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# School-related gender-based violence: A call for action in occupational therapy

## ABSTRACT

School-related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV) is a sub-set of gender-based violence (GBV) that occurs in primary and secondary school settings. SRGBV is a daunting reality, a crime against humanity, and therefore a human rights issue. Responsive SRGBV programmes need to be dynamic, and determined by the needs of communities and learners. If the Department of Basic Education (DBE) wants to remain relevant in supporting communities into becoming safe spaces for all, it needs to promote safe community models with adequate flexibility. Although school-based occupational therapists are a human resource of the DBE, traditionally occupational therapists have not been involved in addressing SRGBV in school settings in South Africa.

### Implications for practice:

This opinion paper elaborates on the context within which school-based occupational therapists can reframe SRGBV as an occupational injustice, and develop life skills interventions that address SRGBV. Recommendations for action are made using existing frameworks such as the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework, and the INSPIRE framework of the United Nations. It encourages school-based occupational therapists to become activists that promote occupational justice, and are leaders in the prevention of and intervention for SRGBV.

## INTRODUCTION

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) is widespread problem that affects millions of children, adolescents, families, and communities around the world. In 2006, the South African Human Rights Commission highlighted that *"the environment and climate necessary for effective teaching and learning is increasingly undermined by a culture of school-based violence and this is becoming a matter of national concern"*<sup>1</sup>. Safety in schools is the key aim of the National Development Plan (NDP) which states that *"in 2030 people living in South Africa...feel safe at home, at school and at work, and enjoy an active community life free of fear"*<sup>2,73</sup>. In addition to this, the main objective of the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) is to create schools that nurture supportive learning environments and create a safe space where all involved in the school system feel welcome (i.e. learners, educators, principals, administrative staff, and School Governing Body (SGB) members)<sup>3</sup>.

Shifting the culture of school-based violence requires a collective response from all stakeholders, including occupational therapists who work in schools. Occupational therapists view people through an occupational lens, while considering the internal and external factors which potentially influence individuals' engagement in certain occupations. According to Feldhacker, Cerny, Brockvelt and Lawler<sup>4</sup>, children are occupational beings who are born with a natural desire to experience learning, control, and mastery. Their ability and intrinsic motivation to engage in occupations is what provide purpose and fulfilment, improve their

general quality of life, enable their physical and emotional health and well-being, and organize their behaviour. School takes up a big portion of children and adolescents' time. It is therefore critical that school-based occupational therapists play a role in creating school environments where learners feel safe, and are able to pursue this natural desire for learning, control and mastery. This opinion piece highlights the phenomenon of SRGBV and its impact on experiences of occupational justice, and suggests a starting point for interventions that occupational therapists working in schools can offer.

### Understanding SRGBV and its consequences

School-related Gender-based Violence occurs in a variety of ways, in a variety of places, and between different people.

*"School-related [gender-based] violence is typically defined as any acts of violence that take place inside an educational institution, when travelling to and from school or a school-related event, or during such an event. These school-based acts of violence can be both physical and non-physical and may or may not result in bodily or emotional harm to the victim. This violence typically takes the form of learner-on-learner, learner-on-educator, educator-on-educator, and educator-on-learner violence and severely disrupts the normal functioning of the schooling system"<sup>5</sup>.*

According to UNGEI and UNESCO<sup>5</sup>, the manifestations of SRGBV may vary. It may include physical, sexual or psychological acts of violence that are inflicted on people in and around the school environment because of various stereotypes, norms and roles that are expected of or assigned to them in terms of either their gender or sexual identity. It furthermore alludes to the differences between how males and females experience vulnerabilities and how they react to violence. The types of violence include corporal punishment, bullying, sexual assault or non-consensual touching, sexual harassment, seduction, sexual acts in exchange for favours, encouragement of male dominance and aggression within the school setting. Often the primary intent of SRGBV is to reinforce gender roles, and to perpetuate gender inequalities that are ingrained in society's unequal power relations.

SRGBV hampers the well-being and health of those who find themselves in the school environment, while preventing many learners in South Africa from embracing their schooling experience fully<sup>6</sup>. SRGBV poses a huge risk to occupational performance since it negatively impacts on educational achievement of learners, and reduces the productivity of school personnel. For example, SRGBV negatively impacts on learners' intellectual capacity which in turn hampers their abilities to advance in school<sup>7</sup>. It furthermore has an impact on the physical and psychological health of all those involved<sup>8</sup>. Physical health consequences may include the following acts: forced sex, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted conception, pregnancies, childbirth, abortions and even death. Psychological consequences may include delayed development of social skills and positive self-esteem. It may also result in anxiety and depression, impaired concentration and decision-making skills, feelings of guilt, insomnia, substance use, suicide ideation, aggression, and school dropout. Ripple effects may come into play i.e. learners who are exposed to SRGBV may become perpetrators of violence themselves<sup>5,7</sup>.

