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‘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 recognised that sexual violence in schools is one of the major concerns with regard to promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights. 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.

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Introduction

Sexual violence taking place in schools is recognised as one of the major challenges in regard to promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights (WHO 2002; Wood, Maforah, and Jewkes 1998). It is a worldwide phenomenon, yet with the HIV/AIDS pandemic it has gained increased attention in sub-Saharan African context (Leach 2003; Leach and 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 is 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 and Aggleton 2001; WHO 2002; Wood, Maforah, and Jewkes 1998). 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, sexual violence seems to be highly normalised and tolerated (Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006; Leach 2003; Leach and Humphreys 2007; Mirembe and Davies 2001).

This article discusses 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 which are supportive of sexual and reproductive health promotion can be unsettling in terms of gender identities (Leach 2003; Mirembe and Davies 2001), leading to confusion for young people about, for instance, what it means to be a man or a woman (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Stromquist and Fischman 2009). In order to enhance 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 article looks at how boys and girls define, experience, and interpret sexual violence in schools, and considers their perspectives on 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 divergence in views held by most girls and boys leads to large misunderstandings between them, allowing space for continued toleration of sexual violence. The article 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 where current (patriarchal) power relations are questioned and transformed, hostile and misogynistic emotional relations are condemned, and symbolic relations reflect gender equality norms. However, despite such opportunities for a school to challenge and 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 the 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 organisations. Because of this, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of the problem. Secondly, due to the sensitivity of the topic, exact incidence numbers are hard to determine. However, for Ethiopia, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2005) estimates that 59%
of all women have experienced sexual violence in their life time. 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. (2011 cited in WHO 2014, 2)

What is essential in defining sexual violence is the imbalance of power in gendered relations that is at the core of sexual violence (Leach and Humphreys 2007). One of the causes of this can be found in the patriarchal history and structures of Ethiopian society and sub-Saharan African societies more broadly, that favour male dominance and male sexual entitlement (Jewkes, Sen, and Garcia-Moreno 2002). Not surprisingly, most violence is thus directed against girls (Jewkes, Sen, and 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 and Humphreys 2007).

What is also important to recognise is that with regard to gender, a binary view of girls only as victims and boys as perpetrators of sexual violence should be avoided. In schools, for instance, other 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 and Humphreys 2007).

A relational theory of sexual violence in schools

In illustrating how social institutions reflect a ‘gender order’ Connell (2002) employs a relational theory and 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 a gendered division of labour. The third dimension of emotional relations could refer to sexual and non-sexual emotional attachments to others; 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 according to this framework, are firstly sites where power relations are being constructed, acted upon, and played out. Common features of this form are power relations between teachers and students, and within peer group cultures (Leach 2003; Mirembe and Davies 2001). Such power relations could, on the one hand, reflect the patriarchal structure of society, socialising young people according to the traditional norms of society about what it means to be a boy or a girl (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Stromquist and Fischman 2009). On the other hand, education can also be a means of contesting existing power relations, in this case questioning the power differences based on gender. In fact, this article will show how CSE has the potential to inspire students to act against gender injustices they witness or experience, but at the same time point to how the implementation of CSE can also limit a deep questioning of current gender regimes.
Secondly, schools are sites where work-based and production relations are reinforced or transformed, through, for instance, a division of labour between boys and girls, or purposefully changing 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 a school could be seen as part of the re-negotiation of emotional relations, by paying attention to sexual development and identity, and the 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 the authoritarian school cultures characteristic of 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, and 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) (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Omaar and de Waal 1994). These examples illustrate power dynamics and a patriarchal societal structure as observed in particular schools (Connell 2002).

