

A culture of silence that normalises widespread violence

The SeViSSA Kwanele* baseline study found that learners at Khayelitsha schools experience high levels of sexual violence, including intimate partner violence in heterosexual sexual and dating relationships.

This research brief discusses the culture of silence accompanying these forms of violence, and the tendency for young people to normalise and justify such violence.

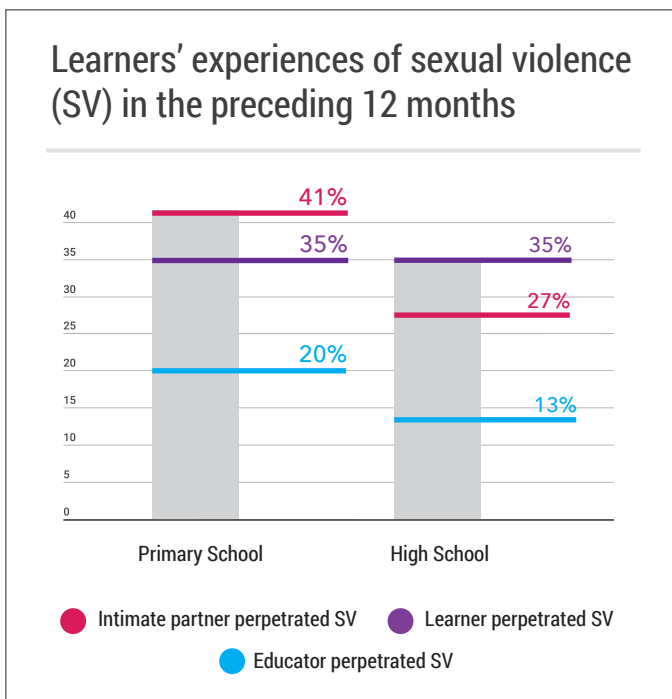


Figure 1: Learners' experiences of sexual violence in the preceding 12 months



Figure 3: Girls at a school in Khayelitsha participate in a peer-led Young Women's Club focused on sexual and reproductive issues, including HIV and sexual violence

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High rates of sexual violence, with younger learners most vulnerable

As illustrated in Figure 1, rates of sexual violence experienced by primary and high school learners are high, with intimate partner violence experienced by 41% of younger learners in the 12 months prior to the study. High rates of educator-perpetrated sexual violence are another worrying finding.

A culture of silence

Only around half of learners in the study disclosed such experiences of sexual violence to someone else, usually telling a friend or their mothers, as shown in Figure 2.

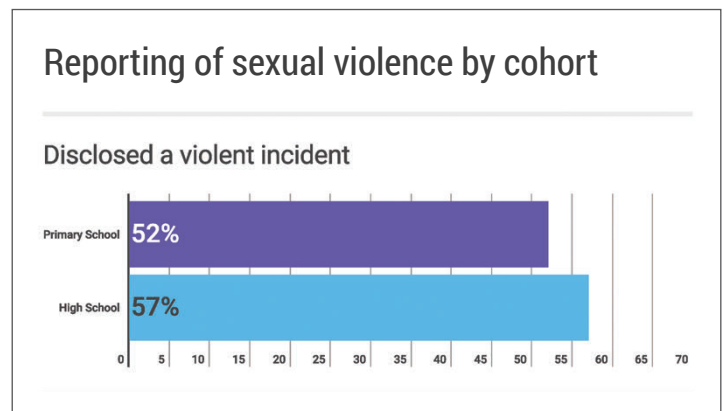
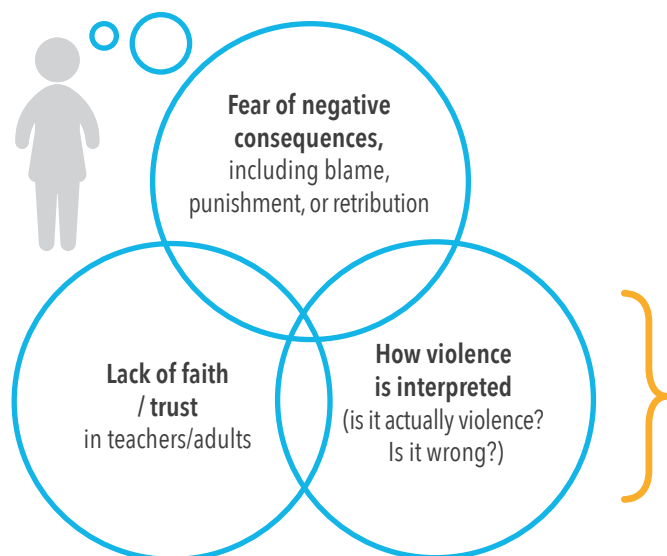


