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Sexual Violence In Schools: The Case Of The Djibo Municipal Secondary School Sounkalo In Bouake

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to analyse the explanatory factors of the persistence of sexual violence in schools at the Djibo Sounkalo high school in Bouake. Sexual violence in schools is a problem. This violence can take different forms, ranging from sexual harassment to sexual assault, often affecting students, especially young girls. The methodology used is based on a qualitative approach. The techniques used are direct observation, documentary research and semi-structured interviews. The results obtained show, among other things, that the factors that promote this violence are often the style of clothing worn by young girls, lack of sex education and drug use on the one hand, and on the other hand, this study has indicated certain consequences such as absenteeism, school dropout, trauma, etc. Finally, we identified prevention strategies and made proposals for recommendations.

Keywords: Harassment, Sexual violence, Stigmatisation, Protection policy, Victim.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence in schools is a real socio-educational phenomenon. This type of gender-based violence, often concealed by silence or minimised by a lack of awareness, disproportionately affects pupils. This situation reveals persistent realities that require attention. Sexual violence in schools knows no boundaries. Education is essential for the empowerment of girls, but the spread of sexual violence in schools hinders the achievement of quality, inclusive and equitable education for all. According to SDG 4 (Sustainable Development Goal), it is necessary to "*ensure equal access to quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities*" (United Nations, 2015). However, it is clear that some young girls often experience sexual violence in their schools.

Present in all societies, sexual violence in schools remains one of the most serious and widespread human rights violations today (Human Rights Watch, 2001; UNICEF, 2014).

According to a 2014 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), approximately 20% of women and between 5% and 10% of men worldwide have been victims of sexual violence during their childhood. At the international level, studies and surveys have revealed that sexual violence in schools is a reality in many countries.

Data from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, published in 2022, show that 548 alleged victims came forward to report sexual abuse in schools between 2017 and 2021. Nearly 17,000 cases of sexual harassment were recorded in schools in the United States over a four-year period, according to the Federal Bureau of Criminal Information, cited by the American press agency. In Cameroon, several reports have indicated that more than 30% of girls have been sexually abused by male classmates. These practices can have several health consequences as well as long-term psychological repercussions on victims. Being harassed can lead to poor academic performance.

Côte d'Ivoire is not immune to this problem. Cases of sexual violence continue to increase in schools. In the current academic year 2023-2024 alone, 4,137 cases of pregnancy have been reported by the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH). According to Plan International, 22% of girls and 10% of boys in schools in Côte d'Ivoire reported having been subjected to sexual violence, including touching, assault and rape (Plan International Côte d'Ivoire, 2017). Similarly, according to reports from the MENETFP, approximately 17% of girls and 7% of boys in schools in Côte d'Ivoire have reported cases of sexual harassment by their teachers or peers (MENETFP, 2018). Furthermore, in 2019, a study conducted by Human Rights Watch in Côte d'Ivoire indicated that 25% of the pupils surveyed had been victims of sexual abuse by members of the teaching staff or older pupils (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In the same year, approximately 30% of girls attending school in Côte d'Ivoire had experienced unwanted sexual advances in their school environment (UNFPA, 2019). Studies conducted by UNICEF in 2020 and by the Centre for Research and Action for Peace (CERAP) in 2021 also revealed figures on sexual violence in schools. According to UNICEF, 42% of primary school pupils and 36% of secondary school pupils were victims of sexual violence at school in 2020. Furthermore, the CERAP study showed that in 2021, 18% of secondary school pupils had been victims of sexual harassment or violence during their school career.

In the city of Bouaké in particular, a survey indicates that 38% of primary school pupils and 33% of secondary school pupils in Bouaké have been victims of sexual violence at school (UNICEF, 2020). Similarly, a report published in 2021 highlighted that 20% of secondary school pupils in Bouaké had been victims of sexual harassment or violence (CERAP, 2021).

