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Breaking the silence: examining the prevalence, causes and consequences of sexual abuse of learners by educators in South African schools

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Introduction: The sexual abuse of learners by educators remains a significant issue in the South African educational system, compromising the learners' well-being and the veracity of institutions. Despite having solid or robust policy structures in place, incidents keep emerging, often hushed by stigma, power dynamics, and insufficient institutional retorts. The ongoing challenges of sexual exploitation in educational environments stipulate cavernous structural and cultural encounters that are not yet fully comprehended. This study rigorously explores the incidences and effects of sexual abuse committed by educators in selected government public South African schools, specifically concentrating on the Soutpansberg North Circuit in Limpopo Province.

Methods: A qualitative cyclical longitudinal ethnographic design was used to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of 16 trained Life Orientation (L.O.) educators selected using purposive sampling techniques. This study was conducted in the rural area of Southpansberg North Circuit of Messina, located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Data was collected through ethnographic group discussions and participant observation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze data.

Results: The findings disclosed that sexual abuse frequently arises from a power imbalance between educators and learners. The participants expressed fear and hesitancy in reporting cases of sexual abuse. Furthermore, the finding reflects how the insensitivity of police and the lack of confidentiality dissuade victims from reporting. The study also highlighted the normalisation of learner - educator relationships within communities.

Discussion: Together, the findings reveal a complex crisis rooted in gender disparities, power imbalances, and institutional fragility. The patriarchal system perpetuates uneven power relations and normalizes gendered dominance, especially between male teachers and female learners. In light of the findings and implications, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education establish more stringent regulations and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with the South African School-based Child Protection Committees.

KEYWORDS

educators, ethnography, gender-based violence, learners, prevalence, sexual abuse

1 Introduction

Schools ought to serve as a safe environment where learners obtain knowledge and improve skills, and nurture confidence. However, in South Africa, the violation of students' rights through sexual abuse by teachers has emerged as a concerning reality (Chitsamatanga and Rembe, 2020). Javorka and Campbell (2021) posit that sexual exploitation of learners by educators represents one of the most dire breaches of trust in educational settings. Educator-learner sexual abuse is defined as any sexual act, sexual exploitation, grooming, harassment, or improper sexual interaction between an educator and a learner, as prohibited by the South African Council for Educators' Code of Professional Ethics (Coetzee, 2024). Despite legal systems and procedures aimed at protecting children in educational settings, occurrences of sexual abuse of learners by educators still arise in South Africa, revealing a significant gap in institutional accountability, reporting systems, and learner protection, especially in vulnerable educational situations. Effective interventions and legislative responses are hampered by a lack of context-specific research on how such abuse impacts learners' educational experiences, psychological health, and long-term possibilities. The misappropriation of power and authority by educators not only infringes on the basic rights of learners but also reduces confidence in the education system. Several cases continue to be underreported due to fear, stigma, and silence within institutions, rendering victims vulnerable and permitting culprits to go with impunity Mdletshe and Makhaye, 2025). This initiates a cycle of victimisation that risks compromising both the safety and educational outcomes of learners.

This concern has garnered substantial attention in South Africa due to its profound impact on victims, their families, and the broader educational framework (Venketsamy, 2024). Sexual abuse of learners by educators in South Africa is entrenched in historical discrepancies, cultural silence, and deficient reporting. Existing studies show momentous community-level sexual victimization and several cases involving educators (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2024). The improper exercise of authority within educator-learner interactions establishes a profound power imbalance that offenders can take advantage of, placing learners, especially those who are young or vulnerable, at high risk of emotional, psychological, and physical harm. Literature shows that when teachers or institutional figures misuse their positional power, either through favoritism, coercion, or unrestricted access to learners, learners may feel unable to resist, report, or even recognize the misconduct (Bennett, 2023). Calitz and De Villiers (2020) state that incidents of sexual abuse keep arising even with legal structures like the Children's Act (2005) and the Employment of Educators Act (1998), which clearly forbid misconduct by educators. This study examines the intricate issue of sexual abuse perpetrated by both male and female educators in South African schools, analyzing its frequency, root causes, and extensive effects. The research seeks to add to the increasing understanding of this significant issue while guiding policy actions and precautionary measures.

Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2020) point out that South Africa has one of the highest universal rates of gender-based violence globally, and this troubling reality is mirrored across both public and independent schooling sectors. In many South African

schools, mainly under-resourced public schools, wider societal gender disparities are replicated through entrenched, rigid gender norms, institutional silence, and power hierarchies. The literature indicates that the sexual abuse of learners by educators remains both underreported and inadequately addressed because of learners' fears of being blamed, facing retaliation, and dealing with stigma (Mocnik, 2021). Institutional silence and ineffective accountability mechanisms frequently enable offenders to stay in schools or be reassigned to different locations. Desiree van der Walt (2023) concludes that the occurrences of sexual misconduct reported to the SA Council of Educators (SACE) surged significantly from 92 in 2019/20 to 169 in 2020/21 and 191 in 2021/22. Bhana (2021) notes that one out of five children in South Africa experiences sexual abuse, which is 19.8%, as compared to the universal average of 18% girls and 8% boys. In South Africa, the Annual Crime Statistics report for 2019/2020 above 24,000 children experienced sexual assault. Statistics for schools are not easily accessible, and there is extensive under-reporting; however, it is estimated that 22.2% of school children have experienced violence. Studies constantly display that sexual abuse of learners by educators is prevalent in South African schools, often normalized within a culture of silence (Adekola et al., 2025). Thobane et al. (2023) argue that this dynamic between teachers' authority and learners' dependence opens up avenues for exploitation.

