



“Our Hands are Tied”: The Disconnect Between the Statutory Rape Policy and Rural Teachers’ Realities in South Africa

Ayobami Precious Adekola¹ · Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi² · Ikekhwa Albert Ikhile¹ · Hulisani Matakanye² · Livhuwani Tshivhase² · Vhothusa Edward Matahela²

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Abstract

Introduction South Africa’s Department of Basic Education introduced a policy in December 2021 to protect rural school learners from sexual exploitation. Schools must report statutory rape cases involving pregnant learners under 16 years of age with partners over 16. However, rural implementation faces significant barriers, highlighting the gap between policy intent and reality.

Methods A cyclical longitudinal ethnographic design was used to investigate the reasons for the limited implementation of the policy in rural schools. The data were collected through group discussions with 19 educators in August 2024 in the Soutpansberg North Circuit. The analysis, guided by an ethnographic content analysis framework, drew on intersectionality and social and cultural norms theories.

Results The findings revealed that in addition to a lack of awareness of the policy and a lack of training, deep-rooted socio-cultural norms hindered teachers and schools from reporting statutory rape cases. The findings also suggested interventions to improve implementation.

Conclusion Based on the study findings, we recommend adopting a multidisciplinary approach and integrating knowledge and methodologies from various fields, such as education, psychology, and social work. Specifically, we recommend that the Department of Basic Education should raise awareness of the policy in schools and among teachers and communities; implement a confidential, standardised reporting system; and provide training to educators on handling statutory rape cases to ensure more effective implementation and achieve the intended outcomes of the policy.

Policy Implications To bridge the gap between the statutory rape policy and effective implementation, policymakers must contextualise educational policies in terms of the realities of rural South African teachers.

Keywords Statutory rape · Teenage pregnancy · Rural educators · Rural schools · Policy implementation · South Africa

Introduction

In response to the high rate of teenage pregnancy among learners in South African schools, especially in rural areas (Ajayi & Ezegbe, 2020; Coert et al., 2020), the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2021 gazetted a policy mandating schools to report rape cases if learners under 16 years of age with male sexual partners older than 16 years of age become pregnant

(DBE, 2021). Mandatory reporting by teachers is crucial in preventing and addressing statutory rape, as educators are often among the first adults to become aware of these situations. Their role is to educate and protect vulnerable children, making it imperative that they understand their legal obligations and the processes involved in reporting such incidents (Jewkes et al., 2015; Sepeng & Makhado, 2018). However, there is a lack of implementation of this policy in rural schools, as some teachers claimed ignorance of the policy during the community engagement visit to the Soutpansberg North Circuit in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The researchers noted that cases of pregnant learners under 16 years of age in the school were not reported as statutory rape, prompting them to engage educators about the policy. Despite well-articulated legal boundaries and policies designed to protect learners,

✉ Ayobami Precious Adekola
adekoap@unisa.ac.za

¹ Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

² Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

there is a pervasive sense of helplessness among educators, who often find themselves unable to respond effectively to cases of abuse or misconduct due to a lack of resources, support and training. This study sought to reveal the complexities of implementing the statutory rape reporting policy in schools in a rural setting.

