FROM THE GIRLS' LENS: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL GIRLS IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS, NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is part of the hard realities of living in an informal settlement. The United Nations reports it as one of the most serious human rights violations, with more than 30% of the females experiencing it. Vulnerability to GBV in these locales is even increased when one is younger, as is the case with secondary school girls, with statistics indicating that they have the highest recorded number of cases of GBV. Numerous policies to mitigate this are in place, yet the vice is on the increase. Most data on GBV that exist focus on adult females, yet the vice can be traced in the early years of the females' lives, and later ignored and thus normalizing the malpractice. The study, therefore, set out to explore secondary school girls' experiences of GBV in informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya. The objective of the study was to explore the forms of GBV experienced by the girls in secondary schools. The social feminist theory by Crenshaw and Janes guided the qualitative study, which employed phenomenological research design within the interpretivist paradigm. The study involved 28 participants (girls), who were selected through snowball sampling, from two public secondary schools in informal settlements. Data were generated through participatory visual methods (drawings), which were used to explore girls' experiences of GBV. Data emanating from discussions of the drawing were thematically analyzed. The findings revealed that the girls experienced physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse. Physical abuse would occur alone or intertwined with sexual abuse. Psychological abuse encapsulated rejection and being treated as commodities. The girls were also verbally abused, taking the form of harsh words and gender-discriminative speech. Perpetrators included teachers,

relatives, fellow students, and community gangs. This study concluded that girls experienced varied forms of abuse, which most of the time was neither reported nor even noticed. The study, therefore, recommended that schools should have a mechanism to identify girls experiencing GBV and offer specialized trauma counseling services. Further, that schools should organize whole school development sessions where teachers, boys, and girls are trained on GBV awareness and possible intervention strategies.

KEYWORDS: Gender, violence, girls, physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, abuse.

1.0   Introduction

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm or maldevelopment" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5). The acknowledgment of gender in violence, cannot be taken for granted. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), defines GBV as "an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females, that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to the victim" (UNHCR, 2020, p.5). Such harm includes but is not restricted to coercion, threats, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, emotional and psychological abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, sex trafficking, sexual violence, spousal abuse, bullying, corporal punishment, and forced prostitution (UNHCR, 2015). On the other hand, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours or attitudes on what is deemed fit for a man or woman (UNICEF, 2017). These socially constructed roles may give rise to gender inequalities, especially if they favor one gender over the other. The socially weaker gender is thus considered vulnerable and open to exploitation and domination by the socially stronger gender. This domination is evidenced in different aspects of life such as inequalities in education and healthcare among others (WHO, 2009).

According to the WHO, boys also experience GBV. However, the girl is the most common victim of GBV, with numerous women around the globe suffering injury and disability in the aftermath (WHO, 2005). According to the Nairobi Women's Hospital Gender Violence Recovery Centre (NWHGVRC) report in 2014, of all the GBV survivors served at their facility, females comprised 92% while the males served comprised 8% of the entire population. For this reason, the term Violence Against Women/Girls (VAW/G) is often used when one wants to indicate that the focus falls on the experiences of women and girls.

GBV "knows no social, economic, class, or cultural confinement" (National Crime Research Centre) (NCRC, 2014). The origin of violence against women can be traced back to the olden times when women were seen as assets and were required to be submissive to men, as it was the gender role given to them (Gender-Based Violence Forum (GBVF), 2010). Today, GBV against school girls is a global phenomenon. It occurs both within and outside the confines of the school. The UN

World Report (2016) on Violence against Children, recognized violence particularly against girls as a worldwide crisis. It is an experience that robs young girls of the opportunity to maximize their full potential both socially and academically. It is worth noting that GBV takes many forms and does not manifest itself the same way in all places, rather it evolves with time and differs based on culture, society, and traditions (Reuters, 2012).

Forms of GBV Experienced by Girls

According to UNESCO (2015), GBV against girls can be categorized into three major forms: physical, sexual, and psychological violence. However, some scholars argue that there are more forms, including verbal and cultural violence. Physical violence is defined as "the pattern of behaviors where physical force is used intentionally and that potentially causes death, disability, injury or harm; including throwing, pushing, shaking, scratching, punching, grabbing, biting, slapping, choking, burning, and using a weapon" (Bekmuratova, 2012, p. 5). It is the form that is easiest to identify and prosecute. Sexual violence is one of the most prevalent forms of GBV affecting girls in secondary schools (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018). WHO defines it as "any sexual act, attempted sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic women's sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the survivor, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149). Psychological violence on the other hand is classified as one of the most difficult forms to identify and even convict. This is because it has no physical evidence by which to prove the violence. It includes humiliating punishments, eve-teasing, threats, verbal abuse, social exclusion, being shouted at, and/or being spoken to harshly.

