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# Psychological Approach to Gender-Based Violence in Schools: Implication for Youth Empowerment

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## Abstract

*Violence in and around schools has been recognized as a barrier to educational achievement. Boys and girls are usually victims of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), whether it is sexual abuse, bullying or corporal punishment. Gender-Based violence impacts the social, economical, psychological, physical and behavioural transitions of students to adulthood. Interventions to decrease school-related gender-based violence therefore must include both victims and perpetrators so that the gender norms and attitude that feed violence can be changed in childhood, thus breaking the intergenerational link that perpetuates violence into adulthood based on childhood trauma. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a type of psychological therapy has been recognized as an effective counselling intervention for victims of GBV, it helps manage their negative thoughts and responses to those thoughts in order to empower them for future challenges. This paper suggested that there should be increased availability of trained counsellors/therapists in every school and there should be awareness among other agencies outside schools that make referrals of victims of GBV to professionals in CBT. This will result in youth empowerment and enhance youth ability to handle life traumas and overcome emotional and behavioural problems following experience of violence and other childhood challenges.*

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence, Cognitive-behavioural therapy, Youth empowerment

## Introduction

Gender violence in and around school has been recognized in recent years as a serious global phenomenon. The sad fact is that schools are not always the child-friendly places. Violence can be perpetrated by pupils or teachers in or around the school, or by out of school youth and/or older men who demand sex in exchange for money or gifts (Leach, 2015). Although attention has been given to some forms of violence such as intimate partner violence, other types including trafficking, rape as a weapon of war, widow abuse, honour killings and gender-based violence in schools have emerged as challenges that also require an immediate and direct response by government and other agencies. These agencies are to be committed to preventing and responding to gender-based violence by addressing the root causes of violence, improving violence prevention and providing victim protection services.

Counselling though old, is a noble profession which deals with giving psychological help to people with different challenges in life, both young and old. In the actual sense, certain experiences of life make it necessary at one time or the other for everyone to obtain some form of counselling to be able to cope and adjust to life situations. This paper however will concentrate on how Cognitive Behavioural Therapy could be utilized to help victims of gender-based violence in the school system, by the school system.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a global phenomenon that knows no geographical, cultural, economical, ethical, or other boundaries. It is a major public health challenge involving all ages and sexes. It occurs across all societies and represents a brutal violation of human rights, the worst manifestation of gender-based discrimination, and a major obstacle to the achievement of gender equality. It is tolerated and sustained by social institutions, including schools, the very place where children are expected to be safe and protected. It is a serious obstacle to

the right to education and learning, with implications for the ways that people understand and enact their social lives and exercise their citizenship (Leach, Dunne & Salvi, 2011). GBV therefore covers those incidents in which one sex asserts power by using sexual or similar acts to achieve submissiveness and fear in another person and in the process commit an offence against the dignity or privacy of that person (Ndungu, 2004).

GBV is defined by the UN as '*physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*' (World Health Organization, 2002). The term, however, also applies to violence specifically targeted against men and boys (UNPF, 2012). The prevalent view is that GBV is mostly about what men do to women; so, in an educational context, perpetrators of violence are assumed to be male students and teachers and their victims to be female students (and sometimes female teachers). Yet, identity construction is complex and violence can be perpetrated within as well as across gender lines (i.e. by both males and females, as well as on both males and females).

The right to education and gender are central to development objectives described both in the Education for All (EFA) agenda and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These objectives have been important in drawing international attention and effort to educational issues and over time considerable gains in access to education have been realized. Nevertheless, there is still over 60 million children out-of-school globally, with some 57% being girls (UNESCO, 2012). As such, gender equality is integral to the achievement of universal access to education (Unterhalter, 2005).

Leach, Dunne and Salvi (2011) concluded that GBV within and around schools has a significant impact on educational participation and gender equality and that it requires particular attention in the continuing drive towards EFA and the achievement of the MDGs, and will need to remain firmly on the international agenda in the post-2015. It will also

heighten the risk of HIV infection for children and adolescents, which also has an impact on enrolment and retention.