Faced with this persistent phenomenon, the Ivorian government has implemented measures and actions to address the problem. These include the adoption of zero-tolerance policies against sexual violence in schools. This measure is supported by efforts to strengthen mechanisms for reporting and managing cases of sexual violence (MENETFP Annual Report, 2020). In 2020 and 2021, large-scale awareness programmes and campaigns were launched in schools. This has enabled the training of teachers, pupils and parents on children's rights and the prevention of sexual violence. Workshops and seminars were also organised to inform school communities about the dangers of sexual violence and how to prevent it (UNICEF, op. cit.; CERAP, op. cit.).

In Bouaké, a number of actions have been taken. These include the establishment of helplines and support centres to provide psychosocial and medical services to victims of sexual violence (UNFPA, op. cit.); UNICEF and other NGOs have launched awareness-raising programmes to educate pupils, teachers and parents about the dangers of sexual violence and ways to prevent it (UNICEF, op. cit.); and CERAP and other local institutions have organised training for teachers on detecting and preventing sexual violence (CERAP, op. cit.).

Notwithstanding these measures and actions taken at both the national and local levels, sexual violence in schools, particularly at the Lycée Municipal Djibo Sounkalo in Bouaké, persists.

Why does sexual violence persist in our schools, despite the measures taken and actions implemented to combat this phenomenon? In other words, what are the factors that explain the persistence of sexual violence in schools?

What are the consequences and impacts on victims?

What are the prevention strategies and recommendations ?

To carry out this study, we have set the following objectives:

-identify the factors that explain the persistence of sexual violence in schools; study the consequences and impacts, develop strategies and make recommendations.

1. Methodology

1.1. Study site

Data collection on sexual violence in schools took place from 14 to 15 and 18 to 20 March 2024 at the Lycée Municipal Djibo Sounkalo. Our methodological approach was based on the principles of theories on sexual violence in educational settings, which emphasise the importance of understanding the power dynamics, social norms, and individual factors that contribute to the perpetuation of this phenomenon.

1.2. Data collection and analysis

During this survey, we spoke with a total of 58 participants, selected in a diverse manner to reflect different perspectives and experiences related to sexual violence in schools. These participants were divided as follows: 22 boys aged between 14 and 26, 19 girls aged between 16 and 19, as well as 7 teachers and 3 education inspectors.

We opted for a qualitative approach in order to allow for an in-depth and nuanced exploration of the participants' experiences. For data collection, we used documentary research, direct observation and semi-structured interviews.

2. Results

2.1. Factors contributing to sexual violence

2.1.1. Young girls' clothing style

According to the testimonies gathered during the survey, girls' clothing choices are often perceived as a factor contributing to sexual violence in schools. During certain school activities, girls are frequently seen wearing outfits that emphasise their figure and body, attracting comments and stares. Some respondents reported that some girls choose clothes to attract the attention of boys, while others do so to assert their self-esteem or identity.

The comments of these respondents highlight that provocative clothing styles for men can be perceived as inciting sexual violence, thus fuelling a vicious circle in which girls are blamed for their clothing choices. This often reflects rigid gender norms and a culture of victim blaming.

According to one respondent, B.M.:

"We provoke men with our sexy clothes."

In the same vein, another respondent, S.N., a second-year student, stated that:

"the cause of this violence is due to the way some girls dress."

This way of dressing can arouse men's sexual instincts and give them sexual ideas, which often leads to sexual violence. In the same vein, respondents Y.C and Z.A emphasise that:

"The reasons for violence in schools are due to the way young girls dress. They wear clothes that show off their figures. By dressing too sexy, they often provoke us and attract our attention."

Analysing these statements in the light of psychological and sociocultural theories of sexual violence, we can understand that young girls' clothing choices may be influenced by previous experiences of victimisation or discrimination. This creates a cycle in which girls who are victims of sexual violence are then more likely to suffer further violence.

Therefore, young girls' clothing choices should not be used to justify sexual violence, but rather as a starting point for discussions about social norms, respect for personal boundaries and the prevention of violence.

2.1.2. Lack of sex education

Lack of sex education is a key factor in the perpetuation of sexual violence in schools. Indeed, students at Lycée Municipal DJIBO Sounkalo lack sex education, which encourages sexual violence within the school.