Perpetrators of GBV against School Girls
Media reports and coverage have revealed that common perpetrators of GBV against school girls are not only confined to the school personnel but rather cut across many people. They range from teachers, students, relatives, and community members, with the vice occurring at home, school, or in the community.

GBV in Informal Settlements
GBV among girls is even more prevalent in informal settlements, commonly referred to as slums (Swart, 2012). Girls living in informal settlements are more prone to GBV as these locales are characterized by a deplorable state of living among its dwellers, lack of basic infrastructure and services, poor housing built of makeshift materials, and other appalling conditions (Arimah, 2011) However, most of the GBV studies focus only on the country's general population neglecting the informal settlements. Unfortunately, the situation in the general population cannot be generalized to informal settlements. There was, therefore, a need to establish the forms of GBV affecting school girls in the informal settlements. This was done by harnessing the power of first-hand experiences on GBV among secondary school girls in the informal settlements

1.1   Statement of the Problem

Gender-Based Violence has been globally ranked as one of the most serious human rights violations, with more than 30% of women experiencing it. The prevalence of GBV increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the UN reports showing that globally, in 2020, 15 million adolescent girls aged 15–19 years, experienced non-consensual sex, which is one of the forms of GBV. In Kenya, the MOE has formulated policies such as the Sexual Offences Act (2006) and the Education and Training Sector Gender Policy (2015), to mitigate the occurrence of GBV against girls in and around schools. Despite the development of numerous policies both globally and locally, GBV has worsened, especially in the slums (Abuya et al., 2012; Swart, 2012). Statistics show that one in three girls aged 11–15 years in urban informal settlements of Nairobi has experienced at least one form of GBV (Kabiru, 2018). Most data on GBV that exists, focus on adult females, yet the vice can be traced to the early years of the females' life. Further, GBV intervention studies often focus on the general girl population, 'neglecting' the experiences of girls in informal settlements. In addition, the girls' voices towards solutions are missing in policy. Due to this, there is a dearth of literature on the GBV experiences of school girls in informal settlements. Therefore, it is in view of this background that this study sought to explore the Gender-Based Violence experiences of secondary school girls in informal settlements, Nairobi County, Kenya.

1.2   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the GBV experiences of secondary school girls in informal settlements, Nairobi County, Kenya.

1.3   Specific Objective of the Study

The study sought to explore the forms of GBV secondary school girls experience in informal settlements.

1.4   Research Question

The following research question was used:
     What forms of GBV did secondary school girls experience in informal settlements?

1.5   Research Methodology

This study was located within the interpretivist paradigm, embracing the qualitative approach and the phenomenological research design. The study was conducted in two selected public secondary schools in informal settlements, Nairobi County, Kenya. The target population was all the secondary school girls who have experienced GBV and studying in selected schools in informal settlements.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of schools. This study targeted the 2 largest and centrally located secondary schools as they potentially had a higher chance of having more girls

who have experienced GBV. Snowball sampling was used in the selection of individual girls. This technique enabled me to identify girls from the general school population who had seen, heard of, or experienced GBV and could share their experiences and thoughts in ample depth and clarity. Fourteen girls from each of the two schools were selected to participate in the study. Thus, twenty-eight girls in total were selected. This sample size was arrived at after data saturation was reached.

Instruments

The study used Participatory Visual Methods (drawings) to collect data from the participants. Brailas (2020), posits that participant-produced drawings provide access to non-verbal meanings and facilitate participants sharing their feelings, thoughts, and experiences which are not easily communicated otherwise. The girls were invited to make a drawing on blank paper, using pencils and coloring crayons, that symbolize how they see GBV and to explain verbally or/and in writing, what they wished to communicate via this drawing. During the drawing sessions, each girl was given at least 15 minutes to draw and write a caption individually. They were then allowed to talk about their drawings individually with the researcher. Thereafter, the girls shared their drawings with each other. Before and during the drawing process, I provided a prompt such as, "Draw how you see GBV and how it has affected you". After the drawing session, they shared more about what they had drawn. Here, I encouraged the girls to verbally describe their drawings by using phrases such as "tell me about it" and "tell me about your experiences of GBV in informal settlements". Data was recorded using an audio recorder.