Secondly, the peer group culture influences the socialisation process of young girls and boys. In schools in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Ghana, girls were expected to be obedient to the 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, many 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 teachers (Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Maganja et al. 2007; Nyanzi, Pool, and 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 sexual knowledge and be sexually active, whereas for Ethiopian young women this would be regarded as shameful, and many stay silent about this for religious, social, and cultural reasons (Kebede, Hilden, and 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 uncontentious (Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Jewkes, Sen, and Garcia-Moreno
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, which is crucial for thinking about sexuality, and sexual violence (Bajaj 2009). However, firstly it can be questioned to what extent the implementation of such programmes is in line with its comprehensive design. Of use here is the framework developed by Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton (2011) which provides three categories for conceptualising sexuality education: scientifically informed, rights-informed, and morally informed approaches. The differences in these approaches are crucial as they bring to light underlying assumptions of the programmes, facilitators, and its intended outcomes, for example: is sexuality education aimed at changing risky behaviours; enabling young people to know and think about their rights; or instilling certain (conservative) moral values? Secondly, from a ‘developmentalist’ approach, the focus of many programmes is on improving health outcomes (e.g. increased condom use, decrease in STDs or maternal morbidity) which in turn is seen as leading to ‘modernisation’ (Lewis 2002). As I argue below, this view is expressed by some students as well, and in effect reduces sexuality education to a means for economic development. Such an approach also fails to fully recognise the social structural factors that contribute to sexual violence (Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, Njambi, and Osirim 2004).

Secondly, whether sexuality education programmes are actually very helpful in acknowledging sexual violence can also be questioned, given the sexually charged environment in schools and society (Leach 2003). It is not surprising that schools, as institutions that reflect society’s regimes, experience cultural and social constraints on the successful implementation of sexuality education programmes (Iyer and Aggleton 2013), and these affect how sexual violence is addressed by teachers and students. Therefore, this requires a whole school process, one that pays attention to formal and informal structures in the school, and involves not only students and teachers, but also parents and the 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 broader support levels as well as the level of formal governance (Connell 2002).

Lastly, it is crucial to include and respond to the 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 topics on sexual violence. Further, including boys and young men is a less common approach in addressing gender equality and sexual violence, yet it is crucial to include their views and voices in investigating these matters (Barker and Ricardo 2005; Varga 2001). Listening to their perspectives, and especially when contrasted to those of girls, is vital for understanding the phenomenon of sexual violence, and informing policy and practice directed to addressing it.

Contextual background

This article concerns sexual violence in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Because of the difficulty and sensitivity of the topic, there has 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 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 50–60% of Ethiopian women experience gender-based violence in their lifetime (Deyessa et al. 2009; Gossaye et al. 2003; Yigzaw, Yibrie, and Kebede 2004). These indications reflect norms and structures in society, which are reproduced by socialisation and gendered relations in schools, as I show below.

There is also serious concern about the high rates of sexual violence among secondary school students. One dissertation study on sexual violence in secondary schools in the East of Ethiopia, reported 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). In 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, and 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 these matters are rarely brought to justice, due in large part 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 shows how structures in society constrain how or whether sexual violence can be addressed; and it also points to how girls’ well-being in particular can be negatively affected by school cultures that reinforce gender norms.

The school which is the focus of this study, is situated in Merkato (Africa’s biggest market) area, known to be one of the poorer areas of the capital city. It is a government school with a population of 2136 students (52% female), from mostly low-income migrant and merchant families. At the time of fieldwork, the school had run a CSE programme for five months. The programme, on paper (classroom practice might diverge from the original design of the programme), had a CSE framework (Braeken and Cardinal 2008) and aimed 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 covered information about sexual violence in particular. The sessions took place in mixed-sex classes, and aimed 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 article are based on a study involving 29 interviews and 4 focus group discussions with teachers, students, and sexual and reproductive health 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. Fourteen girls and 11 boys participated, of which 5 girls and 5 boys expressed their views in focus group discussions, and interviews were conducted.
with 9 girls and 6 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. By hearing and contrasting their views, voice was given to these young people, which, I argue, is essential in sexuality research as it gives insight to their experiences which 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 a voluntary basis and that they understood they could leave or withdraw at any time, and that all information was confidential.

A quiet classroom was chosen, so that 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 et al. 2001; Brady 2005). While similar questions were asked in the focus groups and interviews, in the focus groups there was a stronger emphasis on finding consensus about, for example, definitions of sexual violence or its causes. Significantly, interactions between the participants in focus group discussions shed light on various interpretations of sexual violence: the negotiations between participants revealed important insights into their frameworks of interpretation, and proved valuable in building the overall analysis of students’ views.

A pre-defined coding scheme was developed in order to analyse how participants 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 then developed to organise 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.