In the field of counselling, therapy is viewed as a process through which an individual who needs help is professionally assisted so as to help to voluntarily adjust to life and environment around. Evidence has shown that counselling strategies are fast becoming a necessity in the educational systems, political settings and socio-economic systems because of its complexity in the society. Oyinloye (2005) asserted that counselling strategy is a programme that seeks to help individuals to constructively shape and adjust to their interests, abilities, personality traits, motivations, vis-à-vis their environments and life situations.

In shedding more light to the concept of professional counselling, Ekwe and Nwanuo (2008) viewed it as an engagement between a counsellor and a client during which both talk and listen to one another in a genuine dialogue which is aimed at managing the concerns the client is facing, which the client is given an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more resourcefully with a greater sense of well-being.

Some of the counselling strategies that counsellors can use are cognitive, behavioural, psychoanalytical, psychodynamic and humanistic therapies. For instance, cognitive therapy aims to change behaviour by addressing a person's thoughts or perceptions, particularly those thinking patterns that create distorted or unhelpful views. Behavioural therapy on the other hand focuses on modifying habitual responses (e.g., anger, fear) to identified situations or stimuli. This paper will focus on how the cognitive-behavioural therapy could be utilized to help victims of gender-based violence change their thoughts, emotions, physical feelings and actions.

#### **Prevalence of Gender Based Violence against Women in Nigeria**

Gender based violence against women is a term that broadly incorporates many behaviours that manifest as physical, sexual or psychological damage to women or girls, which is a violation of human

right. Violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment, and intimidation at work, and most recently women trafficking are inclusive. Violence can occur during any phase of a woman's life as in childhood, adolescent and even as an adult. In whatever stage a woman encounter violence, thus exposes her to suicide, depression and drug abuse (Uwameiye & Iserameiya, 2013).

The protest against violations of human rights is based on United Nations Charter of 1945, which recognizes the need to stop mistreating all citizens. In compliance with that standard, the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly which Nigeria is a signatory to, described discrimination against women as any distinction, exclusion made on the bases of sex, which has an effect or for the purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition of right exercised by women, irrespective of their mental status, on a basis of equality of men and women; of human rights and fundamental freedom in political, economical, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

Nigerian cultural traditions have included female genital mutilation, forced marriage and widowhood practices, including hair-shaving and restriction to the home (Jekayinfa, 2010). These cultural practices and beliefs among tribes have relegated women to second class status. For instance, in some tribes in Nigeria, a woman has no right to inherit her husband's property. Widows are humiliated, confined and restricted in the same position as long as one year, all in the name of mourning the late husband. Most common among the violence practiced is child trafficking. Murzi 2004 in Badri (2014) observed that over 60% of the children often trafficked from African to Europe for sex exploitation are Nigerians. The children are often deceived by syndicates who pretend to help secure jobs for them, but only to transport them to Europe and use them as prostitutes.

According to Oladepo, Yusuf and Arulogun (2011) in a study of Igbo communities in Nigeria, 58.9% of women reported battery during pregnancy while 21.3% have been forced to have sexual intercourse. All

these acts of violence against women in Nigeria cut across culture, traditions, class and ethnic groups. Majority of women in Nigeria are not aware of human right violations. Even those that are aware are afraid of stigma; consequently tolerate violence, while they suffer in silence until the consequences start manifesting in depression, low self esteem and attendant health problems. Violence may be experienced at separate and multiple stages of the life cycle. The table below show types of violence commonly experienced at various phases of the life cycle

**Table 1: Types of Violence at Different Phases of Life Cycle**

Phase	Types of Violence
Prenatal	Prenatal sex selection, battering during pregnancy, coerced pregnancy (rape during war)
Infancy	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Genital cutting, incest and sexual abuse, differential access to food, medical care and education, child prostitution
Adolescence	Dating and courtship violence, economically coerced sex, sexual abuse in the workplace, rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution
Reproductive	Abuse of women by intimate partners, marital rape, dowry abuse and murders, partner homicide, psychological abuse, sexual abuse in the workplace, sexual harassment, rape, abuse of women with disabilities
Old Age	Abuse of widows, elder abuse (which affect mostly women)

**Source: Heise (1994) World Bank Discussion Paper. Washington D.C. The World Bank**

#### **Prevalence and Experiences of Male Sexual Abuse**

Although the term "gender based violence" is widely used as a synonym for violence against women, GBV also occur among men

(Cascardi, Langhinrichsen & Vivian, 1992). Men most commonly experience sexual violence in the form of receptive anal intercourse, forced masturbation of the perpetrator, receptive oral sex, or forced masturbation of the victim.