1.6   Ethical Considerations

Before the onset of the fieldwork, I applied for research approval from the university. I then sought research clearance from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). I obtained informed consent from all the participants before onset of the study. Further, before the start of the draw-and-tell sessions, I acknowledged the presence of any audio recording equipment. In addition to this, I allowed participants the freedom to withdraw at any point during the process. I consistently protected the anonymity and confidentiality of all the study participants during data collection. storage, analysis, and publication processes. I used pseudonyms throughout, and never the girls' real names. Additionally, I used a method (drawing) that ensured information generation and documentation were done in a way that presented the least risk to participants while building on current experience and good practice.

1.7   The Research Results

The age range of the school girls was between 13 and 18 years. They can thus be generally classified as teenagers/ adolescents.

Experiences of Physical Violence

Physical abuse came up prominently in the girls' replies about their experiences. The participants (girls) in this study reported that they were physically abused, both at home and even in school. The perpetrators included their parents, relatives, and strangers.

The physical abuse became evident from the following quotations:

"This is the father. A man who is the father and he is thoroughly caning the daughter of which the pregnancy he is the one who has caused it" [Caroline Brillian]*"Going to school was also a problem. She was constantly beaten by those parents and was not viewed as a child of that home. She was treated like a house help, doing all the house chores, while the other family members just sat and watched".* [Veronicah].

I have drawn that this man is forcing this girl to have sex with him. Now, this girl refused and the man started beating her up. She cried and then the man was successful. The man beat the girl and left her".[Lucky Barak]

"I have drawn a father beating a daughter. This girl had come from school and found out that her mother had not yet arrived. The father demanded sex but the girl refused to give in. The man started beating the girl thoroughly and told her he would beat her till she dies if she denied him sex" [Amelia]

From the above quotations, it is evident that there is an intertwining of physical and sexual violence, where one occurs before or after the other. This is consistent with Abramovay and Das Graças Rua (2002), who argues that most forms of violence intersect with each other and have common root causes. According to the KDHS (2008/2009), 35.9% of girls are physically abused by their mothers while 40.6% are abused physically by teachers. In this study, however, the participants did not share any physical abuse perpetrated by teachers.

Experiences of Sexual Violence

The girls shared experiences of sexual abuse, occurring in school, outside school, and in the family. They reported that sexual violence in the family was perpetrated mostly by relatives and sometimes by strangers. Most of the time it was perpetrated by the father or stepfather. This is in agreement with the KDHS (2008) report that fathers are the leading perpetrators of sexual violence against children. The following drawing and quotations highlight this:
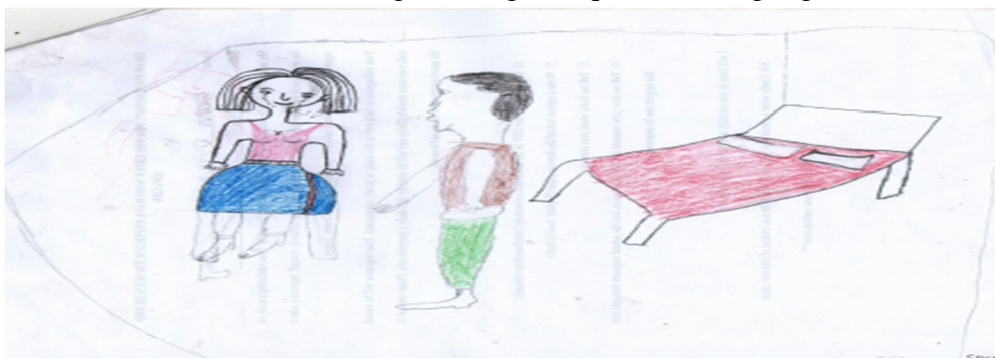
"This man is this girl's stepfather. The mother had just given birth to this man's child and she thus saw it fit that they live together as man and wife. The woman thought that her husband viewed her children as his own. She was wrong. The man started advancing toward her eldest daughter, touching her inappropriately and having sex with her. He threatened that he would beat or stab her" [Olive]

"This girl is being beaten by her father. She had come back from school and found her father alone at home, the mother had not yet returned home. The father then demanded sex, to which the girl refused. The father beat her so much, threatening that if she refused, he would beat her to death".[Amelia]