According to UNESCO and UN Women<sup>9</sup>, SRGBV violates children's rights to education and limits their ability to enjoy the benefits of education and participate fully in their individual and social development. It also violates children's right to security, privacy, integrity, freedom, and often also their right to life<sup>7</sup>. This means that SRGBV hampers the well-being and health of many

learners in South Africa, as it prevents them from embracing their schooling experience fully<sup>6</sup>.

### The role of schools in addressing SRGBV

According to Psaki et al.<sup>10</sup>, schools are the most important socializing environments outside of the family structure. Schools are not isolated from the outside world but perpetuate traditions, culture, norms, customary laws, and the governmental policies that exist in countries and communities. The experiences of both learners and staff inside and outside school settings are contributory factors that inform the individuals' ideas of the world and how they are supposed to function<sup>11</sup>. Schools often become the breeding grounds where various sources of disadvantage play out or are reinforced<sup>10</sup>. Patterns of school violence reflect the broader inequitable social and gender norms, as well as the power imbalances and dynamics between adults and children, and between women and men or girls and boys<sup>12</sup>.

Schools need to protect and promote human dignity and must therefore be free from SRGBV<sup>7</sup>. Schools must also mirror the central rights of children as stipulated in United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989. Equally important are the rights of the school personnel. Consequently, Magalhães et al.<sup>6</sup> explain that schools represent an important place for SRGBV awareness raising, addressing family and gender violence, as well as supporting learners and parents affected by it<sup>7</sup>. Preventative measures and interventions should also extend beyond school grounds, and adopt an ecological or whole school approach to safety in schools<sup>13</sup>.

### The role of occupational therapists as change agents for SRGBV

Occupational therapists are one of the human resources available in schools who have the competencies to address some of the education and health consequences of SRGBV, as well as contribute to awareness raising and prevention. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT)<sup>14,1</sup> states that *"the role of occupational therapist is to enable, support and promote full participation and wellbeing of students by supporting the strengths and finding solutions, reducing or removing learning activity limitations and participation restrictions"*. However, as an occupational therapist with extensive experience working with children and adolescents in a psychiatric hospital, and in the schooling system, the first author (SSF) noticed that the occupational therapy approach to practice was more holistic in mental health services than in the school system. This is echoed by Galvaan, Peters, and Gretschesl<sup>15</sup>, who highlight that the predominant focus of occupational therapists working in schools are interventions for learners with disabilities and barriers to learning. UNESCO and UN Women<sup>9</sup>, argue that these practices do not necessarily address the many other challenges that learners are facing in the real world daily and dual economy of schooling. Nevertheless, Sondag et al.<sup>16</sup> also point out that occupational therapists' roles extend beyond the traditional 'one-on-one' treatment sessions with disabled learners and those with developmental delays and learning difficulties. It is important to note that our role within the education system also incorporates multidisciplinary team collaboration inside and outside of the school environment, referrals and follow-up, support and empowerment of educators, advocacy, and policy development that extends into parental support and community development<sup>16</sup>.

The discipline of occupational therapy has reflected on how to become a more politically and socially responsible profession, with calls for politically informed transformative approaches<sup>17</sup>. Occupational justice includes the right to participate in diverse and meaningful occupations to meet one's basic needs, and have equal opportunities and life chances to achieve one's potential<sup>18</sup>. Victims

and perpetrators of SRGBV may lose their opportunity and chances to achieve their potential, as a result of the health and educational occupational injustices, so that people have consequences of SRGBV. Even if not directly involved in an instance of SRGBV, and teachers may still experience occupational injustice. Occupational deprivation is a risk factor for occupational injustice that is the social consequence of broad political and social forces that deprive individuals of engaging in meaningful activities due to circumstances that are outside of their control<sup>19</sup>. SRGBV is one such social force that falls outside the control of learners, teachers, parents, and the broader community. Magalhães et al.<sup>20</sup> point out that children are supposed to feel safe and protected within and around schools, but often this is not the case due to SRGBV. Feelings of being unsafe and at risk may deprive children and adolescents of their right to education, and restrict their ability to enjoy the benefits that accompany education, and to participate fully in their individual and social development<sup>7</sup>.