The study investigates the intricate interactions that enable this abuse, taking into consideration both societal and institutional vulnerability. It seeks to shed light on the disturbing incidents of these events and the substantial effect they exert on the victims, their families, and the wider educational setting (Abboud et al., 2020). This study addresses a critical gap by examining both the occurrence and impacts of this abuse and the efficiency of institutional responses. It takes a critical stance to challenge the silence, complicity, and institutional deficiencies that allow abuse to continue.

2 Literature

2.1 Prevalence and nature of sexual abuse in schools

Throughout South Africa and the wider Sub-Saharan African area, sexual abuse of learners by educators has been extensively recorded. The literature illustrates that learners, particularly girls, are predominantly susceptible due to imbrication issues like economic hardship, patriarchal standards, and inequality in the dynamics between learners and educators (Daki, 2022; Ngcobo et al. 2025). The abuse manifests itself in various ways, including unwanted physical contact, pressure for sexual acts, inappropriate sexual remarks, and direct sexual assault (Monahan, 2024).

Studies reveal that abuse caused by educators is not a secluded incident but instead a systemic problem (Wong et al., 2025). Du Plessis, and Mestry (2024) demonstrate that many incidents remain unreported, but estimates reveal that thousands of students endure various types of sexual abuse throughout their educational years (Clarke et al., 2023). Shalate (2022) points out that this underreporting is often connected to social stigma, lack

of trust in the reporting system, and fear of backlash. In some instances, educators take advantage of the learners' financial hardships and provide them with cash or academic benefits in exchange for sexual favors (Crankshaw and Freedman, 2023). These practices are often referred to as "transactional sex" and obscure the lines between consent and compulsion, leaving learners in susceptible situations of reliance. Hierarchical structure of educator-learner relationship escalates the abuse as the educators hold power, reliance, and management in the school setting, whereas students are expected to demonstrate compliance and esteem. This power difference nurtures an environment where learners are hesitant to confront teachers or report abuse (Calitz and De Villiers, 2020).

Significantly, educator-perpetrated sexual abuse extends beyond individual misconduct and exposes deeper institutional and systemic failures within the educational system. This kind of abuse often reflects inadequate safeguarding policies, ineffective reporting procedures, and a culture of institutional silence that prioritises reputational protection over learner safety (Bull and Shannon, 2025). Bhana (2021) attributed the ongoing abuse to insufficient educator training on professional boundaries and ineffective monitoring systems. Thobane et al. (2023) observe that, in some occurrences, schools effectively protect perpetrators by transferring them to different schools rather than following disciplinary action or legal accountability. This procedure frequently takes place through unofficial networks and administrative choices that put the school's reputation way ahead of student safety, enabling educators to carry on teaching without an open investigation or consequences. Ngcobo et al. (2025) concur that the transfers have the potential to evade required reporting requirements, impede criminal investigation, shield offenders from punishment, and weaken the implementation of child protection laws. Thobane et al. (2023) further reveals the professional implications of the transfer, which allows offenders to keep their jobs and licences, but morally exacerbates suffering by indicating institutional participation, undermining confidence in educational institutions, and silencing victims (learners) whose experiences are downplayed or ignored. Subsequently, the prevalence and characteristics of sexual abuse in educational institutions cannot be viewed as secluded events; instead, they underscore a systemic and prevalent problem within the education system.

2.2 Consequences for learners

The psychological effects of sexual abuse include anxiety, depression, and trauma. It also causes academic problems, which result in poor academic performance, school dropout, and social challenges that lead to isolation and social discrimination. Mapfunde and Mungomez (2025) argue that the effects of sexual abuse on learners form extensive damage that disturbs their mental health and their ability to learn, as well as their social interactions. According to research and reports throughout the world, learners who are exposed to violence are more likely to internalise stress and develop long-term mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, develop low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts, which have the potential to hinder their ability to participate in social and academic activities (Mocnik, 2021). Adolescent girls are disproportionately targeted for sexual harassment and abuse, which reinforces negative gender norms

and internalised stigma (Kennedy and Prock, 2018). Such trauma often affects a learner's general developmental trajectory and persists beyond the initial experience.

Due to sexual abuse, the educational procedure becomes extremely difficult for learners to participate effectively. Scholars such as Langwenya et al. (2022) are of the view that survivors of abuse are likely to drop out of school because of the multiple educational challenges, like early pregnancy and stigma, which may force girls who are sexually abused to drop out of school early. Shiningayamwe (2023) contends that all learners may experience violence at school; teenage girls are more vulnerable because of intersecting gender norms and power relations. Girls are remarkably vulnerable to sexual harassment and coercion because of gendered norms and patriarchal frameworks, which discourage reporting out of fear of social repercussions or stigma (Pietersen and Langeveldt, 2025). These intensifying vulnerabilities lead to broader developmental failures, such as lower self-confidence, limited future socioeconomic possibilities and distorted goals in addition to immediate effects on mental health and academic functioning.

The abuse remains from their childhood and teenage years to affect survivors' future education and work stability, and relationship development (Hegel et al., 2023). The continual challenges faced by survivors regarding trust and intimacy and self-worth create constant patterns of vulnerability and social inequality (Hegel et al., 2023). Scholars like Crankshaw and Freedman (2023) argue that the blend of abuse with gender inequality and poverty forms long-term effects that block survivors from attaining empowerment and social mobility. Sexual abuse can seriously interrupt students' educational paths in addition to the psychological anguish that is frequently connected to such violations. Reduced academic confidence, deteriorating academic performance, and trouble focusing are common among survivors, which may result in absenteeism, grade repetition or even school dropout (Crankshaw and Freedman, 2023).