Some girls shared that girls experience sexual abuse outside school. These abuses occurred when the girls were doing errands away from home, such as going to the market. Sexual abuse perpetrated against girls outside the home/school is evidenced by the following drawing and quotations:
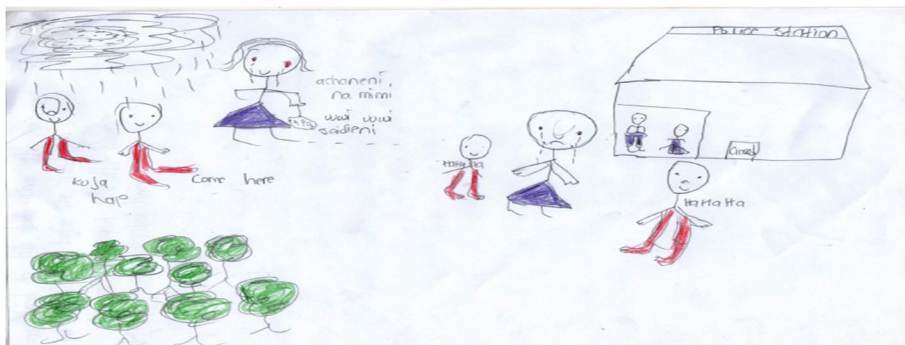
"This girl had been sent to the market to get groceries. The market was far away and on her return journey, it started raining. As there was no place to shelter, she decided to keep walking in the rain. She then met two boys who started running after her. Once they caught her, they carried her to the nearest forest and raped her and left her there having lost consciousness". [Adhiambo]

"According to my image, the girl is on the road walking then a man approaches the girl and intends to introduce forced sex to the girl. The road was not a public one hence not many people pass. When the girl refuses, the man intends to catch her attention and rape her". [Queenter]

These responses resonate with Hampshire et al. (2011), who posit that poverty shapes girls' movements and subsequently their social relations with other people. They further explain that doing household tasks such as fetching firewood or water and walking through potentially dangerous places increases the girls' susceptibility to sexual violence. From the above quotations, girls experienced sexual abuse and were prohibited from speaking out by the perpetrator. Out of fear, they kept silent and endured the abuse. This corresponds with Beyene et al. (2021) who asserted that GBV victims stay silent because they fear their perpetrators.

Further, some girls narrated how they experienced abuse inside or around the confines of the school. The girls shared that some male teachers were responsible for sexually assaulting girls while in school, while others pointed to fellow students (boys). They had the following to say about the sexual abuse of girls in school:

"This girl had gone to the staffroom to meet the mathematics teacher for academic consultation. The teacher said that the room is noisy and that they needed a quieter space. They thus headed for the library. The teacher started caressing the girl while teaching her and eventually raped her. The girl got pregnant". [Stephanie]

"I have drawn a girl on her way home from school. On the way, she meets a man, and she deems him dangerous. She was so scared when the man talked to her and she started trembling. The man touched her and then forcefully raped her".[Charity]

These findings agree with a report from the Human Social Rights Council (2018), where numerous girls between the ages of 10-14 experienced sexual violence at school. Parkes' (2016) study findings are also congruent with this idea. The findings above also point to groups of men outside the school who prey on girls when coming to or leaving school. This is congruent with McIlwaine and Moser (2004) who posit that in Columbia, school violence is linked with gangs outside the school compound who target girls going in or out of school.

Some girls reported that their parents were behind the sexual abuse they experienced. This was in exchange for money. For instance:

"She took it as a joke because her mother was behind her being abused. The teacher had been giving her money in exchange". [Stephanie]

In the above case, the mother organized for her daughter to get sexually violated for her own monetary gain. The teacher took advantage of the poor economic state of the girl's family. A study by Cornell University's Law School (2012) asserts this when it found that Zambian school teachers took advantage of girls' poverty levels by attempting to have sex with them. However, this case was unique as the mother 'sold out' her child.

Experiences of Psychological Violence

Psychological abuse emerged glaringly from the girls' narrations of school girls' experiences. It encapsulated rejection and neglect by their families, denial of education, and being treated as commodities for 'sale'.

The intertwining of psychological abuse with sexual abuse was evident from the girls' experiences. This is portrayed in the quotation below:

"The man was touching and caressing her. The girl resisted but the man threatened her and said he would stab her with her knife" [Olive]

Some girls said they experienced rejection by their families after they had experienced GBV:

"This mother loved her sons more than her daughter. She would gift the boys and ignore the girl. When she queried about this situation, her mother told her that she is useless and had no value to her. She then chased her away from home".[Jennifer, Line 431-436]

"I have drawn a guardian living with her sisters' daughter and a girl. And simply because she is living with the guardian, she is given a lot of work to do. They do not appreciate the work that she does, she does not even appreciate the exams or anything that she does. And when she moves from school, she is given a lot of work and she sleeps late simply because she is a girl. No one listens to her".

