

Safeguarding Our Future Generations from Sexual Assault

By utilising pedagogical techniques that influence attitudes and behaviours, teaching can directly impact the reduction of gender-based violence acts, writes Angie Motshekga.

Today, on the 18th of November, the United Nations (UN) has designated this day as the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence. It is a day of global significance that underscores the urgency of addressing a profoundly disturbing issue affecting countless children's lives worldwide.

The [statistics](#) presented by the UN are nothing short of staggering. Shockingly, approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 9 boys worldwide experience sexual violence before reaching their eighteenth birthday. These numbers reveal the distressing reality that millions of children are subjected to the horrors of sexual exploitation and abuse, leaving lasting scars on their lives.

However, amidst these distressing figures, we find hope. Decades of research have illuminated the path towards prevention and healing. Proven, effective solutions exist to prevent sexual violence, and policies and programs have been designed to ensure that survivors can access the healing and justice they deserve. Establishing a global day dedicated to this issue is vital to raising awareness and mobilising transformative change.

Closer to home, we must acknowledge the severity of the situation in South Africa. The [Optimus](#) Foundation Study, undertaken by an affiliate of the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, paints a grim picture. Before this study, there was no nationally representative data on the extent or impact of child sexual abuse in our country. Shockingly, it revealed that 19.8% of adolescents reported some form of sexual abuse (boys 20%; girls 19%) over their lifetime; 11.7% reported having been forced to have sex. Disturbingly, the rate of sexual abuse in South Africa surpasses the global average, as per the Optimus Study.

Adding to this distressing picture, the StatsSA Governance, Public Safety, and Justice Survey (GPSJS) of 2022/23, issued by Risenga Maluleke, Statistician-General in August 2023, presents alarming findings. Over the past five years, approximately 49,000 households and not individuals in our country have experienced sexual offences, marking a 53% increase from the previous year. Moreover, the survey indicates that about 112,000 individuals have experienced sexual crimes in the same period, with a slight decrease of 0.9% from the preceding reporting period in 2019/20.

In the face of these dire circumstances, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has taken proactive steps to prevent child sexual exploitation, abuse, and violence. This effort entails including pertinent content in the Life Orientation and Life Skills curriculum, disseminated through 80 lessons, equating to 80 hours of instruction, spanning from Grade 4 to 12. Of these 80 lessons, 29, constituting 36%, are dedicated explicitly to addressing gender-based violence. This is a testament to our unwavering commitment to arming learners with the requisite knowledge and tools to safeguard themselves. We have also undertaken the vital work of the child and youth agency, "Speak Out," which empowers learners with information to speak out against sexual violence and abuse. Educators have been provided with the necessary guidance to support young people in raising their voices against abuse.

Moreover, policy enrichment efforts have been initiated, introducing the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) and the Protocol for the Management and Reporting of Sexual Abuse and Harassment in Schools. Collaboration with partner departments, including the South African Police Service (SAPS), Social Development, Justice and Health has been instrumental in rolling out the Inter-Departmental Campaign on the Prevention of Violence, Bullying, Corporal Punishment, Gender-Based Violence, Teenage Pregnancy, Drugs, and Substance Abuse in multiple provinces. This campaign, championed by the Deputy Minister of Basic Education and supported by various partner departments, has raised awareness of the social challenges affecting teaching and learning in schools.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to eradicating the practice of corporal punishment in schools. Efforts have been made to distribute the Protocol on dealing with incidents of Corporal Punishment to schools nationwide. Workshops on alternatives to corporal punishment are regularly conducted with educators nationwide. The recently passed Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill reinforces its illegality and introduces penalties.

In our unwavering commitment to preventing child sexual exploitation, abuse, and violence, we have undertaken a crucial initiative by recruiting Learner Support Agents (LSAs). These LSAs are strategically placed in selected schools through various support programs and play a fundamental role as learners' first line of support. Acknowledging the necessity to empower them with enhanced skills, we have diligently provided comprehensive training encompassing Psychosocial Support and Basic Counselling Skills. This training equips them to effectively address a wide range of psychosocial challenges, including various forms of child abuse.

Recruiting Care and Support Assistants through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative has further strengthened our efforts. These Assistants underwent mandatory hybrid training to effectively utilise the Guide for LSAs and Schools on Providing Psychosocial Support for Learners, a resource formulated by our department.

Collaborative efforts with School-Based Support Teams (SBST) have included policy enrichment work, focusing on the Protocol for the Management and Reporting of Sexual Abuse and Harassment in Schools.

Furthermore, we are addressing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among school-going children, a consequence of early or forced sexual contact. Initiatives such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Ambassadors Camps, conducted in partnership with us, have trained 170 adolescent girls from 14 districts to serve as DREAMS Ambassadors. The DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) partnership represents an ambitious public-private collaboration to reduce HIV rates among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in countries with the highest HIV burden. DREAMS was introduced on World AIDS Day 2014. Since 2015, USAID has implemented activities in ten sub-Saharan African countries, including Eswatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. These nations accounted for nearly half of all new HIV infections among AGYW worldwide. This initiative seeks to lower HIV rates among adolescent girls, combat gender-based violence, and promote economic empowerment.

As we reflect on the establishment of the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence, let us reaffirm our commitment to creating a safer world for future generations. We remain resolute in our dedication to this cause, and together, we can and must work towards a world where every child is safe from harm, abuse, and exploitation, ensuring we leave no child behind.

Angie Motshekga is the longest-serving Minister of Basic Education in South Africa, post 1994.

1. <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/en/press/united-nations-declares-nov-18-world-day-prevention-healing-child-sexual-exploitation-abuse-violence>
2. <https://ci.uct.ac.za/projects-reporters-resources-violence-against-children/sexual-violence>
3. <https://www.usaid.gov/global-health/health-areas/hiv-and-aids/technical-areas/dreams>