As with any study, there were some limitations. Firstly, the majority of students found it challenging to express their ideas in English, which sometimes led to confusion. Secondly, as a relatively small number of people participated in the research, and as it is based in a specific place, generalisations cannot be made based on this study alone. Nevertheless, the aim of this study was not to generalise 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 definitions from WHO (2002), boys and girls defined sexual violence as a sexual act or attempt directed against someone else (mostly girls) without their consent. Boys
and girls used 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 placed this in a framework of gender norms: gender inequality was at the heart of sexual violence, and their cultural heritage of gender unequal norms and practices was mentioned as part and context of sexual violence. In stating this, they implicitly referred to the current gender order in their society (Connell 2002). Most students added the need to re-negotiate this order through schooling.

There were striking differences in the ways girls and boys elaborated 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 played a major part in their lives, clearly confirming that fear is an essential part of defining sexual violence. 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 a sense of freedom for girls in South Africa. Finally, girls mentioned their ‘diminished psychology’ (feeling less worthy, and capable than boys) as another influential aspect of sexual violence, something not mentioned at all by boys. It thus seems 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 was seen as a bad thing by both girls and boys, as they started off the interviews. 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, advice, and general opinions circulating at home and the wider society about sexual intercourse. As shown in other investigations, pre-marital sexual intercourse is often considered to be immoral, and accordingly, CSE lessons in schools have typically been shaped along abstinence-only approaches (Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011; Oshi, Nakalema, and Oshi 2005). Despite its comprehensive framework on paper, it seems likely, from what students reflect, that classroom implementation of the CSE programme in the school also promotes abstinence practices and negatively judges sexual activity for high school students. These messages are clearly reflected in the views 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 emphasised 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, 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. According to students in this school in Addis Ababa, the gender order in Ethiopia is changing with modernisation and education, and this is happening 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, for example, health and/or women’s rights. According to students, schooling has thus helped in challenging patriarchal structures and power relations in society, supporting the more general argument that the 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 study 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 experienced sexual violence from boys when they commented on how girls look, or touched girls without their permission. One girl shared that boys in her class touch her and how this makes her feel tense. With regard to their relationships with boys, girls experienced boys to be forceful and aggressive. Moreover, they found it difficult to negotiate relationships and sex. In discussing some boys’ persistent behaviour when asking for sex, one girl explained:

If one boy loves any girl, he pleases them [referring to insisting on having 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 reported feeling discriminated in class when teachers do not listen to them, but do listen to their classmates who are boys. In addition, girls shared that especially during gym class, teachers watch and comment on the girls’ clothes and looks, which makes them shy and uncomfortable. More worryingly, girls feared and experienced 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 ‘sexual corruption’ through marks (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Omaar and de Waal 1994). Although it is thought to be a phenomenon typical at 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 continue and be resistant to change. 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 the issue from being properly addressed. As shockingly, girls themselves also seemed 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 emphasised 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 concluded that they have to tolerate oppression in the form of sexual violence for a better life afterwards, shows 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 who held 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 with whom he attends CSE class, that a teacher had tried to manipulate her through her marks for sexual intercourse. After hearing this story, the boy got very angry, visibly sympathised 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 from happening. 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 described 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 the two boys who pointed out this notion were aware of emotional and power relations in the school that result in different experiences for girls than boys, whereas the majority of the boys were mainly concerned with the legalistic and pragmatic results of gender equality on paper and in relation to academic performance in school and labour market divisions later in life. Consequently, it seems essential to have critical reflection skills to develop a thorough understanding of sexual violence, its manifestations, causes, and consequences.

**Causes of sexual violence**

When it concerned causes of sexual violence, all girls and boys referred 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, recognising that patriarchal power structures in society are 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 the taboo of talking about sexuality.

First, in explaining why boys violate girls, the reasoning was very simple: it was considered ‘bad behaviour’ of boys, or that they had not understood teachings about gender equality, which was why they performed such actions. Girls explained that boys are aggressive, forceful, and want to prove their powers. One boy had 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 teachers and students, however, these situations were often viewed from a completely different angle. In particular with regard to sexual corruption, teachers’ relationships with girls were 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 the teacher must be lonely, and therefore tries 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 qualified as bad behaviour of the girl, and was critically judged by these students. In contrast to these interpretations, girls feared teachers and felt unable to say no to their advances.