### Interventions informed by occupational justice and the INSPIRE framework

School-based occupational therapists can work within the parameters of existing frameworks to address SRGBV. The Participatory Occupational Justice Framework is directed towards achieving social inclusion by highlighting and addressing occupational injustices, so that people have the resources, capabilities, and opportunities to be able to participate in life and make a contribution to society<sup>21</sup>. This article is a step towards the process of raising consciousness of occupational injustice for victims and perpetrators of SRGBV, as well as others in the school community. Other processes to enable occupational justice within this framework include engaging collaboratively with partners across the school, including learners, teachers, and other staff, parents, and the broader community; co-developing plans to address SRGBV within a particular school or community; identifying strategies to find the resources needed to support action and continuous evaluation; and finally to inspire advocacy against SRGBV in all its forms, so that the fight against SRGBV is sustainable<sup>22</sup>.

The World Health Organisation's INSPIRE strategy is a second framework using an integrated approach to assist those committed to preventing and responding to violence against children<sup>23</sup>. The seven strategies in this framework include implementing and enforcing laws, altering values and norms, creating safe environments, caregiver and parent support, economic and income strengthening, support and response services, and life skills and education. We believe occupational therapists can promote occupational justice, across all seven strategies, using the strategies outlined in Table I (below).

**Table I: Life Skills Programme Content to Address SRGBV and Enable Occupational Justice**

INSPIRE STRATEGY	PROCESSES TO ENABLE OCCUPATIONAL JUSTICE	LIFE SKILLS CONTENT
Implementing and enforcing laws	Raising consciousness of occupational injustice, by developing children, teachers, parents, and community's awareness of how a culture of SRGBV affects the ability and opportunity to fully participate in school life.	Raising awareness of laws that protect children including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- laws that ban corporal and any form of violent punishment by parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults,</li> <li>- laws criminalizing perpetrators of sexual abuse and child exploitation</li> <li>- laws preventing alcohol misuse</li> <li>- laws preventing access to firearms</li> </ul> Know your rights and how to report violations of the law Know your responsibilities and abide by the law

Norms and values	Engage collaboratively with partners, by including social and religious leaders in the development of a norms and values-based curriculum.	Developing knowledge of social norms, and important values for addressing SRGBV including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Respect</li> <li>- Bullying and victimization</li> <li>- Societal norms and societal stereotypes</li> <li>- Sexuality and Destigmatization</li> </ul> Promoting the rights of people in the LGBTQ+ community and their vulnerabilities Introducing masculine and feminine role models that inspire
Safe environments	Mediate agreement on a plan and strategies to gain resources by collaborating to make schools a safer space for children to be.	Respect and take care of your environment Be proud of your environment: Don't litter initiatives Play in groups and avoid dangerous activities and areas Different types of violence: Physical abuse, psychological abuse, economic abuse, and domestic violence How to report crime and people that make you feel unsafe
Parent and caregiver support	Engage collaboratively with partners – Extend life skills training to parents and teachers who are the most important partners to meet the individual needs of children	Positive Parenting Supportive parents: Know, understand and support your child Communication: Parent/caregiver-child interaction Mutual respect Supporting my parents: Chores and responsibilities
Income and economic strengthening	Engage collaboratively with partners – Extend life skills training to parents and teachers who are the most important partners to meet the individual needs of children	The economic standing of families can alter children's experience of GBV. Aim to develop: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial knowledge: Becoming a productive citizen</li> <li>- Basic budgeting and saving</li> <li>- Income generation</li> <li>- Cash transfers, group savings, and loans programmes vs loan sharks</li> </ul>

### CONCLUSION

In this opinion piece, we have argued that school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) poses a serious threat to the occupational engagement, health, and well-being of children, teachers and staff, parents, and the broader community. Because SRGBV restricts the choice of occupations, and opportunities to participate, it is a source of occupational injustice<sup>7</sup>. Occupational therapists working in schools have a crucial role to play in addressing this injustice, which extends beyond their traditional role of working individually with children with specific learning needs. This opinion piece is a call to action for school-based occupational therapists, and offers potential actions based on existing frameworks as a starting point while developing the collaborative networks needed to eradicate this scourge from the lives of South African children.

### Author Contributions

Sylnita Swartz-Filies conceptualised and designed the piece. Literature was collected by Sylnita Swartz-Filies, and Nicola Plastow, and the manuscript was drafted by all listed authors, who also approved the final version thereof.

### Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

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