Abboud et al. (2020) concur that educators use sexual exploitation as a tool for learners to gain better grades, which mostly affects female learners. Survivors of abuse face social discrimination, which includes social exclusion from peers, their families, and being victimized (Langwenya et al., 2022). When girls disclose sexual abuse, it leads to accusations of being promiscuous, while their male counterparts face ridicule, which daunts them from reporting the incidents (Daki, 2022). The manner community responds to abuse generates more humiliation for victims while making them less likely to speak out. Survivors become more vulnerable to exploitation due to their social networks collapsing, which prevents them from returning to regular social activities.

2.3 Institutional responses

South Africa has established an inclusive legal and policy structure aimed at safeguarding learners from abuse in educational institutions (Mpanza, 2021). The South African Schools Act (1996), the Employment of Educators Act (1998), and the Children's Act (2005) all forbid sexual misconduct by educators and highlight the importance of child protection (de Villiers and Garbers, 2023). Schneider and Hirsch (2020) state that the Department of Basic Education's guidelines for preventing and managing sexual violence and harassment in

public schools aim to assist schools with reporting, prevention, and disciplinary procedures. In theory, these frameworks demonstrate a significant dedication to protecting learners.

However, studies indicate that the implementation of these policies is still poor and irregular. Monahan (2024) argues that although reporting mechanisms are well-defined, they are seldom implemented efficiently. According to Robertson et al. (2023), allegations are reported and dealt with differently in rural and urban school settings due to differences in institutional accountability mechanisms for resolving problems. Urban schools typically have more structured procedures. Literature further argues that formal accountability procedures may be weakened in rural schools due to resource limitations, restricted access to support services, and physical distance from monitoring institutions (Robertson et al., 2023). Both male and female offenders escape responsibilities, while survivors failed to get justice due to poor examination and overlooking of many cases. Daki (2022) articulates that female learners frequently encounter more obstacles when reporting abuse, such as victim-blaming and accusations of being promiscuous, fear of reprisals, while their male counterparts face ridicule, which daunts them from reporting the incidents. The absence of enforcement fosters a culture of impunity (Mpanza, 2021). Literature indicates that some schools and educational agencies in rural and urban schools apply “protectionist” measures for teachers, allowing offenders to be subtly transferred to different schools instead of being terminated or reported to the relevant authorities (de Villiers and Garbers, 2023; Gottfredson et al., 2020). This not only denies justice to victims but also continues the cycle of abuse by permitting offenders to commit more offenses in different settings.

The research by De Villiers and Garbers (2023) discloses that institutions fail to offer suitable support systems for learners, which leads to another institutional breakdown. According to Schneider and Hirsch (2020), both the school administrators, governing bodies, and educators work together to protect the school’s image; therefore, making it difficult for the learners to report abuse, as they receive negative reactions. Mdletshe and Makhaye (2025) point out that the victims face added obstacles because their societies sustain traditional power structures that discriminate against victims. The cases of educator-learners are being worked on by the police and court system without any agency before dismissing them due to insufficient evidence and family pressure to drop charges (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2024).

Literature further shows that some progress has been made despite current impediments. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) along with NGOs, awareness campaigns, and offender deregistration efforts by SACE, demonstrates progress toward holding perpetrators accountable (Bhana, 2021). The current institutional response to protect learners remains disorganized because schools need to provide immediate support and protection to their learners.

(2020), feminist theory is of the view that sexual abuse, particularly in schools, is deep-rooted in patriarchy, gender inequality, and systemic disempowerment of women and girls. Therefore, the feminist theory provides a critical lens to understand these systemic gender inequalities underpinning sexual abuse in educational settings. It also cross-examines how the cultural norms, patriarchal structures, gender inequality, and institutional cultures perpetuate the control of girls and women, frequently normalising male authority, and silencing victims (Roka, 2025). In the setting of South African schools, feminist theory assists in exposing how power imbalances and patriarchal beliefs contribute to atmospheres where male educators may exploit their authority over female learners. Applin et al. (2023) concur that the feminist standpoint frames sexual abuse not simply as an individual misbehavior but as a systemic and structural subject entrenched in socialization processes and gender inequality, which privileges men. By applying feminist theory, this study explored how cultural silence around victim-blaming, sexuality, and unequal gender norms tolerates conditions in which abuse persists.

Power relations theory complements how hierarchies within institutions generate dynamics that permit authority figures to exploit vulnerable learners (Collien, 2021). In the school context, power relations theory assists in explaining how educators’ institutional authority places them in a dominant role over learners, making opportunities for abuse and coercion (Collins et al., 2021). Feminist scholars such as Hooks (2019) contend that the patriarchal system perpetuates uneven power relations and normalizes gendered dominance, especially between male teachers and female learners. Ahmed (2018) demonstrates how bureaucratic procedures that ignore, postpone, or reroute complaints can make institutions complicit in maintaining inequality. In this way, power relations theory demonstrates that institutional responses to abuse are not merely procedural but also profoundly influenced by deeply ingrained gendered power dynamics that determine who is heard, whose stories are recognized, and whether or not responsibility is sought.

In educational settings, teachers hold institutional authority over learners, this power imbalances influence social interactions and may facilitate domination or exploitation. Educators control access to grades, discipline, and recognition tools, which are institutional power tools that can be exploited to manipulate or silence victims. The theory provides a lens for understanding how power relations and institutional authority may influence the incidence of abuse as well as the social and psychological effects that learners endure. Power relations theory will guide the interpretation of the findings by examining how unequal authority relations between educators and learners allow coercion, stifle reporting, and maintain institutional norms that may normalize or conceal abuse.