Not only does this illustrate how, in terms of power relations within Connell’s (2002) framework, the behaviour and intentions of men and boys are not questioned and instead are tolerated by means of subordination and blaming of girls. It also shows how this painful contradiction in views reflects a massive misunderstanding or divergence between boys and girls. In fact, it is due to different experiences and socialisation processes that boys and girls have such contrasting interpretations of the causes of sexual violence. What is interesting, however, is that students obviously learn about gender equality
in school, and some even considered themselves as responsible enough to pass on ‘the awareness’. However, at the same time they reinforce existing power relations by not critically questioning the 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, that is, the behaviour and authority of the ‘dominant’. This again can contribute to the continuing tolerance of sexual violence between teachers and students.

Lastly, the taboo of talking about sexuality was brought up as another cause for the high level of tolerance 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 shared, 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 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 can lead to devastating consequences such as depression, isolation, and low self-esteem (Bott 2010; Gelaye et al. 2009; Gossaye et al. 2003). Girls also reported that sexual violence in terms of unwanted comments, touches, or manipulation makes them fearful and tense, in some instances taking a detour from school to home, confirming again that fear plays a major role with regard to sexual violence (Bhana 2012): not only in defining sexual violence, but also in its emotional, psychological and relational consequences. Moreover, these severe emotional consequences can lead to girls skipping classes, not paying attention in school, and their lower academic performance (Dunne et al. 2005). Indeed, one girl mentioned how she skips classes with 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 long-term implications for the emotional well-being and academic performance of its survivors. It also negatively affects the achievement of gender equality within and through education (Subrahmanian 2005) as the emotional impact of sexual violence is shown to affects girls’ academic performance. This can lead to underperformance and school dropout, which, in turn, serves to reinforce the current gender order in society in which men hold the more powerful positions (Connell 2002).

Boys, on the other hand, had a completely different perspective on the consequences of sexual violence. Interestingly, their views were not fully in line with their own 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. 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 these can lead to shame, stigma, and school dropout. However, they did not mention any consequences of other forms of sexual violence such as teasing, insults, and unwanted touches or kisses.

What is interesting is that boys also mentioned that their country’s development was 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 was that when women are discriminated against this leads to a gendered division of labour and poor economic participation from women. Similarly, when girls are victims of sexual violence and have to drop out of school as a result of, for example, pregnancy, this negatively affects the country’s development. Boys saw this as a key 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 expressed by 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 to the huge differences in understanding sexual violence.

Addressing sexual violence in school

Despite the enormous differences between boys and girls in views on definitions, experiences, and interpretations of sexual violence, their views were surprisingly similar with regard to addressing sexual violence in formal education. First, girls and boys expressed a great need to be able to talk 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. Crucially, students emphasised 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 own social and cultural ideas (in line with findings from Iyer and Aggleton 2013; Oshi, Nakalema, and Oshi 2005). Students recognised this yet also saw the need to break such taboos and speak freely in class.

One regularly recurring topic concerns the conflicting messages in society about modern and traditional values, and gender relations associated with these. These messages are sometimes a strong traditional judgement of sexual activity, accompanied by a judgement of modernity. To illustrate, some students and teachers judged modernity to be a cause of sexual violence as watching films, porn in particular, and going to khat (a local drug) 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 they could give the wrong messages to boys. At the same time, other students and teachers felt there needed to be more tolerance of such instances of modernity, as well as greater acceptance of young people’s desires for these things. For some teachers, it was essential that students learnt how to deal with these influences 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 sexualised nature, and beauty products associated with girls and seduction. This illustrates again the segregated relations and attributions between boys and girls, which could be seen as 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 had learned that boys and girls can be friends in a ‘brotherly and sisterly’ manner. This made them more open to interactions with each other, which is normally quite uncommon in Ethiopian schools where students prefer same-gender friends (Rose and Tembon 1999). This could reduce the differences in gender socialisation processes, by having shared experiences and interpretations of what happens around them. It also has the potential for transforming emotional relations (Connell 2002) between the two sexes, and fostering 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.

