



When caring is not enough: The limits of teachers' support for South African primary school-girls in the context of sexual violence



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ABSTRACT

Between 2011 and 2012, 40.1% of all sexual offences in South Africa involved children under 18. Important scholarship has demonstrated how large-scale social and economic inequalities structure African girls' risk to and experience of sexual violence leading to a condemnation of violent masculinities and the social processes that produce it. Under conditions of chronic poverty and unstable living conditions, girls' vulnerability to sexual violence is increased. Schools located in extreme settings, without adequate material and social resources are often in the frontline in dealing with sexual violence. This paper examines how a selected group of teachers located in a township primary school understand their role in the social protection of young girls in the context of sexual violence. An ethic of care dominated teachers' responses to girls' rendered vulnerable to sexual violence, but as this paper argues, caring is both vital and inadequate. This point becomes particularly clear as turbulent social conditions and material struggles beyond the school limit teachers' potential to safeguard the needs of girls, resulting in their silence and fear contracted by their difficulty to work with parents. These social processes underscore the need to attend to interconnected interventions beyond and within education recognizing that teachers' work in addressing sexual violence in extreme setting exceeds the terrain of schools. The paper concludes with recommendations within schools and beyond that address teachers and the social, gendered and economic contexts which give rise to girls' sexual vulnerability.

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1. Introduction

We sat and then I said 'So tell me, where is mom?' 'My mom passed away... My dad passed away... I'm living with my granny'. I ask, 'what is troubling you?'... I'm holding her, we're talking: 'I'm talking to you as your mother. I want to help you because you might be having a problem but you don't know who to tell so I'm here for you baby, 'just tell me what is happening with you.' And then she started crying. And then I knew that there's something... 'every morning um my father's friend will come... will wait for me here at KK[a male migrant hostel built during apartheid] and then... he gives me food, and then I play with the cell phone...' And then, 'He touches me here' [Interview with Mrs. K, deputy principal in a township primary school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa].

Between 2011 and 2012, 25 862 reports, constituting 40.1% of all sexual offences in South Africa, involved children, under 18 with girls in particular, victims and men perpetrators (South African Police Services, 2013). Of this 40.2% of sexual offences involved children between the ages of 0 and 11 years old. Whilst these statistics are often considered to be underestimated due to low disclosure rates (Jewkes et al., 2010), girls' vulnerability to sexual violence is profound especially in a country where almost 27% of men, in a population-based study, have perpetrated rape, with 75% admitting to rape before the age of 20 (Jewkes et al., 2011). Beyond these statistics, are the social forces and underlying gender inequalities which structure girls' risk to and experience of sexual violence.

Complex factors related to the historical legacies of apartheid, political economy and male frailties in the economic sphere combined with ideological domains of male privilege drive the conditions which create women's vulnerability to sexual violence and African girls' particular risk. Fragile home settings exacerbate their risk. Almost 40% of households in South Africa are headed by women with the number of children living with their fathers dropping from 44% in 1996 to 31% in 2012 (Stats South Africa,

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2013). The crumbling of the family is a poisonous legacy of apartheid and linked to the high rate of men's labour migration, and situated within the nexus of contemporary social and economic upheaval in the country ([White Paper on Families in South Africa, 2012](#)).

In South Africa, the tragedy of sexual violence is especially conspicuous in African townships although not limited to it. This is due in large part to the townships' lamentable position, where children's lives are precarious in unstable living conditions and thin social networks, with substantial levels of coerced sex and where rape disproportionately strikes young girls ([Jewkes et al., 2005](#)). Whilst girls on the global scale suffer more sexual violence than boys largely as a result of gender power inequalities ([Backes, 2013](#)), as the World Report on Violence and Health ([Runyam et al., 2002](#)) suggests, it is more common in households which are poor, lack social support or are located in communities with less social capital. Without the care and protection of their families, in grinding poverty, in a context of impoverished community support structures and weak social service systems, the school in extreme contexts may be a critical site to increase girls' care and protection options.

In South Africa there is growing attention to the role of the school in addressing and supporting vulnerable children as elucidated by the plethora of educational policies ([Department of Education, 2005](#)). One of the roles required of teachers is the social protection of children in the context of sexual and gender violence. At the same time, schools in South Africa and male teachers in particular have been identified as perpetrating rape against school girls and hostile to gender equality ([Human Rights Watch, 2001](#)). Recently the Report of *Sexual Violence by Educators in South African Schools* (2014) shows that between 2010 and 2012, there were there were 126 complaints of sexual misconduct, including rape in South African schools. The report notes further that many male teachers do not face the full might of the law with written cautionary letters most common in dealing with male sexual abusers.