The lack of sex education is closely linked to theories about sexual violence in educational settings, particularly with regard to understanding consent, respect and communication in sexual relationships. According to these theories, a lack of awareness and education on these issues can create fertile ground for violent and abusive behaviour. When individuals are not informed about boundaries and rights in relation to sexuality, this leads to situations where consent is not clearly established, thereby facilitating sexual abuse and violence.

It is therefore imperative to provide adequate and comprehensive sex education, tailored to each age group. Parents have an essential role to play in this process. They must commit to providing adequate sex education to young

people, both girls and boys, to help them progress positively in their sexual relationships. As one respondent named T.F. points out:

"Parents don't talk about sexuality. They leave everything to the school staff, but the school can't teach children everything. So it's important for parents to also get involved in their children's sex education."

This opinion highlights the vital role of parents in providing adequate sex education. It reinforces the importance of ecological approaches in understanding sexual violence in educational settings, emphasising the importance of interactions between the individual and their social and cultural environment, including family and school.

2.1.3. Drug use and increase in cases of sexual violence in schools

Drug use plays a decisive role in the increase in cases of sexual violence in schools. When individuals consume drugs or alcohol, their ability to give informed consent and set boundaries is impaired.

The effects of drugs can include loss of consciousness, whether from drugs, cigarettes or alcohol. These substances impair individuals' judgement and create an environment conducive to sexual violence. Perpetrators under the influence of these substances may lose sight of the seriousness of their actions. This idea is corroborated by the observation of one respondent, K.M., who states that:

"The majority of sexual assaults are committed by students who use intoxicants (drugs, alcohol, cigarettes)."

In light of theories on sexual violence in educational settings, several aspects stand out. First, psychological theories argue that drug use can alter inhibitions and impulse control, leading individuals to engage in aggressive and violent behaviour. Secondly, sociocultural theories emphasise that substance use may be linked to environments where behavioural norms are less strict, which increases the risk of deviant behaviour. Finally, ecological approaches suggest that drug and alcohol use in a school environment can be influenced by various factors, including the availability of substances, peer pressure and a lack of adequate supervision. These factors create a context in which sexual violence occurs more frequently.

2.1.4. Insecurity due to insufficient supervisory staff

Insecurity at the Lycée Municipal DJIBO Sounkalo is one of the major risk factors for sexual violence. The shortage of supervisory staff, particularly security guards and educators, creates an environment conducive to such abuse. Indeed, the reduced number of security guards does not allow for adequate surveillance of the entire school. This situation facilitates the uncontrolled entry and exit of people, whether they are students or outsiders. As investigator L.S. pointed out:

"The school is so big and there are not enough guards that some individuals dress in school uniforms in order to enter and cause trouble."

Ecological theories on sexual violence in educational settings highlight the importance of security and surveillance in prevention. Inadequate surveillance creates situations where students feel free to engage in inappropriate behaviour without fear of consequences. At Lycée Municipal DJIBO Sounkalo, there are only 17 educators, who cannot effectively supervise the more than 1,000 pupils attending the school.

This shortage of teaching and supervisory staff is illustrated by the testimony of respondent Y.Z., who recounted a disturbing experience:

"One day, I was looking for a classroom to study in, I opened a door and caught two students having sex."

This type of situation reflects a lack of control and supervision, creating a climate where inappropriate sexual behaviour can go unnoticed or be tolerated.

This absence of authority figures to enforce rules and monitor interactions increases the likelihood of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Social control theories add that when monitoring and regulatory structures are weak, individuals are more likely to transgress social norms. Thus, the lack of supervisory staff at Djibo Sounkalo High School reinforces this dynamic by fostering a climate of insecurity where sexual violence is on the rise.

2.2. Perpetrators of sexual violence

2.2.1. Student perpetrators

Our study shows that students themselves are both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. Assaults between peers, often influenced by group dynamics and social pressures, are

common. During our interview, one respondent, V.P., gave the following answer:

"The perpetrators are the students themselves. Often, some of the boys rape the girls here. We don't know why, but I myself am often afraid. It's also the girls' fault because they don't button up their shirts and show their breasts."

To confirm this, we interviewed a teacher, O.S., who stated that:

"The students themselves are the perpetrators of sexual violence among themselves."

