution that sexuality education can have to a friendly and supportive relationship
between both sexes should not go unnoticed. Lastly, both recognize taboo to speak about sexuality as an explanation for confusion. With regard to consequences, boys typically mention dangerous physical consequences as a result of rape (e.g. HIV/AIDS, or unwanted pregnancy), where girls emphasize their psychological and emotional experiences, which could also be the result of seemingly more minor manifestations of sexual violence such as unwanted comments or touching. Ironically, this can lead to drop out and lower academic performances (Dunne et al., 2005), in the same institutions where they should be in a safe environment, learn about sexual health, and have equal opportunities to boys to, within and through education (Subrahmanian, 2005). Equally worrying is the messages they learn, through such experiences, as a consequence about what it means to be a girl or a boy (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009). Moreover, the school as a site where gender norms can be questioned and transformed, is experienced by students to be a place where relational gender regimes are in reality reinforced (Connell, 2002).

With respect to how to address sexual violence in school, views of boys and girls were strikingly similar: they have the need to learn and talk about sexuality and the formation of their own identities in an environment free from taboo and judgement (in line with Allen, 2005). This applies to the attitude of teachers, and of students. One notable point is that despite their desire for not feeling judged based on their views, some students themselves reflected morally informed notions that blame girls and boys who involve in “modern” lifestyle. What message resounds in these opinions might thus be a reflection of the clashing values of various contradictory messages that young people are left with to make sense of, often leading to confusion. In fact, the influence of modernity, and not knowing how to interpret various
contradicting messages with clashing values in society, leads to increased misunderstandings of sexuality. The influence of modernity thus not only applies to transactional sexual relationships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003), but to general understanding and confusion about sexuality, which should be further investigated.

**Sexuality education is the answer?**

The fact that boys and girls generally put forward views that are completely different, confirms that there are major misunderstandings between and among them. This again can lead to continued toleration of the phenomenon. However, critical reflection as a result of CSE of some students proved to be crucial to formulate more conscious ideas about sexual violence in school. Based on this paper, it is therefore recommended that school adopt a comprehensive approach to sexuality education, with the needs of young people central in the design and implementation of the programme (Allen, 2005). Alongside this, students recommend and urge schools to commit to a code of ethics, for with the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO, 2009) can be relevant, in particular with reference to safe schools and zero tolerance for relationships between teachers and students.

Yet, implementing CSE in a way that it questions the current gender order (Connell, 2002) seemed a challenge in school. In fact, with students repeating factual knowledge about the dangerous aspects of sexual intercourse, the implementation of the programme seemed to have taken a ‘developmentalist’ approach to health, emphasizing why e.g. gender equality is important for the country, while failing to recognize the completely different experiences, emotional relations, and according socialization processes boys and girls go through. Sexual
violence was by many male students in this research also placed in line with such a
developmentalist framework, making interpretations pragmatic, limited to production
relations, and leaving fear, tensions and emotional relations including consequences of
depression and low self-esteem unrecognized. A more rights-informed and comprehensive
implementation could stimulate critical reflection and questioning of current norms and
structures in society (Braeken & Cardinal, 2008; Connell, 2002; Miedema, Maxwell, & Aggleton,
2011), and go beyond a liberal framework for addressing gender inequality and sexual violence
(Ampofo et al, 2004). The question remains though, how to develop adequate sexuality
education programmes that are responsive to students’ needs (Allen, 2005; Ollis, 2014) as well
as culturally appropriate to unpack and challenge existing gender regimes (Connell, 2002).

The findings in this paper underline the importance of continuing to address the highly
sensitive and controversial topic of sexual violence. Sexual violence should be placed in a
context of gender relations (Connell, 2002; Leach & Humphreys, 2007), and students support
the argument that the current gender order in their society is a result of a patriarchal history
that can potentially be changed through education (Connell, 2002). Yet, despite efforts, sexual
violence seems to be highly tolerated in schools (Mirembe & Davies, 2001) and the gender
regime in the site of research seems little supportive of questioning gender relations beyond a
liberal notion of production relations and gender equal laws and governance. The contradictory
messages of schools as a promotor of sexual health, but at the same time tolerating sexual
violence, are in need of immediate action, as well as structural addressing through for instance
the implementation of CSE, sensitive to students’ needs, and responsive to gender relations.
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