Sexual violence is difficult to define although it involves coercion, is highly stigmatizing resulting in widespread silence making it difficult to estimate. Using the definition of the *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002), [Dartnall and Jewkes \(2013\)](#) define sexual violence as a sexual act, using coercion and encompass a range of different sexual acts with girls mainly the victims who usually know the perpetrators. In South Africa, the Sexual Offences Act (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act No. 32 of 2007 ([Republic of South Africa, 2007](#)) requires mandatory reporting by any person who becomes aware of sexual violence involving a child. Beyond reporting, the role of the teacher is to facilitate disclosure, support the child and build on preventative programmes through life skills education programmes supporting gender equality ([KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, 2007](#)).

Primary schools have an important role to play in addressing and preventing sexual violence although there is hardly any research and debate that puts primary schools to work in this regard. In addressing this caveat, this paper asks: How do teachers understand their roles to support girls' rendered vulnerable in the context of sexual violence? To illustrate the paper examines how primary school teachers' care work is invoked in responses to sexual abuse. It then considers how teachers' care work and action is limited by the context of gender inequalities, poverty, violence as well as difficulties in establishing relations with parents. [Jewkes and Abrahams \(2002\)](#) note that in many institutional contexts in South Africa including schools there remains lack of support including infrastructural support to facilitate the reporting of sexual abuse although the specific ways in which primary school

teachers respond to the sexual violence has not been adequately examined.

This paper is based on a larger research project titled, "Stop the violence: boys and girls in and around schools". The paper focuses on an empirical based study of primary school teachers in an African township school, *KwaDabeka* in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. *KwaDabeka* was constructed in the 1960s during apartheid specifically to house African migrant labourers. The KK Hostel which was built in *KwaDabeka* was the largest hostel complex in the southern hemisphere ([Ethekwini Municipality, 2010](#)). Today *KwaDabeka* is a mix of four room housing, single and attached housing units, shacks and informal settlements and the KK hostel. The [Ethekwini Municipality \(2010\)](#) indicates that almost 35, 4% of people are unemployed.

The 1122 children who come to school at *KwaDabeka* emerge from conditions of chronic poverty and HIV, where adults are un-or underemployed and where households generate an income from unskilled labour relying on government grants for their survival, with children dependent upon the school nutrition scheme which is often their only hot meal for the day ([Bhana, 2005](#)). 16.9% of people in KwaZulu-Natal province are infected with HIV with the eThekweni Municipality which includes *KwaDabeka* is one of the highest HIV prevalence municipalities in South Africa ([HSRC, 2014](#)).

Against the grim context of structural inequalities, from a standpoint of care, Mrs. K, in the opening transcripts above, narrates her experience as she facilitates disclosure of sexual violence. [Kleinman \(2009\)](#) defines caring as a moral practice of responsibility and solidarity with those in great need and holds potential for deepening justice. Caring for those in great need, especially in extreme contexts is vital when girls' suffering and vulnerability is reproduced by the failure of the state to protect them, the weakened social support systems including family and police services ([Jewkes et al., 2010](#)). Caring for those in need is vital but as this paper will show, teachers' narratives of their socially constituted roles and wider inequalities, provides insight into the complex processes and structures that are implicated in the social protection of girls. Therein lies the complexity of teachers' role in the social protection of girls. The wider social context is integral to understanding how teachers negotiate and reflect on their roles. In short, teachers' care cannot be romanticized as simply doing the work of justice. The extreme social conditions under which teachers negotiate their responses to girls' sexual vulnerability, diminishes their agency, leaving girls located on the bottom end of the social ladder, continually vulnerable to and victims of sexual violence with little social protection. Caring is vital but not enough and interdependent on wider structural contexts. This is the main argument of the paper.

2. Caring teachers in the context of children's vulnerability

There is a well-established educational debate about the role of teachers in promoting an ethic of care which stands in conflict with their role in teaching and learning especially in a context where the quality of teachers is measured by how well learners perform in tests rather than immeasurable acts of emotional labour involving love and care for learners ([Acker, 1995](#); [Noddings, 2012](#)). Rejecting the approach that sees caring 'on top' of the daily demands of teaching and learning, [Noddings \(2012, p. 777\)](#) argues that caring is 'underneath all we do as teachers adding further that 'when that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better'. As [Gaita \(2012, p. 769\)](#) states, a teacher can do nothing finer for her students that honour the fundamental need for human regard.

What constitutes the meaning of caring is ambiguous; its meaning is contested, elusive and partial. [Fine \(2007\)](#) suggests that care constitutes actions, attitudes and values about the responsibility to others. [Noddings \(2012\)](#) refers to caring as a relation. Despite social and generational inequalities between teachers and

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