



Conceptualising gender and violence in research: Insights from studies in schools and communities in Kenya, Ghana and Mozambique

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Gender
Violence

ABSTRACT

Gender and violence are complex and contested concepts, understood in varying ways in research, policy and interventions in education. Often there has been an emphasis on acts of violence, with much less attention to the social conditions and gender relations behind these acts. This paper discusses the development of a conceptual framework that emphasises not just acts and individuals, but also transformation of gendered power relations and inequities, alongside a focus on addressing the identity conflicts and struggles of everyday life. The framework underpins research, advocacy and community interventions in a multi-partnered project on violence against girls led by ActionAid.

Drawing on findings from a mixed methodology baseline study carried out for the project in Kenya, Ghana and Mozambique, we discuss how conceptual lenses focused on acts/individuals, institutions and interactions inform the analysis of sexual violence. We identify some tensions in using a multi-perspectival framing, yet, we argue that holding the tensions between approaches in play can be productive, yielding rich data to inform NGO interventions at community, district and national levels. We conclude with suggestions for theorising and realising gender justice and violence in education research and NGO partnerships.

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1. Introduction

The United Nations World Study on Violence against Children brought to global attention the high incidence of physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced by children in and around school (Pinheiro, 2006). Violence against women and girls in intimate private spaces previously deemed outside the public gaze has increasingly been revealed (Bott et al., 2005; WHO, 2002). While the research is often piecemeal and insufficiently comprehensive (Jones et al., 2008), there is an emerging picture of the gendered contours of violence, with sexual harassment, rape, assault and intimidation in schools common experiences, particularly for girls; and with implicit gender violence in the form of gender differentiated corporal punishment and bullying reinforcing gender discrimination in schools (Leach and Mitchell, 2006; Jones et al., 2008). In the global south, many of the studies have

been led by multilateral organisations and international NGOs, committed to developing evidence based practice and advocacy to contest violence (e.g. UNICEF, 2005; Plan, 2008; DevTech Systems, 2008; Save the Children, 2011). But the continuing extensive documentation of violence in many different sites raises questions about whether the increasing knowledge base is leading to effective action or resulting in any progress in reducing levels of gender violence.

The ethical and methodological challenges of researching gender violence have been well documented (Ellsberg et al., 2001; WHO, 2002; Walby, 1990; Leach, 2006). Less attention has been paid however to the conceptual challenges of how, for example, we define violence. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004: 1) reflect on the voyeuristic tendency to focus on the physical acts, on the “pornography of violence”, missing the social and cultural dimensions that “give violence its power and meaning”. Should we then be researching ‘violence’ at all, or does this focus represent a distraction, shifting the gaze away from underlying inequalities and injustices? Or alternatively, does attention to violence help to spotlight these injustices by illuminating some of their visible manifestations? How then can we ensure this illumination in the

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ways we conceptualise violence? It is these questions that are at the heart of this paper.

Our analysis reflects on how a particular conceptualisation of violence translates into research and action in a project on violence against girls. We begin by tracing how different conceptual framings around gender and violence have informed research in education and international development, using theoretical lenses that emphasise acts and individuals, institutions or interactions. We then present a conceptual framework developed for a multi-partner project on violence against girls led by ActionAid in Kenya, Ghana and Mozambique. This framework makes explicit use of a multi-perspectival approach, attempting to harness the combined strengths of different theoretical positions. In order to assess the potential of this approach, we discuss evidence from baseline studies carried out for the project, focusing in particular on our data on sexual violence. We will also reflect on NGO actions arising from the research, and how different conceptualisations of violence may lead to particular kinds of actions. We conclude by considering the implications for theory, research and action.

2. Conceptual lenses in research on violence against girls

Unterhalter (2007) frames work on gender, schooling and global social justice according to interventions, institutions and interactions. Interventions, linked to WID (Women in Development) ideas, have stressed girls' enrolment in school, viewing gender as a noun, and have dominated international mobilisation. Institutional approaches, viewing gender as an adjective and linked to GAD (Gender and Development) ideas, have attended to challenging gendered relations in learning and teaching. Interactions, linked to gender as human variability, have been concerned with processes of dialogue and critique, and with how local understandings can influence institutions tasked with global social justice. In our review of work on gender, violence and education, we identified some conceptual similarities, which we frame as focusing on acts/individuals, institutions and interactions.