Links Between Rape and Teenage Pregnancy in South Africa

The links between rape and teenage pregnancy in South Africa reflect a confluence of social, cultural and economic factors that contribute to both phenomena. South Africa has one of the highest rates of sexual violence globally, with reports indicating that rape occurs approximately every 35 s (Reji, 2022). This alarming statistic underscores the widespread nature of sexual assault in the country and its direct implications for teenage pregnancy. Research conducted by Ajayi and Ezegebe (2020) highlights that sexual violence is a significant contributor to unintended pregnancies among young girls, emphasising the need for a nuanced understanding of how rape and sexual coercion can lead to early pregnancies. The intersection of rape and teenage pregnancy is further supported by the findings of Meel (2017), which indicate that unprotected sex resulting from sexual assault often leads to high levels of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Jewkes et al. (2016) reveal that entrenched gender power hierarchies in South African society contribute to the normalisation of sexual violence, with young men often socialised to view women as objects of conquest. This socialisation not only increases the likelihood of rape but also fosters an environment where young women may feel pressured to engage in sexual activity, leading to unwanted pregnancies. The findings of Madlala et al. (2018) further illustrate that traditional rites of passage such as circumcision often lack comprehensive sexual education, leaving young men and women ill-equipped to navigate sexual relationships responsibly. The findings of Saani (2022) indicate that poverty and the lack of employment opportunities are significant contributors to early pregnancies. Young women may feel compelled to engage in sexual relationships for financial support, which can increase the risk of sexual violence and unintended pregnancies. This economic dependency creates a vicious cycle in which teenage mothers often struggle to provide for their children, perpetuating poverty and vulnerability. With empirical evidence showing that rape is linked to teenage pregnancy, it is understandable that the DBE put in place a policy to address the issue in schools.

Overview of Statutory Rape Legislation and Policy in South Africa and Their Intended Purpose

In South Africa, the statutory rape policy has been developed to protect minors from sexual exploitation and abuse,

recognising the vulnerability of young people. These laws are aimed at establishing a clear age of consent (which is currently 16 years in South Africa) to prevent adults from engaging in sexual activities with children, thus reinforcing the notion that minors are incapable of giving informed consent, which recognises the inherent power imbalances and potential for coercion in such relationships (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007). The Sexual Offences Amendment Act (Act 32 of 2007) criminalises sexual acts with minors below the age of consent, regardless of whether coercion was involved. The Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) further emphasises the need for child protection and outlines the responsibilities of various stakeholders, including educators, to protect children's rights. However, the intended purpose of these pieces of legislation often clashes with the realities faced by rural educators, who may operate in communities where social norms and cultural practices undermine the enforcement of such laws. Despite the frameworks that are in place, there is a significant disconnect, as highlighted by the rising rate of pregnancy among schoolchildren without the concomitant reporting of incidences of statutory rape to the police (Abeid et al., 2014). Therefore, the effectiveness of these laws remains severely compromised in rural South African contexts where systemic inequalities prevail (Ngubane et al., 2022). The need to strengthen the implementation of these laws is crucial in a society where gender-based violence is prevalent and cultural norms sometimes condone relationships that statutory rape laws prohibit (Abrahams et al., 2020). Furthermore, statistics reveal that nearly 30% of learners encounter statutory rape situations in schools, often involving teachers or staff (Smit & Du Plessis, 2011). Jewkes et al. (2015) emphasise that the high prevalence of rape in South Africa requires robust legal protections for minors, as these laws serve as a deterrent against potential offenders and provide a mechanism for accountability. Moreover, the implementation of statutory rape laws is complicated by the realities of the South African criminal justice system, which faces challenges such as high attrition rates in rape cases and inadequate support for victims (Machisa et al., 2023). The complexities of navigating legal processes can deter victims from seeking justice or educators from getting involved, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and exploitation.

Challenges Faced by Rural Teachers in Implementing the Policy

Rural teachers operate in a context of severe socioeconomic challenges that prevent them from implementing mandatory reporting duties (Jewkes et al., 2016; Machisa et al., 2017). According to Heeralal (2014), they face challenges that hinder their effectiveness, including inadequate resources, lack of professional development and socioeconomic pressures

that affect their students' learning environments. These challenges are compounded by the widespread issues of poverty and unemployment in rural areas, creating a backdrop of vulnerability for both teachers and students. The findings of Jewkes et al. (2011) indicate that gender-inequitable masculinity and sexual entitlement are prevalent in rural communities, contributing to a culture where statutory rape may not be adequately recognised or reported. This cultural background complicates the role of teachers, who may feel ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of reporting such cases.