The team of researchers were outsiders to the school system, and their identity and professional expertise contributed to and influenced participants’ interaction as well as openness of responses during data collection.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Feminist theory and power relations

This study is grounded in feminist theory (gender inequality) and power relations theory. According to Renzetti and Campe

3.2 Research design

A qualitative cyclical longitudinal ethnographic design was used to gain in-depth insights into educators’ perspectives on the prevalence, consequences, and causes of sexual abuse of

learners by educators in South African schools. Ethnography was carefully selected because it allows for connection within participants' cultural and social contexts, thus aiding the researcher to interpret meanings and behaviors from the participants' lived experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

The cyclical longitudinal element accentuated unceasing engagement with participants through several segments of data collection and reflections. This iterative aspect permitted observing consistencies, emerging patterns over time, and changes expanding the understanding of the socio-institutional processes influencing sexual abuse in schools. Following the approach outlined by Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023), the design combined recurring interaction, reflexivity, and contextual interpretation, safeguarding the authentic representation of participants' voices and experiences. Ethnography facilitated an understanding of how power hierarchies, cultural norms, and patriarchal discourses shape and sustain patterns of sexual abuse in educational settings (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

The longitudinal and cyclical aspects of the design enabled continuous interaction, allowing the researchers to build trust as well as observe evolving perspectives over time. This iterative aspect of engagement enhanced the authenticity, credibility, and depth of findings attributes central to qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.3 Study setting

This study was conducted in the rural area of Southpansberg North Circuit of Messina, located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, focusing on eight public primary and high schools in the Soutpansberg North Circuit region. As part of a community engagement scholarship project to improve human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention and address sexual and reproductive health challenges among learners. This particular community was nominated due to the high prevalence of HIV among the learners in Messina.

3.4 Sampling

16 trained Life Orientation (L.O.) teachers from eight schools were nominated by their school management teams and approved by the DBE. Fourteen of the participants were female, while the other two were male. All participants provided their informed consent as they took part in the workshop sessions aimed at enhancing their capacity to deliver efficient sex education for the learners. Every teacher was proficient in English.

3.5 Data collection methods

Data was collected through ethnographic group discussions and participant observation. Since this was a longitudinal study, educators were invited to a conducive and comfortable venue for a workshop and discussion to reflect on the effects of the training and intervention from the previous year. Each session was conducted in English, and educators provided individual

responses, followed by group discussions, which were recorded (via Microsoft Teams) and transcribed for analysis. The group discussions allowed participants to exchange their personal experiences and views about sexual abuse together. The group discussions exposed common understanding, social factors, and cultural perspectives that affected the incidence of sexual abuse. Observations helped to contextualize non-verbal clues such as facial expressions and overall interaction. Following Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023), the ethnographic process was iterative, combining interactions, immersion, and reflection to capture both explicit and subtle aspects of participants' social realities. The session began with a pilot question, with the teachers being asked: "What do you do as a teacher when you see your fellow teacher dating young learners?" This was followed by additional probing questions.

3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze data through the six-step method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six qualitative researchers from the research team transcribed the audio recordings word-for-word while they collected data and analyzed it simultaneously. The research team conducted multiple review sessions of transcripts, feedback, responses, comments, and visual data to identify recurring patterns and interpretations. The detailed approach needed us to organize and review the data multiple times to identify essential themes. The researchers grouped similar data points into themes and sub-themes before reaching consensus through team discussions to finalize the categories.

3.7 Ethical consideration

Granted the sensitivity of the study, ethical principles guided all research stages. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (Unisa) Research Ethics Committee (REC) and the Provincial Department of Education before fieldwork commenced: (reference number 90187598-SEPTEMBER-CREC-CHS-2023). The confidentiality of educators was ensured, and they were informed that their shared information might be shared with relevant stakeholders to address the learners' challenges. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity to protect the identities of participants, and data were securely stored in password-protected files. Participants were treated and addressed with dignity, and the findings will be disseminated in ways that contribute to community awareness and policy reform to avert sexual abuse in schools.

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

The criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were applied throughout the research process to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was established through member checking, prolonged engagement, and persistent observation, permitting participants to verify the accuracy and

authenticity of the interpreted data. The cyclical longitudinal nature of the design enhanced credibility by enabling iterative reflection and validation of findings across multiple data collection cycles. To ensure dependability and confirmability, field notes were carefully kept, including comprehensive information on all research activities and important elements at each stage of the research process. We included thorough explanations of the research process, participant demographics, and research environment to promote transferability.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Abuse of power and exploitation of learners

The study findings divulge that sexual abuse frequently arises from power imbalances between educators and learners, manifesting as coercion, manipulation, and transactional exchanges. These abuses frequently occur in a context of socioeconomic vulnerability, where learners, especially in rural and poorly resourced areas, may be exploited through offers of financial incentives, educational benefits, or material support. Teachers used their authority to exploit learners sexually, sometimes offering academic rewards or financial compensation. For instance, a participant reported:

“Learners are manipulated to sleep with the teachers for marks, and they should be told that they may be benefiting from the act, but their teacher does not mark the final marking of their exams.” Grace female

Another participant reported a case of a teacher who engaged in a long-term sexual relationship with a learner under financial coercion, with the mother being aware of the situation. Instead of reporting the case, as the child was still a minor, the mother opted for financial gain.

“I had a case of a grade 10 learner who was having an affair with the teacher and the mother found out after a year when the learner was in grade 11 and they sat down with the teacher and the mother asked the teacher to be paying R5000 every month and when she fell pregnant she aborted the pregnancy and the mother continued to get the money” Noleen female.

This illustrates feminist theory’s assertion that patriarchal power dynamics permit men in leadership positions to control and exploit women and girls (Renzetti and Campe, 2020). This corresponds with (Foucault, 1980) in power relations theory, which describes how institutional structures, like the power educators exert over students, act as tools of control, enabling sexual abuse to continue under the pretense of mentorship or discipline. The results are similar to the research by Wong et al. (2025), who emphasized the intersection of power and gender in South African schools, which perpetuates male dominance and normalizes abuse.