Majority of perpetrators of sexual violence are men. Studies of sexual assault against children and young adolescents report that more than 97% of perpetrators were male. Despite popular belief, most male perpetrators identify themselves as heterosexual and often have consensual sexual relationships with women. One study notes that 98% of male perpetrators self-identify as heterosexual (Lisak, Hopper & Song, 1998). The vast majority (over 80%) of sexually abused boys never become adult perpetrators, while a majority of perpetrators (up to 80%) were abused as boys and young men. Perpetrators tend to be known by, but unrelated to, the victim (Holmes & Slap, 1998).

Females can also be perpetrators. Studies report that women commit 2-4% of reported sex offences against children. A Bureau of Justice Statistics study reports that overall, 6% of offenders who sexually assaulted juveniles were female, and compared with just 1% who sexually assaulted adults (Sexual assault of Young Children, 2000). Female perpetrators of sexual assault tend to use persuasion rather than force or the threat of force during their crimes (Holmes & Slap, 1998).

Sexual abuse of male adults and children is vastly under-reported and poorly understood. Population-based studies conducted among adolescents in developing countries indicate that 3.4% of males in Namibia and 13.4% in Tanzania have experienced a sexual assault. Eleven percent of male adolescents in South Africa and 29.9% in Cameroon reported forced sexual initiation (Kurg, 2002). In a recent study in Nigeria on gender based violence among men and women, Oladepo, Yusuf and Arulogun (2011) reported that respondents who had experienced sexual violence were 364 (12.1%) of which 221 (7.4%) were males and 143 (4.8%) were females.

Boys and men who are sexually assaulted may experience a wide range of post-traumatic symptoms including depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other emotional and physical problems as a

result. Common reactions of men and boys after an assault can also include fear of appearing "unmasculine," societal, peer or self-questioning of their sexuality, homophobia, sense of shame, and feelings of denial.

### **School Related Gender-Based Violence**

Access to quality education and a safe school environment are fundamental rights for every child, and a prerequisite to socioeconomic development and security. In addition, poverty reduction is an element for improving quality education and increasing levels of literacy in society. The achievement of Education for all (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are seriously compromised by violence in the educational environment. Many schools in the African region, both private and public, are not safe and well protected for children and adults of school age. Also, there is a casual link between school violence and drop-out rates and absenteeism ratio. Various forms of school based violence are practiced; the most serious implication of sexual harassment is reduction in girls' attendance at school and increasing drop-out rates (UNGEI, 2010 in Badri, 2014).

School-based violence refers to the varied forms of violence found in schools. There are three major types of School Based - Gender Based violence (SBGBV): sexual, physical and psychological. Sexual violence involves violence or abuse by adult or another child through any form or forced or unwanted sexual activity where there is no consent, consent is not possible, or power and intimidation is used to coerce a sexual assault (Badri, 2014). The most common typology of school violence used in research and intervention identifies three types - physical, sexual and psychological - which refer to three main forms: a) corporal punishment, b) sexual violence and c) bullying (although they are not necessarily exclusive to each other, e.g. bullying may be physical or psychological, and it usually has sexual overtones).

An alternative approach to the separation of sexual violence from other forms of violence is one which accepts that all manifestation of violence, including corporal punishment and bullying, have their roots in

inequitable gender relations. Indeed, it can be argued that the three types of violence are inter-related and difficult to isolate, both conceptually and practically. For example, a school girl who grants sexual favours to a male teacher will expect to avoid being beaten, whereas one who turns the teacher down might risk being singled out for beating or other forms of victimizations; boys who are themselves beaten or observed male teachers behaving inappropriately with certain girls may also use physical violence to procure sexual favours and other benefits for themselves (Leach, et al., 2011).