Moreover, the lack of support systems for teachers in rural areas exacerbates the situation. Omodan (2022) highlights that pre-service teachers deployed in rural communities face numerous challenges, including inadequate training and a lack of mentorship, which can leave them feeling isolated and unsupported when confronting sensitive issues such as statutory rape. This lack of preparation can lead to underreporting, as teachers may fear repercussions or feel uncertain about the proper procedures to follow. The absence of robust reporting mechanisms further complicates the situation, as teachers may not know how to handle this reporting responsibility. This resonates with Bipath and Beckmann (2016), who argue that effective training equips educators with the skills to handle sensitive issues, including sexual violence. However, the reality is that many rural teachers do not receive adequate training opportunities, which can hinder their ability to respond effectively to cases of statutory rape. This training gap can lead to a lack of confidence in reporting procedures, which further perpetuates the cycle of silence surrounding sexual violence in rural schools. Furthermore, teachers could be concerned about their ability to respond to incidents of abuse, given that many perpetrators reside within their communities or are part of the school system itself. This was corroborated by Maja's (2023) study, which shows that teachers may fear social ostracism or backlash from the community if they report cases of statutory rape, leading to a culture of silence that protects perpetrators rather than victims. This fear can be particularly pronounced in tight-knit rural communities, where social bonds are strong and the repercussions of breaking the silence can be severe.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to develop comprehensive support systems for rural teachers, including robust training programmes on government policies, accessible reporting mechanisms and community awareness initiatives aimed at changing cultural narratives about sexual violence.

Theoretical Framework

The study explored the lived experiences of educators regarding the implementation of the DBE's statutory rape

policy in their schools. We used the lenses of social and cultural norms theory and intersectionality theory, both of which provide critical frameworks for analysing how societal expectations and individual identities shape experiences and responses to issues such as statutory rape. Social and cultural norms theory posits that the prevailing norms in a society heavily influence behaviours and attitudes. It suggests that individual attitudes, behaviours and decisions are deeply influenced by the prevailing beliefs, traditions and expectations within a society or community (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018; Latkin et al., 2009). In rural South Africa, these norms are powerful in determining how sensitive issues such as statutory rape are perceived and handled. For teachers, reporting statutory rape often means going against established community norms, where sexual activity involving minors might be normalised, dismissed or seen as a private family matter. Teachers in rural schools have to navigate a complex expectations landscape where traditional beliefs and practices often intersect with modern legal frameworks.

Intersectionality theory further enriches the analysis by recognising that individuals experience overlapping identities that influence their experiences and responses to societal issues (Crenshaw, 1991). It recognises that people's experiences are moulded by the intricate interactions between their multiple identities, resulting in distinct difficulties and perspectives that are not entirely understandable by looking at each identity component independently (Adekola, 2024). In the case of rural teachers, factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and cultural background intersect to shape their perspectives on the statutory rape policy. Therefore, it is a powerful theoretical lens and a methodological tool to investigate how social identities influence individual experiences and outcomes (Grzanka et al., 2020; Moradi et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2017). Social and cultural norms theory and intersectionality theory converge to show how rural teachers' ability to report statutory rape is constrained by deeply embedded norms and their intersecting social identities.

Methods

Design

This study used qualitative cyclical longitudinal ethnography to gain in-depth insight into teachers' attitudes, perspectives and knowledge about the implementation of the DBE policy regarding statutory rape. This design is particularly useful and relevant, as it allows researchers to understand the broader social influences on sex education, such as educator hesitancy, the learner's socioeconomic conditions and cultural barriers that affect sexuality education, and to engage intermittently with stakeholders over several years

(Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023). The design helped to explore how rural cultural norms regarding age, relationships, and sexuality influence teacher attitudes and their reluctance to report statutory rape cases.