Often, schools in rural areas like Limpopo Province do not have established psychosocial support structures, obscuring the process for learners to report abuse. The social-educational environment, hence, fosters an atmosphere where sexual abuse regularly occurs within educational settings, revealing the crucial need to address not only distinct cases of abuse but also the broader cultural, structural, and institutional elements that enable them.

4.2 Culture of quietude and dread of reporting

In many communities, limited access to justice, anxiety about victim-blaming, and cultural exclusions on discussing sex perpetuate silence and acceptance of sexual exploitation. The inequality of power between educator and learner, collectively with institutions’ failure to implement discipline, permits these challenges to persist largely unreported or ignored. Participants mostly displayed feelings of intimidation, fear, and hesitation to report instances of sexual abuse. While educators articulated feeling helpless and self-protective in several circumstances, the learners changed their statements once the incident was reported. This reveals the widespread culture of silence concerning sexual violence within educational institutions, as supported by the quotation below

“To be honest, we are afraid to help out the student who is being sexually active with their teacher as sometimes we can report a case and the student changes their statement,” James, male.

The feminist scholars argue that patriarchy creates silence as a mechanism that safeguards perpetrators and upholds male dominance (Collins et al., 2021). The power structure between educators and learners creates fear because learners need their marks and recommendation letters from their educators, thus disclosure becomes dangerous. The study by Schneider and Hirsch (2020) supports this finding because they discovered that South African educational institutions face three main obstacles to sexual abuse reporting, which include fear of becoming victims, disbelief, and social discrimination.

4.3 Normalization of sexual misconduct in schools

The narratives also revealed disturbing normalization and acceptance of teacher and learner sexual relationships within some communities, according to the participants’ perceptions. In some cases, parents use their children to engage in sex with older males to receive monetary terms in exchange. Participants explained that sometimes when they tried to correct the sexual misconduct taking place, the parents of the learners were not pleased:

“In some cases when we try to condone or bring to a stop the sexual relationship between the teacher and learner the parents

become angry and tells us to mind our own business”
Paul male.

This normalization perpetuates the patriarchal monetization of young women’s bodies, buttressing the idea that girls’ sexuality is open to negotiation or exchange. In rural regions such as Limpopo, educators’ sexual abuse of learners happens amidst a complex interaction of patriarchal, economic, and cultural elements. Traditional gender roles usually portray men as authority figures and women as subservient, buttressing power imbalances that silence victims and endorse male dominance. Economic dependency and poverty also play a vital role in deepening vulnerability and empowering educators to exploit learners’ financial challenges through transactional relationships that masquerade as care or support. Due to community silence, cultural restrictions surrounding sexuality, and a lack of accountability from both schools and law enforcement, the situation deteriorates. Together, these aspects form a setting in which sexual abuse is prevalent and badly reported, underscoring how economic insecurity, gender inequality, and social complicity combine to uphold systemic vulnerability among learners in South African educational systems. From the standpoint of feminist theory, the normalization of sexual misconduct in schools can be explained by the intersection of gender, age, and institutional hierarchies. In this study, patriarchal power relations unravel how young girls are vulnerable to exploitation by older male educators, whose institutional status and authority frequently silence resistance and normalize abusive behavior.

4.4 Obstacles to reporting in institutions and structures

Educators constantly emphasized systemic weaknesses in the reporting and justice mechanisms, including a deficiency of confidentiality and sensitivity. Victims often find themselves in public queues where their stories can be overheard, increasing stigma and traumatization. One participant noted:

There is a lack of sensitivity regarding the issue of rape within the reporting systems, and this lack of privacy means that everyone around can hear your story while reporting.”
Pinky female

The finding reflects how the insensitivity of police and the lack of confidentiality dissuade victims from reporting. Furthermore, the absenteeism of victim-centered approaches actually daunts survivors from reporting sexual abuse. Such hurdles contradict national policies promoting child protection and reveal the disconnection between legal frameworks and lived realities in schools. Feminist scholars such as [Collins et al. \(2021\)](#) also posit that the criminal justice system in South Africa often re-traumatizes victims, underpinning gendered power hierarchies and limiting access to justice.

4.5 Ethics in the profession and safeguarding teacher responsibilities

The study highlights that, despite prevalent silence and fear, some educators proved moral and professional integrity by expressing their intent to confront as well as report misconduct from colleagues to both school management and police:

“Will confront the fellow teacher first, and if he or she continues, I will then report the case as it violates ethics.”
Levhu female.

This displays the counter-hegemonic capacity of educators who confront patriarchal oppression and serve as supporters for learners. Feminist theory sees these actions as resistance against patriarchal dominance ([Renzetti and Campe, 2020](#)). Educators who actually implement ethical positions help alter the institutional culture of silence into one of responsibility and safeguarding. This is also consistent with the DBE’s 2019 position on protecting learners’ rights and promoting ethical behaviour in schools.

4.6 Consequences of abuse of learners

The long-term consequences of sexual abuse on learners were evident in participants’ accounts. One educator lamented that:

“I had a case of a grade 10 learner who was in a sexual relationship with her teacher and The mother found out after a year when the learner was in grade 11 and they sat with the teacher and the mother requested the teacher to be paying R5000 every month and when the learner fell pregnant, she aborted the pregnancy and the mother continued to get the money, until now he is still paying although that learner has passed here matric and left the school-now she is living a life of a sex worker” Noleen Female

This indicates severe psychological, moral, and emotional harm to learners. Such experiences not only hinder academic development but also perpetuate cycles of gendered vulnerability and poverty. Through a feminist perspective, these results reveal the systemic subjugation of young women in patriarchal cultures, where their education and potential are compromised by gender-based abuse. [Mocnik \(2021\)](#) and [Daki \(2022\)](#) study attest that sexual abuse in educational surroundings leads to school depression, dropout, and engagement in risky behaviors among female students.