Most of what is labeled 'bullying' is in fact GBV. It is believed that children who are physically punished are less likely than other children to internalize moral values. They are less inclined to resist temptation, to engage in altruistic behaviour, to empathize with others or to exercise moral judgment of any kind. They are more disposed to engage in disorderly and aggressive conduct such as slapping their siblings, parents, schoolmates and boyfriends and girlfriends (Durant, 2005). And they may become adults who use corporal punishment against their own children, and so pass on the habits of violence. North American and European studies suggest that school bullying, whether the children are victims or perpetrators or both, can be a predictor of future anti-social and criminal behaviour, including intimate partner violence, involvement in fights and self-destructive behaviour such as smoking and drinking to excess (Badri, 2014).

Children and adolescents exposed to violence also may experience trauma and emotional harm such as depression, behavioural problems, fear and uncertainty relationship problem, and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorder (Baily & Whittle, 2004). Furthermore, the impact of violence is immeasurable and includes loss of self-esteem, depression, anger, risk of suicide, unwanted pregnancy, HIV infection and fear of victimization. Combination of these factors causes many students to drop out of schools. The consequences of school related gender based violence include a lack of motivation among students, failing grades, absenteeism and increased numbers of drop out.

The most widely reported form of school violence is in fact corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is defined as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort (this sometimes leaving some sort of marks on the body of sufferers). It encompasses the use of sticks, whips, belts or any other objects, blows to the head, slaps, boxing, or enforcing of uncomfortable positions such as kneeling. Also, degrading punishment include verbal insults and threats (Bardi, 2014). The recommendations made in the UN World Report on Violence against children has galvanized the global campaign formed in 2001 to eliminate all corporal and other humiliating punishment against children, whether in the school, home and the community. Solutions which include, 'Save the Children, Plan International and UNICEF (through its Child Friendly) School Programme', have been at the forefront of these efforts in educational settings.

#### **Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and Gender Based Violence**

Gender-based cognitive behavioural approaches that combine the psycho-educational feminist model and the cognitive behavioural model follow a gender-based cognitive behavioural model (Vaddiparti & Varma, 2009). Interventions based on this model range from an educational or instructional format to a free-flowing group discussion model (Gondolf, 2004). Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) combines cognitive and behavioural therapies and involves changing the way an individual thinks (cognitive) and how one responds to the thoughts (behaviour). The approach focuses on thoughts, emotions, physical feelings and actions and teaches clients how each one can have an effect on each other. CBT focuses on the present rather than focusing on the cause of the issue and that helps break overwhelming problems into smaller parts to make them easier to deal with (Counselling Directory, 2012). CBT is based on the principle that individuals learn unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving over a long period of time.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is an evidence-based treatment approach shown to help children, adolescents, and their caregivers overcome trauma-related difficulties. Because violence is theorized as learned

behaviour, the programmes are built on the idea that non-violent behaviour can likewise be learned (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). It is designed to reduce negative, emotional and behavioural responses following child sexual abuse, domestic violence, traumatic loss, and other traumatic events. The treatment is based on learning and cognitive theories, addresses distorted beliefs and attributions related to the abuse and provide a supportive environment in which children are encouraged to talk about their traumatic experience. It is also used to help parents who were not abusive to cope effectively with their own emotional distress and develop skills that support their children.

Cognitive behavioural therapy uses the power of the mind to influence behaviour. It is based on the theory that previous experiences can adversely affect self perception, so will condition, attitude, emotion and ability to deal with certain situations. It works by helping the client to identify questions and change self-derogating thoughts thus altering habitual responses and behaviour. Cognitive Analytical Therapy (CAT) combines cognitive therapy and exploratory therapy and encourages client to draw on their own resources to develop the skills to change destructive patterns of behaviour. Negative ways of thinking are explored and treatment is structured and directive. For example, victims of sexual abuse often experience:

- Maladaptive or unhelpful beliefs and attributions related to the abusive events including a sense of guilt, anger at parents, feeling of powerlessness, a fear that people will treat them differently because of the abuse.
- Acting out behaviours, such as engaging in age-inappropriate sexual behaviours.
- Mental health disorders including major depression
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms like intrusive and recurring thoughts of the traumatic experience, avoidance of reminders of the trauma (often places, people, sounds, smells and other sensory triggers. Other symptoms are emotional

numbing, irritability, trouble sleeping and physical and emotional hyper arousal.