Study Setting

This study was carried out in rural areas of the Soutpansberg North Circuit, Vhembe district of Limpopo Province in South Africa, as part of a community-engagement scholarship project to improve HIV prevention and address sexual and reproductive health challenges among learners. The circuit borders Zimbabwe with key towns, including Musina and Beitbridge. Sexual health practices among young people remain a serious concern, as learners often engage in unprotected sexual activities, resulting in high incidences of sexually transmitted infections, HIV and unplanned pregnancies (Vinny et al., 2024).

Sampling

This study involved 19 Life Orientation teachers from eight public primary and high schools in the Soutpansberg North Circuit. They were nominated by their school management teams and approved by the DBE circuit manager. All the participants gave their informed consent and participated in a workshop to improve their ability to provide effective sexual health education to learners. Sixteen of the participants were female, and the remaining three were male. All the teachers were fluent in English, and 17 resided in the circuit, where the schools are located, and the remaining two stayed in the circuit on weekdays and travelled to their homes on weekends.

Data Collection

We used an ethnographic group discussion and observation for data collection, following the approach outlined by Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023). Educators were invited to a comfortable venue for a workshop and discussion to reflect on the impact of the previous year's intervention and training, as this was a longitudinal study. Consistent with the ethnographic framework of Spradley (2003) and Eder and Corsano (1999), we asked the teachers unstructured questions about the DBE's statutory rape policy and reporting procedures in South Africa.

The session began with a pilot question: "How familiar are you with the current DBE statutory rape policy and reporting procedures in South Africa?" This pilot question was followed by additional questions based on the participants' responses.

The teachers provided individual responses; this was followed by a group discussion. All the sessions were

conducted in English and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Additionally, we documented observations of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and overall interactions to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the implementation of the DBE's statutory rape policy and reporting procedures in the schools.

Data Analysis

This study used the ethnographic content analysis framework described by Brink et al. (2017). The research team, comprising six qualitative researchers, transcribed the recorded sessions verbatim and conducted iterative data collection and analysis. We examined the transcripts, feedback, responses, comments and visual data through multiple review cycles to identify emerging patterns and meanings. This rigorous process involved organising and re-examining the content to distil relevant themes. Similarities were grouped into themes and sub-themes, then compared and refined through researcher consensus. The analytical process yielded a final table of four themes and supporting excerpts from the participants' transcripts. This rigorous approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the data and the emergence of meaningful insights.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the study, ethical clearance (reference number: 90187598_SEPTMBER_CRECHS_2023) was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa. Additionally, the Vhembe District's Department of Basic Education approved the study, and the Soutpansberg North Circuit Manager was the gatekeeper, facilitating access to school principals, educators, learners and governing bodies.

To ensure participant anonymity, the schools and individuals were assigned pseudonyms. Throughout the study, we upheld the fundamental ethical principles of respect, beneficence and justice. The participants provided informed consent and confirmed understanding of the research purpose, and all the collected data was handled confidentially.

Trustworthiness

We adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness, which includes transferability, dependability, confirmability and credibility. The participants reviewed the transcripts to ensure credibility and confirmed that their shared experiences and perspectives had been accurately captured. Field notes were meticulously kept, documenting detailed information on all the research activities and key aspects of each stage of the research process to guarantee dependability and confirmability.

Furthermore, all six researchers participated in rigorous data transcription and analysis, and the emerging themes were compared between researchers to strengthen confirmability. To support transferability, we provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participant demographics and the research process.

Results

The study's findings revealed that despite the existence of the policy, educators often lacked awareness and access to essential training, hindering effective implementation. Furthermore, deep-rooted sociocultural barriers in the study setting impeded the implementation of the policy. The research further identified potential interventions to address these challenges and improve implementation.

Educators Lack of Awareness or Limited Knowledge of the Policy

The findings revealed that many educators were largely unaware of the statutory rape policy of the DBE. Teachers expressed confusion about their legal obligations, with several admitting that they had not received formal communication on the policy. Some educators were only vaguely aware of statutory rape laws, and many had misconceptions about the specific reporting procedures that they were required to follow. This lack of awareness left teachers feeling unprepared to address cases of statutory rape within their schools.