5 Integrated discussion

The findings reveal a complex crisis rooted in gender disparities, power imbalances, and institutional fragility as illustrated in [Figure 1: Breaking the Silence: Conceptual Framework](#), which highlights the interdependence of institutional, social, community, and individual elements that sustain vulnerability and influence reactions to sexual abuse and

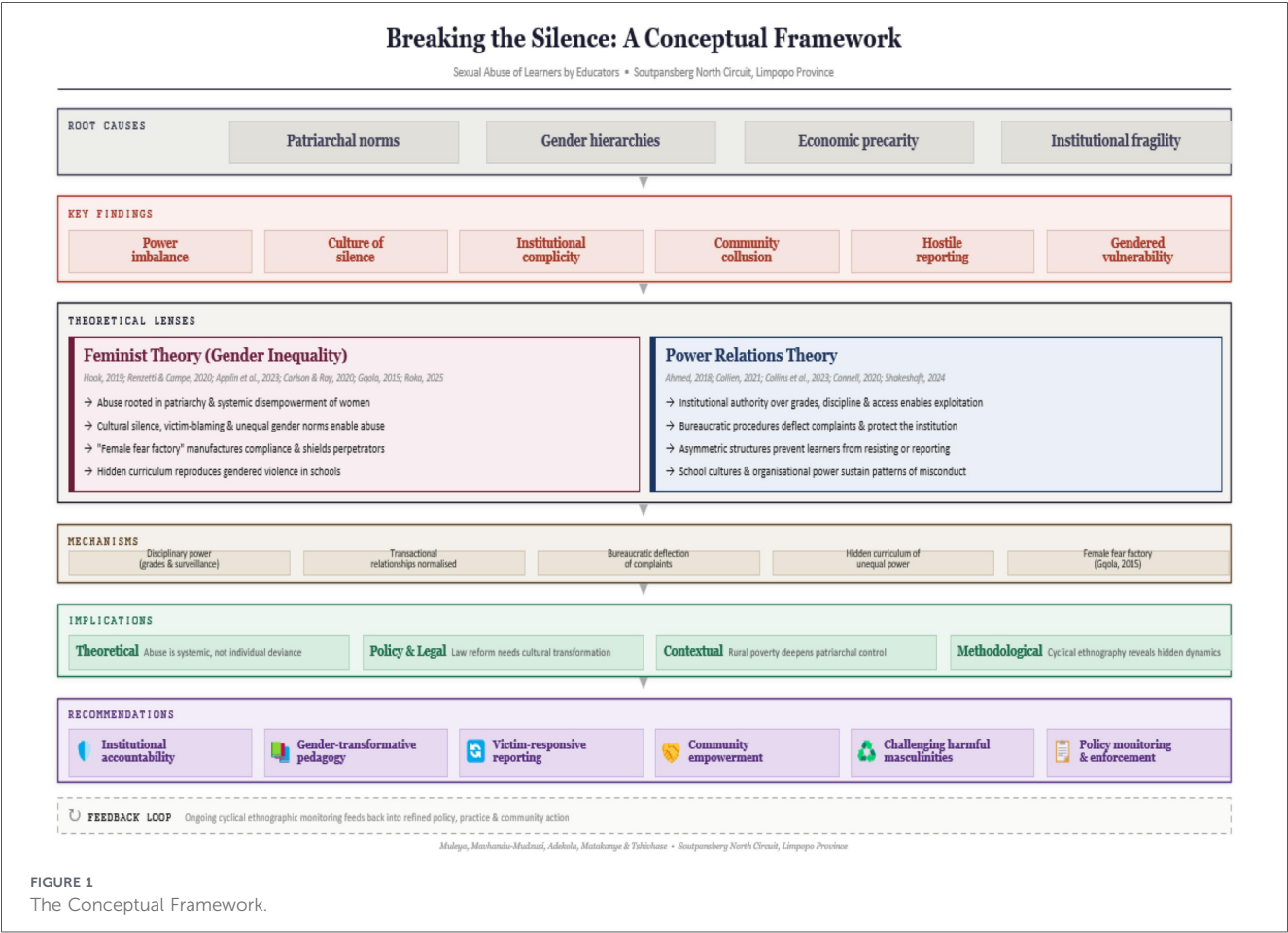


FIGURE 1
The Conceptual Framework.

exploitation. Monahan (2024) concurs that sexual abuse in educational institutions is not simply a secluded deviant behavior but rather a signal of cultural and structural power dynamics that normalize male superiority and female victimhood. Hooks (2019) agrees with Monahan that the patriarchal system perpetuates uneven power relations and normalizes gendered dominance, especially between male teachers and female learners. Viewed through the lens of feminist theory, these findings confirm that sexual violence in schools is not an aberration but a predictable consequence of patriarchal social organisation. Feminist scholars have long argued that gender-based violence functions as a mechanism for sustaining male dominance and female subordination (Carlson and Ray, 2020). In the context of this study, the normalisation of educator-learner sexual relationships in rural Limpopo reflects what Gqola (2015) describes as the operations of patriarchy, which is a system that renders gendered violence invisible by embedding it within everyday cultural practices and economic arrangements. The finding that parents accepted financial compensation in exchange for silence about abuse exemplifies how patriarchal structures co-opt economic vulnerability to sustain gendered exploitation.