It turned out that among the actors are student aggressors. These are students who commit acts of sexual violence against other students. They use their proximity and daily access to the victims to commit abuse. This behaviour is becoming increasingly widespread due to a culture of impunity, because acts of sexual violence are not reported or punished adequately. Theorists of sexual violence in educational settings claim that students who commit these acts are often themselves victims of trauma or family dysfunction.

2.2.2. Educational staff

Teachers and other school staff are also involved in sexual violence, either as direct perpetrators of abuse or by failing to take appropriate measures to prevent and report such acts.

Given that the recurrence of sexual violence in this school aroused our curiosity during our investigation, we questioned some students and supervisory staff on the issue. One student, W. X, said:

"The perpetrators are the teachers who intimidate the girls and make advances towards them."

In the same context, another interviewee, K.A., added:

"Teachers often hit on us, and when you go to complain to the education department, they take your number too. Even the headmaster is involved, and when you refuse, they make your life difficult at school. That's how it is here. If you try to be alone with them in their office, they can force you to sleep with them. I'm not lying."

These testimonies confirm the involvement of certain members of the teaching and administrative staff in sexual violence at school.

Educational staff who are supposed to ensure the safety and education of students are often responsible for sexual assault. There is an abuse of power and a lack of training on issues of sexual violence. A teacher or administrator who exploits their position of authority to commit abuse directly contributes to a climate of fear and silence.

2.2.3. Outside individuals

The lack of security at the Lycée Municipal Djibo Soukalo in Bouaké allows outsiders (adults with no connection to the school, former students, labourers and technicians, tutors and guardians of other students, certain tradesmen, i.e. tailors, carpenters, hairdressers, mechanics, etc.) have easy access to the school grounds. These individuals, whether intruders or not, blend in with the students by wearing school uniforms and take advantage of opportunities to commit acts of violence against girls.

A.A., one respondent, states:

"We have noticed that men in small trades are heavily involved in sexual violence against girls because they always have money on them. They deceive girls and often go with them without their consent."

Indeed, many girls allow themselves to be deceived because of money and suffer sexual violence inflicted by men in "menial jobs".

2.2.4. Accomplices

Our investigation showed that there is another category of actors, accomplices, who play a significant role in perpetuating sexual violence in schools. Their silence and inaction contribute to an environment where perpetrators feel safe to continue their abusive behaviour. As theories on collective responsibility and the culture of silence in educational settings highlight, the failure to report and denounce abuse fosters a climate of impunity. It is necessary to educate and raise awareness among the entire school community about the importance of reporting and denouncing acts of sexual violence.

2.3. Consequences of sexual violence and its impacts

2.3.1. On school life

Sexual violence has a significant impact on the school life of victims. We see absenteeism, meaning that victims may be more likely to miss school for fear of encountering their

abusers. In short, they will imagine all sorts of bad things that will discourage them from attending class.

This violence can lead to school dropout (abandonment, discontinuation). Victims will find it difficult to concentrate in class. In addition, they will not want to interact during lessons, as their thoughts will be focused on their traumatic experiences. As a result, they will not maintain healthy social relationships and will not be able to complete the school programme.

Finally, sexual violence can disrupt the school environment, creating a climate of insecurity and fear within the institution. It is in this context that one respondent, A. H., states:

"I wasn't sexually assaulted, luckily... but he took my phone and threatened me so much that when I set foot in school, I'm so scared that I always want to finish class quickly and go home because I still don't feel safe at school."

2.3.2. On the well-being of victims

The physical and psychological consequences of sexual violence can be serious and long-lasting. Victims may develop trauma that manifests itself in flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression and other symptoms related to post-traumatic stress, mood disorders, depression, anger and feelings of guilt. Internal conflict is often observed, as the person does not accept themselves and feels impure. This conflict can be harmful to the victim if nothing is done about it.

Victims may also have attachment disorders. They will find it difficult to form healthy emotional bonds with others due to mistrust, fear and difficulty feeling safe. Sexual violence can also lead to low self-esteem, frustration, sadness, anxiety, fear and depression in victims.