Honestly, I wasn't even aware that we had a policy on statutory rape. It's not something we've ever discussed in our school, and we've never had any formal communication from the department about it. — Senamile, female

I know there is a policy, but I'm unsure where to find it or exactly what it says. As educators, we need to be informed about policies, but it feels like no one communicates them effectively to us. — Mawande, male

Lack of Training for Policy Implementation

Teachers consistently highlighted the absence of training on the statutory rape policy and procedures. They noted that despite the critical importance of such policies, the school management or government entities had not provided formal training. Many teachers expressed frustration over their lack of preparation to handle sensitive cases of statutory rape, explaining that they were uncertain about how to navigate both the legal and emotional aspects of these situations. This absence of training left them feeling

powerless to act effectively when it came to reporting statutory rape cases in their schools.

Training is essential, so we need support; and without proper training, we're left to figure things out on our own. — Thapelo, Male

There's been no training at all. We hear about the policy, but they don't teach us how to implement it or what steps to take if something happens. — Vuyiswa, female

We are usually trained if we are to implement any school policy, but with this policy we were never trained on how to handle such cases. We think it is not to be implemented now, as there is no formal memo from the circuit office and from our school governing body meetings; it was never introduced as an agenda item. — Mateo, male

Sociocultural Barriers to Policy Enforcement

The study showed deeply ingrained sociocultural norms that significantly impeded the enforcement of the statutory rape policy in the research setting. Teachers reported that some people in the community tolerated intergenerational relationships, including incest, due to economic dependence on the perpetrator. In many cases, the abuser was the sole breadwinner, and families feared arrest or imprisonment would exacerbate their financial vulnerability. Participants noted that community members, including parents, often viewed such relationships as private matters, making it challenging for teachers to report cases without facing backlash. Furthermore, fear of retaliation from both the community and affected families discouraged teachers from taking action, contributing to the underreporting of statutory rape cases.

It's difficult because some parents [to] see these relationships as normal and support their kids to sleep with older men, who in turn provide for the family. If we report it, they might turn against us. Pressures like these can silence teachers who want to report incidents. Fear of backlash is real. — Kefilwe, female

Most family situations here in the community make reporting difficult; for example, a mother whose daughter was raped by her stepfather would often threaten the teachers not to report the case to the police. Otherwise, the teacher must be ready to take care of the family and, after reporting, should the breadwinner get arrested and jailed. It becomes a dilemma indeed. The practice here makes it seem like statutory rape isn't a big deal. Even if I want to report, I'm afraid of the consequences, both professionally and personally. — Lungile, female

Interventions for Improving Policy Implementation

Reflecting on possible solutions, teachers suggested several interventions to improve the implementation of the statutory rape policy. These included mandatory comprehensive training for educators on statutory rape laws and their reporting responsibilities. Teachers also recommended that the DBE should establish confidential reporting systems to protect educators from possible community retaliation. Furthermore, they emphasised the need for community-wide awareness campaigns on statutory rape and its consequences, as well as to challenge harmful cultural norms and encourage teachers to support them in enforcing these laws. Participants called on the government at different levels to implement programmes to address the underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to learner vulnerability, such as poverty and a lack of opportunities. These interventions would go a long way in bridging the gap between policy and practice in the research setting.