Power present in educators' institutions and families establishes and maintains an environment conducive to abuse, as highlighted by Feminist theory and power relations. They both demonstrate that the sexual abuse of learners by educators is not simply an individual ethical lapse, but a systemic and

structural issue upheld by cultural silence, institutional disregard, and gender hierarchies (Ahmed, 2018). Power relations theory further illuminates how institutional authority operates not merely through overt coercion but through diffuse mechanisms of control embedded in routine educational practices. Educators wield power over grades, discipline, recognition, and access to institutional tools that, when misused, create conditions for the manipulation and silencing of victims. Shakeshaft (2024) demonstrates through analysis of over 200 cases that school cultures and institutional structures are frequently complicit in enabling educator sexual misconduct, arguing that organisational power dynamics rather than individual deviance alone sustain patterns of abuse. The practice of transferring offending educators, as documented in this study, exemplifies what Ahmed (2018) terms institutional self-protection: bureaucratic procedures that deflect complaints and shield the organisation from accountability rather than confronting the power imbalances that produced misconduct. This notion emphasizes how power and control are ingrained in institutional processes, affecting who is taken seriously, how complaints are handled, and how strictly accountability is enforced. Bhana et al. (2021), in their study of a rural South African primary school, similarly found that gendered power structures and patriarchal discourses are paramount to understanding violent relations in educational settings, confirming that feminist and power relations analyses are indispensable for interpreting school-based sexual abuse. The study results reveal the instantaneous

necessity for transformative actions, such as private reporting systems, gender-aware educator training, and school-centered awareness initiatives that permit learners to express themselves freely and safely.

The qualitative cyclical ethnographic approach enabled the researchers to reveal these underlying dynamics by repeatedly engaging with participants over time, documenting the evolution of silence, fear, and complicity. The ethical dilemmas within communities where both protection and exploitation are present were revealed by the collective voices of educators. From a feminist standpoint, the methodology proved especially valuable for uncovering what [Pietersen and Langeveldt \(2025\)](#) describe as the hidden curriculum of violence in South African schools, the implicit norms, values, and gendered power dynamics that are not formally taught but profoundly shape the conditions under which abuse occurs and is sustained. Power relations theory explains how these hidden dynamics operate: educators' institutional authority creates what [Collins et al. \(2021\)](#) characterize as asymmetric relational structures in which learners lack the positional power to challenge, resist, or report exploitation. The finding that reporting environments are insensitive and non-confidential further demonstrates how power hierarchies extend beyond the classroom into the very mechanisms designed to address abuse, effectively re-victimising those who attempt to disclose ([Connell, 2016](#)). This study reflects the crucial requirement for inclusive approaches that include an ethical shift among educators, victim-responsive reporting mechanisms, and community empowerment to dissolve the patriarchal culture that affluences abuse in South African schools.

6 Implications of the study

The findings of this study have substantial implications for educational policy, educators' development, and child safeguarding systems in South Africa. The continuous incidence of sexual abuse by educators exposes the crucial need to improve institutional accountability in the educational system. [Hooks \(2019\)](#) stresses that it is crucial to acknowledge the marginalized voices and lived experiences, which are remarkably important when analyzing learners' reports of abuse and institutional reactions. From a feminist theoretical perspective, the persistent disconnect between South Africa's progressive child protection legislation and the lived realities of learners in rural schools exposes how patriarchal structures operate at multiple levels, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal, to neutralise legal protections. Feminist analysis reveals that the problem is not merely one of policy implementation but of deeply embedded gender inequality that shapes how institutions perceive, process, and respond to allegations of abuse ([Carlson and Ray, 2020](#)). Power relations theory further explains that institutional responses are not neutral procedural acts; they are shaped by the very hierarchies that produce abuse, determining whose accounts are believed, how seriously complaints are pursued, and whether accountability is enforced ([Ahmed, 2018](#); [Collien, 2021](#)). The results further reveal that patriarchal dynamics in rural Limpopo are intricately entrenched in the social and cultural landscape, influencing gender relationships

both at home and in institutions such as school, and economic vulnerability allows for exploitation, emphasizing how cultural and socio-economic frameworks.

The findings confirm established patterns of economic vulnerability, institutional silence, and patriarchal control that occur in South African school sexual exploitation cases. The study provides detailed community-based findings that develop the present understanding of sexual abuse in schools. Drawing on feminist power, the findings align with [Hooks \(2019\)](#) work, who contend that patriarchal systems normalize gendered dominance and sustain disparities that disproportionately affect women and girls. Feminist theory helps explain why the rural Limpopo area exhibited a distinct pattern of parental immersion in teacher-learner sexual relationships: patriarchal cultural norms position men, including male educators as authority figures whose conduct is not to be questioned, while economic precarity compounds this power asymmetry by making families financially dependent on the goodwill of those in authority ([Bhana et al., 2021](#)). [Gqola \(2015\)](#) terms this the "female fear factory," a patriarchal system that manufactures compliance and silence among women and girls while shielding perpetrators from consequences. This dynamic demonstrates how patriarchal power structures and economic precarity interact to create circumstances that encourage abuse while limiting accountability. The study reveals how small, tight-knit communities sustain silence through common moral doubts because educators elect to protect their reputation rather than face legal penalties. The research further established that gendered violence follows national patterns, but Limpopo rural communities sustain their own distinct pattern of abuse through the collective forces of economic poverty, patriarchal control, and community-wide moral acceptance. This is in line with the observations of [Ahmed \(2018\)](#), who emphasizes how organizations might defend themselves by sidestepping complaints rather than confronting misconduct. [Shakeshaft \(2024\)](#) reinforces this point through a power relations lens, documenting how schools across diverse contexts enable sexual misconduct through inadequate screening, weak supervision, and institutional reluctance to investigate boundary violations patterns that resonate with the power dynamics documented in this study.