Much of the work on children and violence from the 1990s has been concerned with revealing the types and extent of violence young people experience in schools and communities. Usually within a positivist tradition, research considers *acts of violence*, causes of perpetration and effects on *individual* victims and witnesses (Smith and Sharp, 1994; Olweus, 1993; Matthews et al., 1999; Jaycox et al., 2003; Seedat et al., 2004; Burton, 2005). Violent acts tend to be viewed as aberrations, perpetrated by individuals and associated with individual psychopathologies (Reiss et al., 1993). Justice in these accounts is about individuals with, for example, behavioural intervention plans for young children displaying anti-social behaviour (Jimerson and Furlong, 2006) or peer support anti-bullying programmes to adjudicate between individual victims and perpetrators (Naylor and Cowie, 1999).

Increasingly broad definitions of violence are being employed, including emotional and psychological harm, as well as sexual and physical violence (WHO, 2002; Pinheiro, 2006). However, the focus on acts and individuals has been criticised for ignoring the social conditions that produce violence, the social relationships surrounding acts of violence and the complex processes of interpretation by which people make sense of violent social relations (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004; Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008). Gender is frequently ignored or relegated to being one of a series of risk factors. Leach and Mitchell (2006) have noted the dearth of research on gender violence in schools internationally, with studies in Asia tending to focus on corporal punishment, in Latin America and the Caribbean on gang violence, and in North America and Europe on bullying, intimidation and assault between pupils.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, however, from the 1990s there has been much more attention to gender and to sexual violence, emerging in part from research linked to the HIV/AIDs pandemic which revealed high levels of previously hidden intimate partner violence (Wood et al., 1998; Jewkes et al., 2002; Morrell et al., 2009). For instance, in Ghana, Mozambique and Kenya, widespread corporal punishment in schools has been documented, as well as sexual violence by male pupils and by teachers (Dunne and Leach, 2005; Leach et al., 2003; Teni-Atinga, 2006; Huber, 2007). Increasing attention to gender violence as a global policy concern was spearheaded by international women's movements, leading to the Vienna Declaration in 1993 and the United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women (DEVAW) 1993. Feminist mobilisation has influenced the development of international standards and norms on gender-based violence, which are increasingly visible in national legislation with, for example, some 90 countries now having laws on domestic violence (Bunch, 2008). The emphasis on violations of the right to bodily integrity unsettles the public-private divide as states are held accountable for scrutiny of violations in private as well as public spheres (Reilly, 2009). Attention shifts from acts and individuals to the ways in which *institutions* and social structures produce violence, with violence understood as a social practice. This shift is exemplified by Iris Marion Young's work on gender justice:

“What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice.” (Young, 1990: 61–62)

Within this approach, gender is viewed as relational, with unequal power relations between men and women supported and maintained by structures, laws, codes and regulations. Violence is conceptualised as the outcome of unequal and unjust social conditions, with gender relations intersecting with other dimensions like race, class, culture and the economy, as expressed through the concept of structural violence. Research using this lens focuses on how structures like patriarchy produce violence in the intimate space of the family, and how entrenched gender regimes may be destabilised as women move into public spaces (Walby, 1990). For example, research in Mozambique exposes constraints on married women, where domestic violence is legitimised by norms around men's control within the family (Arthur and Mejia, 2007). In addition, gendered dimensions of war and conflict have also been a concern, countering the exclusion of women from discussions and interventions on conflict and peace (Moser and Clark, 2001).

While GAD theorists tended to focus on women's rights rather than children's rights, structural critiques within education have examined how schools and education systems perpetuate violence (Harber, 2004; Leach, 2006). Injustice in these analyses is associated with generational imbalances of power that are enacted through authoritarian punishment and discipline systems in schools, or curricular biases which condone racist or gendered stereotypes and exclusions (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997; Mirembe and Davis, 2001; Davies, 2004; Rojas Arangoitia, 2011). Studies have also looked at legal and policy frameworks on violence, gender and education, with research in Kenya and Ghana identifying problems with translating national policies on gender and violence into local-level action (Wetheridge, 2008; Unterhalter and North, 2011). Within this framing, actions aim to transform social structures and institutions, often through legislative change, an approach Unterhalter (2007) has termed 'equity-from-above'. Gender justice is concerned with redressing

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