2.4. Strategies for preventing sexual violence in schools

2.4.1. The importance of sex education

The subject of sexuality is seen as a sensitive, even "taboo" topic. However, it is necessary for girls and boys of puberty age to be aware of what sex is. It is important for parents to educate their children about the risks associated with early sexuality.

Knowledge about sex can curb the spread of sexual violence. It is necessary to talk to and advise pupils about sex and the harmful factors it can entail. One respondent, F.A., stated:

"There is a section that has been set up by the ministry to raise awareness among students on various topics, including (pregnancy during school, forms of violence, drug use) in schools. This section, entitled 'life lessons', is implemented in our high school."

Life lessons do exist, but those in charge are often not qualified to teach them. Training for specialised supervisors is essential.

2.4.2. Support and recourse organisations for victims

Victims of sexual violence need support, someone to listen to them, and assistance to rebuild their lives and cope with the traumatic consequences of these acts. There are associations and organisations such as BICE, an NGO that works to combat sexual abuse. Established in 1987 and in partnership with the DDE-CI, it works on the issue of child victims of sexual abuse and also relies on local protection committees (CLPs): these are groups of key individuals in each village or neighbourhood. They serve to identify child victims, raise awareness of sexual abuse among the community and families, and ensure the successful reintegration of victims.

2.4.3. Relations between pupils and supervisory staff

Relationships between pupils and supervisory staff in a school are essential for fostering a positive and safe learning environment. Trust is the basis of a healthy relationship between pupils and supervisory staff. In view of this, one respondent stated: *"In general, there is a good relationship between pupils and teachers, which gives us confidence."* It is therefore important that students feel safe and confident with the adults around them, which promotes a climate conducive to learning and well-being. We must maintain respect between students and supervisory staff. During our survey, one respondent, A.M., stated:

"When there is respect between us students and our teachers, violent behaviour can be avoided."

We must ensure that there is mutual respect between all those involved in school life in order to maintain a balanced school environment.

Social pressures often lead to deviant behaviour, so it is necessary to provide moral support in the relationship between students and supervisory staff. K.S., a member of the supervisory staff, said:

"This was a year when one of my students approached me and told me that someone was making advances towards her, and it was one of my colleagues. I told her not to behave badly towards him, to stay away from him without causing a scene, if she wasn't interested."

It was a source of support and comfort for her to know that she could count on the supervisory staff if she had a problem.

Furthermore, open and transparent communication between students and their supervisors is essential for building a good relationship. It is also important to encourage students to express themselves, ask questions and share their concerns, while ensuring that supervisory staff are attentive and available to respond to their needs, as in the case of the respondent mentioned above who supported and advised his student.

2.5. Recommendations for combating sexual violence in schools

2.5.1. Support and assistance for victims

Victims of sexual violence in schools can benefit from various types of support and assistance, including:

- Schools must develop specialised services. This involves collaborating with organisations that specialise in caring for victims of sexual violence in order to offer appropriate support. These services may include individual consultations, support groups and legal advisors. In this regard, one respondent stated:

"Our school works with NGOs to support our students in the event of any form of violence in schools."

- Victims of sexual violence must receive psychological care. Psychological follow-up is necessary to help them overcome the trauma associated with the assault. Psychologists or therapists specialising in trauma care in this context can offer support tailored to the needs of each victim. Respondent V. C. said:

"In our school, we have a social worker whose role is to deal with these cases, but the school is large and she cannot manage everything on her own... otherwise, she does her best to support these people."

2.5.2. Awareness-raising, education, reporting and dialogue

Awareness-raising, education, reporting and dialogue on sexual violence in schools are crucial elements in creating a safe, respectful and protective school environment. Raising awareness of sexual violence helps to highlight the problem and make the school community aware of the risks, consequences and manifestations of this type of violence. By raising awareness among pupils, educational staff and parents, we promote collective awareness and contribute to the prevention and early detection of inappropriate behaviour.

Sexual violence education plays a key role in prevention by providing students with accurate, age-appropriate information about body respect, consent, healthy relationships and individual rights. Equipping students with knowledge and skills strengthens their ability to recognise, report and protect themselves from sexual violence.