In discussions, girls reflected that 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 not properly addressing sexual violence, and found it should be a higher priority in school-wide policy and more strictly regulated. The two boys who went to the school administration office to express their anger about instances of sexual violence which they had witnessed, were left disappointed and angry about the lack of action from 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 that 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 code of ethics in the school. In their opinion, this should forbid relationships between teachers and students, and there should be a policy for punishing perpetrators of sexual violence, whether they are students or teachers. Moreover, as some students added, the school board should contact the parents of offenders, and cooperate more closely with communities and other NGOs to address problems in the school. In other words, a comprehensive approach needed 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, interpretations, the views held about 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 view, had often heard stories from their girlfriends, or had observed instances of sexual violence; they tended to show more personal responses to the topic than their male peers, who were usually quite distant from the topic in their descriptions.

The most striking differences can be summarised as follows: first, girls included fear as an essential dimension of defining sexual violence, whereas boys did not mention that. Second, almost all girls recognised the influence of sexual violence in their daily lives. On the contrary, most boys seemed to live in the illusion (or at least presented 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 viewed sexual relationships between teachers and girls as a romantic or transactional relationship, whereas girls again emphasised fear of teachers. It is important to note, though, that two boys held a different view on this. They recognised the unjust treatment by a teacher and its effect on their female peer, and they attempted to take action. The close relationship between these boys and their female peers, however, seems uncommon in their school and for Ethiopian adolescents in general (Rose and Tembon 1999). The contribution that sexuality education can have to fostering friendly and supportive relationships between both sexes should not go unacknowledged. Lastly, both girls and boys recognised the impact of taboos in speaking about sexuality as an explanation for confusion. With regard to consequences, boys typically mentioned dangerous physical consequences as a result of rape (e.g. HIV/AIDS, or unwanted pregnancy), where girls emphasised 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 very institutions where they should be in a safe environment, learn about sexual health, and have equal opportunities to boys 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 and Johnson 1998; Stromquist and 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 obstruct this role (Connell 2002).

With respect to how to address sexual violence in school, boys and girls’ views were strikingly similar: they 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 both teachers and students. One notable point is that despite their desire for not feeling negatively judged because of their views, some students themselves reflected morally informed notions that blame girls and boys who are involved in so-called modern lifestyles. The underlying values resounding in these
opinions might thus be a reflection of the clashing and contradictory messages that young people are given to make sense of the present, often leading to confusion. In fact, the perceived influences of ‘modernity’ (a term used by participants, typically referring to the desire of living a ‘Western’ lifestyle, moving away from traditional Ethiopian values), and not knowing how to interpret various contradictory messages about gender and sexuality was seen to lead 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.

Is sexuality education the answer?

The fact that boys and girls generally put forward views that were completely different, suggests that there are major mismatches in understandings about the form and effects of sexual violence and this can again lead to continued tolerance of the phenomenon. However, critical reflection among some students as a result of CSE proved to be crucial in formulating more informed ideas about sexual violence in school. Based on findings from this study, it is therefore recommended that schools 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, and the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO 2009) is relevant here, in particular with reference to safe schools and zero tolerance for relationships between teachers and students.

Yet, implementing CSE in a way that questions the current gender order (Connell 2002) seemed a challenge for this 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, emphasising why, for example, gender equality is important for the country, while failing to recognise the completely different experiences, emotional relations, and socialisation processes boys and girls experience. Sexual violence was also placed in line by many male students with such a developmentalist framework, making pragmatic interpretations, limited to production relations, and leaving fear, tensions and emotional relations, including consequences of depression and low self-esteem unrecognised. A more rights-informed and comprehensive implementation could stimulate critical reflection and questioning of current norms and structures in society (Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Connell 2002; Miedema, Maxwell, and 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 from this study underline the importance of continuing to address the highly sensitive and controversial topic of sexual violence. Sexual violence should be placed in the context of gender relations (Connell 2002; Leach and Humphreys 2007); students supported the argument that the current gender order in their society is a result of a patriarchal history that can potentially be changed through education. Yet, despite considerable efforts, sexual violence seems to be highly tolerated in schools (Mirembe and
Davies 2001) and the gender regime in the site of research seemed limited in its support of questioning gender relations beyond a liberal notion of production relations and gender equal laws and governance. The contradictory messages of schools as a promoter of sexual health, but at the same time tolerating sexual violence, are in need of immediate action, as well as structural attention through, for instance, the implementation of comprehensive CSE, sensitive to students’ needs, and responsive to gender relations.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

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