We should be workshopped on the policy to help us implement this policy. The training should teach us guidelines and protocols for reporting incidents to the authorities. Also, if the community could be educated about the seriousness of statutory rape, it might help. — Nonhlanhla, female

As teachers, we need proper training and workshops that explain the legal procedures and give us tools to handle these sensitive cases in a way that protects us and the learners. Actually, they [the department] should be visiting schools, meeting with communities, and making sure everyone understands the importance of reporting statutory rape. — Salmina, female

They should protect us by making the reporting confidential so that we can report these cases without fear of retaliation. Government should provide jobs and opportunities and support people in need. — Busisiwe, female

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight critical issues regarding the implementation of the statutory rape policy within public schools in the study setting. Nöthling et al. (2015) argue that such types of policies are necessary to create a safer school environment and ensure that children are protected from sexual violence. These findings resonate with existing literature that emphasises the need for educator awareness and training for successful policy implementation (Dosekun, 2013; Sebaeng et al., 2016).

The study revealed a concerning lack of awareness of the statutory rape policy among teachers, with many teachers expressing confusion about their legal obligations. This aligns with previous research that underscores the importance of teachers being informed about policy requirements to implement them effectively (Ade-Ojo, 2011). This implies that educators must accurately understand policy requirements to navigate their responsibilities successfully. The educators' statements during the study, such as their unfamiliarity with the policy and a lack of formal communication, reflect a broader trend identified in the literature, where teachers often operated as "unconscious policy implementers" rather than intentional actors (Keenan, 2019). This lack of awareness can lead to significant gaps in policy enforcement, as teachers may feel unprepared to address sensitive issues such as statutory rape if they do not fully understand the policies that are in place.

In addition to a lack of awareness, the lack of training highlighted by the educators in the study is a critical barrier to effective policy implementation. This is consistent with findings from other studies that revealed that in rural areas, resources and training opportunities were limited (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016; Daly & Ranwashe, 2023). Similarly, Fansher and Zedaker (2020) discuss the importance of training in shaping responses to sexual violence, noting that without proper education, individuals may struggle to intervene appropriately in critical situations. The educators' calls for mandatory training reflect a recognised need within the educational community for structured support to navigate the challenges of reporting and addressing statutory rape cases. This lack of training leaves educators feeling powerless and contributes to a culture of silence about such incidents, as teachers may be unsure of the correct procedures. Karimakwenda (2020) and Vries et al. (2014) argue that without proper training and support for teachers, policies aimed at protecting children may not achieve their intended goals, leaving vulnerable children at risk.

Furthermore, the study identified deep-rooted sociocultural barriers that impeded the enforcement of the statutory rape policy. Educators reported that community norms often tolerated intergenerational sexual relationships, complicating their ability to report cases without facing backlash. This finding is corroborated by other research that highlights how cultural attitudes can significantly influence the reporting of sexual violence. For instance, Barn and Powers (2018) note that societal acceptance of certain behaviours can create an environment where victims are discouraged from seeking help, as they may fear social repercussions. This line of thought is supported by Ikhile and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023), who explain that the prevailing culture in a community shapes how people behave regardless of existing policies. The educators' concerns about community retaliation

and the economic dependence on perpetrators further illustrate the nexus between socioeconomic factors and policy enforcement. This supports the findings of Strydom et al. (2020) and Kuo et al. (2019), who indicate that high levels of poverty and unemployment in communities could limit access to resources and support systems that could facilitate the implementation of government policies. Similarly, this aligns with the findings of Krienert (2023), who emphasises the need for policies to consider the sociocultural context in which they are implemented.

The study proposes several interventions to improve policy implementation in response to identified challenges. The educators suggested mandatory training, the establishment of confidential reporting systems and community awareness campaigns as potential solutions. These recommendations echo the literature's emphasis on the need for comprehensive educational programmes that not only inform educators about policies but also engage the community in discussions about the implications of statutory rape. For example, Senn et al. (2015) highlight the efficacy of educational programmes in raising awareness and changing attitudes about sexual violence. Furthermore, various studies concur that increased awareness could alert educators to their reporting responsibilities and improve collaboration between schools and child protection services (Dosekun, 2013; Sebaeng et al., 2016). By fostering a community-wide understanding of statutory rape and its consequences, educators can create a more supportive environment for reporting and addressing such incidents.