Open and supportive dialogue creates a space where students feel confident to talk about their experiences, ask questions, report situations of violence and seek help. Encouraging dialogue between students, school staff and parents promotes a culture of respect, listening and solidarity within the school. Through awareness-raising, education and dialogue on sexual violence, schools can help create an environment conducive to prevention, protection and victim care. These actions break the silence, combat stigma, promote mutual respect and encourage solidarity within the school community. By working together to raise awareness, educate and engage in dialogue about sexual violence, schools can play a central role in building a safe, respectful and inclusive school environment for all pupils.

2.5.3. Punishment of perpetrators

The Ivorian government has taken measures to combat GBV, including the creation of the PNLVBG and the enactment of Law No. 2021-960 of 25 November 2021 on the suppression of violence against women and girls. However, according to the International Federation for Human Rights (2023), *"the law of 21 December 2021 remains inadequate in terms of the protection afforded to survivors when filing a complaint and during the police investigation. Indeed, it does not provide for the need to protect the physical and psychological integrity of victims during evidence-gathering procedures in order to minimise the risk of retraumatisation, in particular by limiting the number of examinations and interviews carried out and ensuring that they are conducted in a reassuring and confidential environment, as recommended by the ACHPR. Similarly, the authorities should ensure, in accordance with*

the same guidelines, that victims are protected from the risk of intimidation and reprisals by ensuring that they are informed in cases where they may be in danger, particularly when the perpetrator of the offence escapes or is released.

However, since 1987, the International Catholic Child Bureau has been working for more than 20 years, and then in partnership with DDE-CI (Dignité et Droits pour les enfants en Côte d'Ivoire), on the issue of child victims of sexual abuse.

3. Discussion

This study has produced several findings. With regard to the lack of sex education, Lay Emile has also demonstrated that education or teaching is essential to prevent sexual violence. According to her, the prevention of sexual violence requires teaching self-respect and respect for others, who are not objects and who feel emotions (Lay Emilie, 2015).

To reduce sexual violence in our institutions, we must raise awareness, denounce it and engage in dialogue. This view is supported by the report entitled " " (Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, Ministry of Families, Children and Women's Rights, 2013), which argues that the scale and multiplicity of violence against women requires everyone to take action to report and combat it.

This study asserted that teachers are often responsible for sexual abuse or violence. This assertion is supported by (Ndéye Anta Kébé, 2018).

It should be noted that the consequences of sexual violence can have physical and psychological repercussions on the victim, as supported by (Ilona Denis, Marie-Jo Brennstuhl and Cyril Tarquinio 2020).

Sexual violence causes damage to a person's well-being. This assertion is corroborated by (INSPQ, 2025), which maintains that sexual violence experienced during childhood and adolescence has consequences for the well-being and development of victims.

Conclusion

This study on sexual violence in schools was conducted in the Gbêkê region, specifically in the city of Bouaké, at the Lycée Municipal Djibo Sounkalo. Its objective was to identify the risk factors, consequences and impacts of sexual violence, as well as to determine prevention strategies and recommendations to combat this phenomenon in this school. To do this, we used a qualitative approach and interviewed

students and supervisory staff (teachers, members of the administration), favouring accidental sampling.

The results showed that certain factors, such as the clothing styles of some girls and the use of drugs by certain individuals, are potential sources of sexual violence. This research also revealed that the perpetrators of this violence are often actors within the education system (teachers, educators, administrative staff), students, individuals from outside the school (parents, taxi and motorcycle drivers, former students), as well as accomplices.

Despite the measures and strategies put in place by the Ivorian government and the commitment of NGOs to combating this scourge, sexual violence in schools continues to increase. It is essential to recognise that this phenomenon is particularly damaging to young girls' self-esteem. It is therefore crucial to strengthen awareness-raising, education and protection measures in order to better protect pupils and create a safe school environment that respects everyone's rights.

The fight against sexual violence in schools requires concerted and continuous efforts. It is imperative to implement zero-tolerance policies, improve reporting and case management mechanisms, and train educational staff in prevention and victim care. Only a comprehensive and inclusive approach will significantly reduce this scourge and protect students from sexual abuse.

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