These symptoms can impact the child's daily life and affect behaviour, school performance, attention, self-perception and emotional regulation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). To date, numerous studies have documented the effectiveness of CBT in helping children overcome these and other symptoms following child sexual, domestic violence, and similar traumatic experiences (Weiner, Schneider, & Lyons, 2009). Their findings show that children experienced significantly fewer intrusive thoughts and avoidance behaviours; they are able to cope with reminders and associated emotions and they show reductions in depression, anxiety, disassociation, behaviour problems, sexualized behaviour, and trauma-related shame.

#### **Youth Empowerment and Counselling**

The Youth Empowerment Scheme popularly tagged Project YES is a registered non-governmental organization initiated by Hajiya Zainab Kure, the former first lady of Niger State. The Scheme which was actually introduced in April 2000 was registered as a non-profit making venture with the Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria with registration number RC 13705.

One of the tools that might make positive impact is information service in counselling. Through this service, the guidance counsellor may help the youths to acquire knowledge for which they are ignorant. Such information could liberate them from falsehood and misconceptions being provided by peers and adults based on their narrowed experiences. Youth also need information that will get them economically empowered. Hence the guidance counsellor gives them entrepreneurial information that will help them develop skills that can sustain them economically.

Youth empowerment is an attitudinal, structural, and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority, and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people, including youth and adults (Vavrus & Fletcher, 2006). Youth

empowerment programmes help prepare children and youth to be active members of their communities and society as a whole. The process-or empowering level- provides opportunities for youth to develop skills and become problem solvers and decision makers. Programmes teach children to work well with peers and can include job skill development and placement; mentoring; intensive case management; writing and communication skills services. There is some evidence that youth empowerment programmes improve social skills, reduce problem behaviours (e.g., alcohol and drug use, truancy, and high-risk sexual behaviours), and increase academic performance (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004; Morton, 2013; Ghahremani, Oh & Dean, 2013). Youth empowerment programmes can operate in a variety of settings including communities, schools, and households.

According to the initiator and motivator, Hajiya Zainab Kure, Project YES is a form of human development intervention organization which offers opportunity for a wide range of vocational skills training for the youths because of their socio-economic situation (Kuti, 2006). The scheme is targeted at training youths by way of empowering them economically and socially. It is also expected to intervene in their educational pursuit and also offer an opportunity for initiating behavioral change in the youth through the guidance and counselling programmes aimed at putting them in proper psychological frame of mind for many challenges ahead in life.

#### **Programming principles for youth empowerment**

Some programming principles include, but are not limited to the following

- Begin with what young people want and what they are already doing to obtain information, services, and opportunities
- Build their protective, positive assets and skills

- Engage adults and institutions to create a safe and supportive environment
- Use a variety of settings and providers, and make the most of existing infrastructure

#### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Despite massive crusade against violence, gender-based violence occurs at all levels of human activities (homes, schools and communities). The violence affects the school child psychology, leading to depression, frustration, low self-esteem, isolation and reduction in enrolment rates. Presently, most institutions have no clear preventive and treatment measures adopted against violation acts in schools neither do government nor other agencies able to combat it. From the psychological point of view, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy has been proved to be an evidence-based treatment approach for school children who experienced sexual abuse, physical violence, or similar traumas. Victims have been able to reduce negative emotional and behavioural responses and change their distorted beliefs and attributions related to the abuse. In spite of the impressive level of empirical support for CBT, other agencies remain unaware of its advantages and many children and caregivers in schools who could benefit do not receive such training. It is therefore imperative to increase the availability of trained therapists in schools. There is need also to repeatedly emphasize the negative effect of violence on school enrolment among the school administrators.

Agencies that find themselves promoting gender-based violence should make treatment referrals to cognitive behavioural therapists for quick and professional services. Both victims and perpetrators of violence in schools should be exposed to CBT approach on how to change their distorted thinking and how to respond positively to life environmental situations. All these can offer significant results in helping children to process their trauma and overcome emotional and behavioural problems following experience of violence and other childhood traumas.



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