[Ceane Clara]

The participants shared that some girls were denied the opportunity to go to school, yet their brothers were taken to school. The societal stereotype of patriarchy is thus evident when the parents say that a girl is always useless, educated, or not. These were captured in their responses:

"Moraa narrates how her friend was discriminated against. She was not taken to school while her brother is educated. She is denied food and her movement is restricted. She even says that the mother loved the boy more than herself".[Moraa]

"So, this is a young girl. She finished her KCPE In 2021. She is staying with her guardians and she lost her parents. Now, her guardians are not willing to take her to high school because they think when she finishes her KCPE, she will be useless and will not be able to help them. So, they brought a man. A man came and said that he wants her hand in marriage, with her. So, he came and started violating her".[Shamiza]

"According to my image there, my friend... wakes. She is a dropout because her parent refused to pay her school fees".[Princess Betty]

The girls shared that they felt and saw that they were treated as commodities for 'sale'. This was especially when they were subjected to early and forced marriage. Some causative factors to child forced marriage include negative social norms, early pregnancy, gender inequality, poverty, and poor enforcement of laws (Mwanukuzi & Nyamhanga, 2021).

The participants in this study said the following:

"I have drawn a father and his daughter, together with the father's friend. This friend is an old eighty-nine-year-old man who has come to seek the girl's hand in marriage. The father is happily giving his daughter away, as he sees educating her as a waste of resources".[Pritty]*"Her father wanted her to get married to an old man, yet she was only 15 years old".* [Pritty]

"This girl lives with her guardians. After completing her primary school examinations, the guardians bring in an old man to marry her. She is sad because she wanted to further her education Her father wanted her to get married after completing her primary school education. He sought an eighty-nine-year-old to marry her"[Shamizah]

From the data above, forced marriage is a sad reality facing girls. This corresponds with Zafar et al. (2020) who argue that over 700 million women alive today, were married as children. Early and forced marriage, from the findings above, led to the girls dropping out of school. This finding is in line with Nour (2006), who asserts that the aftermath of child marriage includes but is not limited to dropping out of school, sexually transmitted infections, and adolescent pregnancies. Globally, it is estimated that 82 million girls between the ages of 10–17 years will be married off before their 18th birthday, where there is no consent to the marriage by the girl (Save the Children Alliance, 2005). This then depicts a disaster in the making, and thus a need to act now and prevent this from happening.

Experiences of Verbal Violence

Verbal abuse can be in the form of insults or name-calling. The girls expressed their experiences of verbal abuse as seen in the below quotations:

"I have drawn a girl narrating her ordeal to a teacher. She says how she has been abused by her parents. They abused her badly, calling her names such as "dog" and "prostitute". They even denied her food. They did not love her".[Princess Joy]

"The girl is crying, narrating to her friend how much her mother abuses her whenever she gets home from school".[Written caption explanation, Obuquidia]

"This girl did not attend school, while her brother did. The mother discriminated against her because she was HIV positive. She constantly abused her, calling her 'sick".[Belisha Visha]

The quotations above reveal the prevalence of verbal abuse against school girls. This resonates with Shute et al. (2008) in their study conducted in Sweden, where they found verbal abuse reported as an everyday occurrence, and reported it as being more prevalent than "physical touching".

1.8   Conclusion

The findings of the study lead me to conclude that GBV is real in the lives of school girls in informal settlements and that violence ranges from verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual. What is disconcerting is that it happens at home, on the way to and from school, and at school. Both home and school are two spaces where girls are meant to be safe, yet the reality is that they are not safe in either. Therefore, immediate intervention measures should be put in place to deal with this vice.

1.9   Recommendations

In view of the conclusion above, this study makes the following recommendations:

i. The study recommends that Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) could be taught in schools. This would ensure that children and girls understand the nature of GBV and thus find ways it can be prevented.

ii. The study also recommends that any teachers who are found culpable of committing acts of GBV against the learners should be brought to book. This can be done by following legal procedures, to investigate and punish those found guilty. They should also be barred from teaching.

iii. The study recommends that the school principals organize whole school development sessions where teachers, boys, and girls are trained. This training could focus on general sexuality, comprehensive sexuality education as well as GBV awareness and possible intervention strategies.

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