Figure 2: Reporting of sexual violence by cohort

Reporting among primary school learners is somewhat lower, despite this age group experiencing higher rates of sexual violence than high school learners. This shows **younger learners are at greater risk, both in terms of experiencing violence and seeking support.**

*The Sexual Violence in Schools in South Africa (SeViSSA) initiative aims to create safe school environments by dealing with violence against girls. It is being implemented by Grassroot Soccer and Soul City Institute in Khayelitsha schools, through their Kwanele Project. A baseline study gives a picture of the situation prior to the project starting and will help monitor its progress. See the full report at: <https://www.ru.ac.za/criticalstudies/policybriefsfeedbackreports/>

Silence is linked to fear and social norms



Silence is linked to fear of negative consequences – both for the victim and the perpetrator – as well as the perception that teachers fail to act on reports.

Normalising intimate partner violence

Our findings suggest that learners in romantic relationships experience high levels of violence at the hands of their partners, with somewhat higher levels among primary school learners. Girls experience such violence at much higher rates than boys. The data from interviews and focus groups with learners demonstrated the gender norms that underpin IPV, as well as the ways in which young people normalised IPV, which can lead to silencing and under-reporting.

The majority view that emerged in our discussions with learners of all age groups was that violence against female partners was a normal, expected part of intimate heterosexual relationships.

The learners explained this dominant view of male-perpetrated IPV according to common, unwritten 'dating rules' (or norms) that they believed "everybody knows".

Challenging the 'rules' that sanction violence

Despite the pervasiveness of these narratives that legitimise IPV, some learners disagreed with these beliefs.

Two common counter-arguments, contradicting 'dating rules' 1 and 2 respectively, included the ideas that:

The decision to report sexual violence was also influenced by whether the learners thought that the violence they had experienced was wrong. The data suggest that under-reporting of sexual violence is common in intimate (dating) relationships.

IPV in particular seen as 'normal' and therefore not wrong

4/10 of learners who'd experienced intimate partner violence believed it WASN'T wrong.



Figure 4: Reporting of sexual violence by cohort

For younger learners in particular, their reluctance to report violence was often linked to fears of being blamed or punished.

Dating rule 1: Women provide sex in exchange for men's material and emotional provision

According to this dating norm, boys who give girlfriends (and even other girls) any form of monetary or material gifts or support (e.g. buying drinks on a night out, helping to buy food and clothing) have a right to expect sex in return. Girls who refuse to offer/agree to sex in exchange, break this unspoken rule. This rule simultaneously excuses male violence and creates a 'deserving' female victim.

Dating rule 2: Girls want to be 'pleaded' or persuaded to have sex

This dating norm frames sex as a romantic conquest, where hormone-driven boys are the ones who pursue sex and win girls over (by convincing them to have sex).

What is concerning about this dating rule is that it supports the belief that girls who say 'no' to sex are sometimes simply 'playing hard to get', and that consent to have sex doesn't have clear boundaries.

- (1) Love comes from the heart and is not proven with sex or money
- (2) If you love someone, you will wait for the person to feel ready to have sex with you.

These two counter-arguments provide possible entry points for creating and encouraging new relationship norms with learners, which do not normalise violence or forced sex.