Furthermore, the results of the study carry policy and legal importance, highlighting shortcomings in existing reporting and response mechanisms. The absence of victim-focused methods, privacy, and sensitivity in handling abuse cases stifles reporting and promotes impunity. Feminist theory foregrounds the importance of the three gender-based violence bills signed into law by President Ramaphosa in January 2022 as a necessary legislative step; however, as [Pietersen and Langeveldt \(2025\)](#) argue through their feminist pedagogical analysis, legal reform alone cannot dismantle the patriarchal cultures and hidden curricula that reproduce gendered violence within educational institutions. The study's finding that police reporting environments lack confidentiality and sensitivity demonstrates how power relations extend into the criminal justice system, where, as [Connell \(2016\)](#) notes, gendered hierarchies determine whose experiences are treated as credible and whose suffering is rendered invisible thus, national, and provincial education authorities, along with the Department of Social Development,

need to reevaluate and reconstruct reporting processes to guarantee that they are culturally sensitive, maintain confidentiality, and prioritize survivors. These frameworks highlight that tackling abuse necessitates addressing wider social inequalities and altering patriarchal mindsets that accept violence and exploitation as normal.

Lastly, the research findings reflect that immediate action must be taken to fight against deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs that support male dominance over women, especially in rural educational contexts. Actually, the prevention of sexual abuse requires more than policy changes because it needs a cultural shift that establishes gender equality and promotes respect and accountability throughout educational institutions and their surrounding communities. Feminist theory demands that such a cultural shift must actively dismantle patriarchal power relations at every level of the educational system, from classroom interactions to governance structures (Roka, 2025). Moura (2024) argues from a feminist perspective that transforming harmful masculinities requires engaging men and boys in understanding how care, empathy, and non-violent relational practices can replace patriarchal modes of authority. In educational settings, this translates to embedding gender-transformative pedagogies within teacher training that challenge educators to critically reflect on their own positionality within gendered power structures (Pietersen and Langeveldt, 2025). The procedure of gender-sensitivity and empowerment training should continue indefinitely to teach people about challenging dangerous masculine stereotypes and sexual attitudes, and power dynamics. Schools can achieve safety for their learners through ideological transformation that establishes equal gender relations based on mutual respect. The fundamental step to eliminate abuse needs people to change their social beliefs that support abusive behavior. As Bull and Shannon (2025) demonstrate, dismantling the institutional power regimes that facilitate gendered violence requires sustained engagement with the structural conditions, including governance, resource allocation, and organisational culture that sustain unequal power relations within educational institutions.

6 Recommendations

In light of the findings and implications, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education establish more stringent regulations and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with the South African School-based Child Protection Committees, which are tasked with supervision, reporting, follow-up, and preventive actions. Include training on gender and sexuality, ethics, and safeguarding in teacher education and continued professional development initiatives. Frequent workshops focusing on power dynamics, gender-based violence (GBV), and ethical conduct to improve educators' awareness and accountability should be organized. Additionally, we recommend that educational initiatives aimed at students and providing knowledge about their rights, awareness of sexual abuse, as well as options for reporting, be considered. Counseling and psychosocial support programs are also essential to be provided in schools for victims of abuse to address trauma and encourage reporting. Consider initiating community

discussions and awareness campaigns to contest cultural norms that condone or conceal sexual exploitation. Moreover, parents must be encouraged to play a vigorous part in protecting learners by promoting zero tolerance for transactional sexual relationships between educators and learners. Additionally, future research should consider the perspectives of learners and families to provide a more holistic understanding of educator-learner sexual abuse and inform comprehensive system-wide reforms targeted at prevention, reporting, and survivor support. Lastly, training for law enforcement officials, educational authorities, and school administrators on the sensitive handling of sexual abuse cases to prevent additional victimization is crucial.

7 Conclusion

This study's findings show the complex connection between gender, power, and institutional failures that contribute to the sexual abuse of learners by educators in South African schools. The results illustrate that this abuse stems not only from the offenders' actions but also reflects economic inequalities, insufficient institutional safeguards, and systemic patriarchal structures. Employing a qualitative cyclical longitudinal ethnographic approach, the study recorded the views and reflections of educators, emphasizing fear, pervasive silence, and normalization linked to sexual exploitation within educational settings.

Employing Feminist theory alongside Power relations theory, the research demonstrates that tackling sexual abuse needs approaches beyond mere punitive measures. A transformation in the power dynamics that sustain gender-based violence in schools and communities is necessary. This study elevates marginalized perspectives and tackles systemic disparities, contributing to the wider dialogue on educational transformation and gender equity. Breaking the silence involves not just revealing abuse but also reinstating trust, dignity, and safety in South Africa's educational framework. The findings also highlight the necessity for a collective commitment from educators, policymakers, parents, and learners to make schools that are authentically safe, equitable, and empowering for every child.

8 Limitations

The study offers dynamic knowledge about learner-educator sexual abuse incidents; however, readers need to understand the study's restricted scope. This study focused only on rural schools within the Southpansberg North Circuit of Limpopo Province, which might limit the generalizability of the findings to other South African regions with different cultural backgrounds and economic conditions. Also, participants were nominated by school management and approved by the Department of Basic Education, which may result in the selection of compliant or institutionally favored educators. The research method of self-reported data collection through ethnographic conversations faced difficulties because participants might have evaded sharing their full experiences due to potential repercussions and fear of sexual abuse disclosure. Also,

the study might have revealed reduced abuse rates because participants chose to hide their complete abuse experiences. The social desirability bias during group discussions made participants feel compelled to support mainstream opinions, which constricted their ability to share their true thoughts. Lastly, the research lacks critical perspectives from DBE representatives and law enforcement officials who could explain the challenges of enforcing underage sexual relationship laws in rural schools.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by (reference number 90187598-SEPTEMBER-CREC-CHS-2023). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AM-M: Project administration, Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. AA: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft. HM: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft. LT: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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