Theoretical Interpretations and Implications

These findings can be critically analysed through social and cultural norms and intersectionality theories. These theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how social expectations and intersecting identities influence educators' awareness, training and responses to the statutory rape policy.

Social norms theory posits that individuals' behaviours are significantly influenced by the perceived expectations of their social groups. The study's findings indicate that many educators were unaware of the statutory rape policy, which can be attributed to the prevailing social norms within their communities that can downplay the seriousness of such issues. Andrighetto and Vriens (2022) emphasise that social norms can drive behaviour and that understanding these norms is crucial for effective interventions aimed at changing behaviours related to policy compliance. The participants revealed a culture of silence and confusion about the statutory rape policy, suggesting that the lack of communication and awareness is reinforced by social norms that do not prioritise discussions about sexual violence in schools.

Moreover, the sociocultural barriers identified in the study, such as community tolerance of intergenerational relationships, illustrate how deeply ingrained social norms can impede policy enforcement. Teachers reported fear of backlash from families and communities, reflecting the injunctive norms that discourage reporting such incidents. This aligns with findings from Nigbur et al. (2010), who argue that perceived social norms can significantly influence individual behaviours and decisions, particularly in contexts where certain actions are socially sanctioned or stigmatised. In agreement, Mamabolo et al. (2022) indicate that teachers may fear that reporting cases could lead to social ostracism or backlash from the community, further complicating their decision-making processes. The educators' reluctance to report cases of statutory rape due to fear of community repercussions highlights the need for interventions that challenge these harmful social norms and promote a culture of accountability and support for victims.

Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding how various social identities, such as gender, class and cultural background, intersect to shape individuals' experiences and responses to social issues. The study's findings reveal that socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in the implementation of the statutory rape policy. Many educators noted that the economic dependence on perpetrators complicates the reporting of abuse, as families fear the financial repercussions of legal action that can take the perpetrator out of circulation. This reflects the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status, where women and children may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their economic circumstances. Moradi et al. (2020) highlight the importance of intersectionality in addressing social justice issues, as various identities and systemic inequalities shape individuals' experiences. In the context of the study, the educators' experiences with the statutory rape policy cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the socioeconomic pressures that influence community attitudes about reporting and accountability. The fear of exacerbating financial vulnerability can silence educators and victims alike, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and complicity. As also explained by DePalma and Francis (2014), the intersectional lens reveals how teachers (particularly women) may feel constrained by both their professional roles and societal expectations, leading to a hesitance to confront issues of statutory rape directly. For example, female teachers may face gender-based power imbalances within the school and the broader community. As women, they may feel even more constrained by patriarchal norms that delegitimise their authority or subject them to higher levels of scrutiny when they attempt to report statutory rape. They may also encounter gendered expectations to prioritise communal harmony over legal mandates.

Additionally, educators' calls for comprehensive training and community awareness campaigns reflect an understanding of the need for intersectional approaches to policy implementation. Waghid and Hibbert (2018) suggest that such training should cultivate teachers' social, economic, political and cultural awareness, noting that a deeper understanding of these factors can enhance critical reflection, pedagogical practices and improved decision-making. By addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors that contribute to learner vulnerability, as well as challenging harmful cultural norms, educators can foster a more supportive environment for reporting and addressing statutory rape. This aligns with the recommendations of Dempsey et al. (2023), who argue that understanding the role of perceived social norms is essential for developing effective interventions.

Social and cultural norms theory and intersectionality theory converge to show how rural teachers' ability to report statutory rape is constrained by deeply embedded norms and their intersecting social identities. Social norms discourage reporting by framing statutory rape as acceptable or unreportable. At the same time, intersectionality theory reveals how teachers (particularly women and those from marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds) face unique challenges at the intersection of their professional responsibilities, gender and social location. Therefore, the disconnect between the statutory rape policy and the realities faced by rural teachers in South Africa underscores the need for a multifaceted approach that considers the prevailing social norms, cultural expectations and individual identities. Through the bi-theoretical lenses of social and cultural norms theory and intersectionality theory, we advocate for contextualising educational policies within the realities of rural South African teachers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on the combined insights of the two theories used for this study, the findings carry important implications for policy and practice. Therefore, we can better understand how to address the challenges identified in the research and improve the effectiveness of the implementation of the statutory rape policy in the study setting.

Implications for Policy

To address the critical gap in awareness and training about the statutory rape policy among educators, policymakers must prioritise the development of comprehensive training programmes that not only inform educators about existing policies but also equip them with the skills necessary to handle sensitive situations effectively. As noted by Hagger et al. (2013), the influence of group norms on individual behaviour underscores the importance of creating

a supportive environment where educators feel empowered to act. Training should be designed to foster a culture of accountability and encourage educators to engage in open discussions about statutory rape, thus normalising the reporting of such incidents.

Policymakers should implement community awareness campaigns to challenge harmful cultural norms that tolerate intergenerational relationships and discourage reporting. According to Legros and Cislighi (2019), social norms are collective constructs that can be reshaped through targeted interventions. By engaging community leaders and stakeholders in discussions about the implications of statutory rape, policymakers can work towards shifting societal attitudes and reducing stigma about reporting.

Policymakers should apply the intersectional approach to policy implementation by ensuring that training and awareness programmes are culturally sensitive and address the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the vulnerability of learners. Fuad et al. (2020) highlight the importance of understanding the cultural context in educational settings. By tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs of different communities, policymakers can create more effective and inclusive strategies for policy implementation.

Implications for Practice

Schools should establish confidential reporting systems that protect the identities of educators and victims to mitigate fear of retaliation from the community. This aligns with the recommendations of Kim and Daniel (2016), who emphasise the importance of creating safe environments to report misconduct. Schools can foster a culture of transparency and accountability by ensuring that educators can report incidents without fear of backlash.

The DBE and schools should develop collaborative networks that include social workers, legal experts and mental health professionals to provide educators with the necessary resources and guidance. As Geber et al. (2017) highlight, peer communication shapes normative behaviours. This can create a support system that empowers educators to act confidently in challenging situations by fostering professional collaboration.

Schools should actively engage parents and community members in discussions about the implications of statutory rape and the importance of reporting. This aligns with the findings of Dempsey et al. (2023), which emphasised the role of perceived social norms in influencing behaviour. With the involvement of the community in dialogue, schools can work towards changing perceptions and building a collective commitment to addressing statutory rape.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the implementation of the statutory rape policy within rural school settings in South Africa, highlighting gaps in educator awareness, training and the influence of sociocultural norms. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive policy reforms and practical interventions to foster a more supportive environment for educators and learners in implementing the policy.

Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The study was geographically limited to rural schools in the Soutpansberg North Circuit of Limpopo Province, which may affect the generalisability of the results to other regions of South Africa with different cultural and socioeconomic dynamics. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data from educators may introduce bias, as teachers might have underreported their awareness of the statutory rape policy or their experiences due to fear of judgment or retaliation. Furthermore, social desirability bias, particularly in group discussions, means participants might have felt pressured to conform to dominant views, thus limiting the depth of individual responses. The study lacks input from other key stakeholders, such as DBE officials, law enforcement and parents, whose perspectives would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges in implementing the statutory rape policy in rural schools.

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Author Contribution Ayobami Precious Adekola: collected, analysed and interpreted the data. He also wrote the manuscript.

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi: conceptualised the study; collected, analysed and interpreted the data. She also supervised the project.

Ikekhwa Albert Ikhile: collected, analysed and interpreted the data.

Hulisani Matakanye: collected, analysed and interpreted the data.

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Data Availability Transcribed data have already been incorporated into the manuscript. However, the recorded audio data cannot be made public for ethical reasons, as agreed upon by the participants.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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