


# Masculinities and femininities through teachers' voices: Implications on gender-equitable schooling for vulnerable children from three primary schools in Swaziland



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Informed by social constructionism and the intersectionality framework, this article focuses on the fight for sustainable gender-equitable and inclusive school environments for vulnerable children. It foregrounds the centrality of teachers' constructions of gender within prevailing dominant gender discourses and the implications these constructions have on gender equality, the vulnerable children's welfare and experiences of gender in three rural primary schools in Swaziland. The article draws on a qualitative narrative study and utilises semi-structured individual interviews and open-ended questionnaires with nine randomly selected teachers (three teachers from each of the targeted schools). The findings revealed that the absence of gender in the school curriculum left teachers with no option but to resort to dominant constructions of gender in their pedagogical practices. These gender constructions were inundated in paradoxes of equality of opportunities for all children, in ways that held different expectations for boys as compared to girls. The teachers' constructions of masculinities and femininities as two diverse homogeneous groups made the gendered experiences of vulnerable boys and girls invisible, hence perpetuating the social injustices against them. Generally, the teachers were found not to concede the social inequalities and hierarchies within each social group of boys or girls. The study recommends the need to make teachers aware about the limiting and adverse effects of constructing gender and socialising vulnerable children in ways that affirm unequal gendered power relations, as a strategy for promoting gender-inclusive and gender-equitable school environments.

## Introduction

With an HIV and AIDS prevalence of 27% among the adult population between ages 15 and 19 years in 2016, the issue of vulnerable children in Swaziland (The Kingdom of eSwatini) continues to be a challenge (Ministry of Health 2017). The country's education system defines vulnerable children as children who are orphaned, living in child-headed households, and children from poor social and economic backgrounds, locally referred to as *bantfwana bendlunkhulu* (those cared for by the whole community) and whose educational fees are catered for by the government (Mkhathshwa 2017). In 2014, vulnerable children made up 71% of the overall number of children in the country as compared to 45% in 2010 (CSO & UNICEF 2016), and in 2016, about 150 000 of these children were within the primary school system (Simelane 2016). Although the reasons that render children vulnerable may differ, for instance orphaned children, those experiencing childhood poverty, and children living in child-headed households in Swaziland, these children share one thing – that is, vulnerability and poverty (Mkhathshwa 2017).

Guided by the country's constitution of 2005, the Ministry of Education and Training through the Swaziland Educational Sector Policy of 2011 committed the education system into providing both vulnerable boys and girls equal opportunities to education (The Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training 2011). However, Mkhathshwa (2017) found that gender inequalities and discrimination still permeate school contexts, with devastating effects on the vulnerable children – a group already suppressed by their socio-economic status. Raza (2017) found that when gendered experiences are intersected with poverty and vulnerability, the vulnerable boys' and girls' lived and schooling experiences are aggravated. Crenshaw (1989:140) says vulnerable boys and girls in the school contexts are 'multiply-burdened'. This is because their experiences of gender are not only gendered but also classed (Luft 2016). In essence, the vulnerable boys' and girls' social status is not their only site for oppression (Raza 2017), but also the inequalities and hierarchies within each social group masculinities and femininities.

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The complexities of the young vulnerable children's everyday school experiences therefore call for gender issues to be considered, with a view to promote equitable schooling experiences. Luft (2016) points out that to create gender-equitable school environments and positive schooling experiences for the vulnerable children, it is imperative to be both gender- and class-sensitive. The importance of teachers' role in the creation of inclusive and gender-equitable school spaces cannot therefore be overemphasised (Bhana, Nzimakwe & Nzimakwe 2011), hence the focus of this article. The first call would be to understand the teachers' own constructions of gender and their individual perceptions of vulnerability and vulnerable children as a social group. This would help in devising intervention strategies that could help teachers devise pedagogic practices that would not only assist the vulnerable children to produce, resist and confront social relationships of gender domination, but also to teach other learners within the school contexts about the importance of a socially just world. By bringing the voice of teachers to the fore, as the primary socialising agents of vulnerable children, the article therefore adds a critical component in the equation, which education policymakers should take into account in their efforts and strategies for enhancing inclusive education- and gender-equitable schooling experiences for the vulnerable boys and girls.

Hence, the article aimed to understand the teachers' constructions of gender in the context of three primary schools in the rural areas of Swaziland and the local factors that inform such constructions. Furthermore, the article aimed to comprehend the implication of the teachers' constructions on the vulnerable children's gender socialisation and, most importantly, the effect of all these on gender equality and equitable schooling for the vulnerable children in these contexts.

## Teachers' constructions of gender: A review of literature

According to Mollel and Chong (2017), education inculcates self-efficacy. Akpede et al. (2018:1) argue that it is 'the light that shines the way'. Education is also important for the socio-economic development of individuals, families and communities (Katz 2016). Hence, the importance of education for the vulnerable boys and girls of Swaziland cannot be overemphasised. Bowe, Desjardins and Clarkson (2015) highlight that learners' attitude towards education and individual beliefs about their educational capabilities is affected and influenced by the teachers' confidence and expectations on the individual learners' performance. For example, viewing boys and expecting them to be more studious and brilliant than girls would indeed yield positive results for the boys whilst relegating the girls to poor performances. Bowe et al. further argue that boys perform better than girls because they receive more attention from teachers, and their performance and behaviour are more controlled in most instances. Yet, studies by Mollel and Chong (2017) and Vidya and Kadam (2017) have accentuated the importance of girls education for the socio-economic

development of families, communities and nations. This therefore highlights the need for teachers to treat all learners equally in the school contexts. It is a sad reality to see teachers on whose responsibility the education of vulnerable boys and girls is entrusted supporting gender stereotypes that uphold inequalities. Understanding the teachers' overall pedagogic approaches and content is therefore important not only in creating inclusive and equitable school spaces for the vulnerable children but also in improving their socio-economic life situations.

Whilst Bowe et al. (2015) in a study involving African-American students found that teachers worked hard to deconstruct stereotypes of gender in the school. Gansen (2017) revealed that teachers in school contexts reinforced and normalised gender stereotypes, often to the detriment of the learners they teach. The same way, Bhana et al. (2011) in South Africa highlighted how teachers draw from the society's dominant discourses to actively and stereotypically construct gender in the school contexts, thus socialising their learners to approach and making meaning of their masculinities and femininities along the same lines. In Swaziland, the curriculum in teacher training colleges was found not only to be silent on issues of gender but also 'reproducing the dominant patriarchal culture' (Lumadi & Shongwe 2010:47). Social stereotypical perceptions about children and gender therefore guide most schools' and teachers' pedagogic practices in the country. For example, children are perceived to be too young to listen to or understand issues of gender (Nxumalo, Okeke & Mammen 2014). Through their overt and inherent gender norms though, teachers regulate gendered behaviour that reinforces unequal gender relations (Vidya & Kadam 2017), hence creating gender inequitable school spaces. Through the school processes, teachers also uphold the most violent domination of girls in line with what they already experience in the society and home (Bhana et al. 2011). For the vulnerable boys and girls whose experiences of gender intersect with poverty and vulnerability, their experiences of gendered social injustices are aggravated (Raza 2017). For instance, Mkhathswa (2017) found that an orphaned boy was deprived of privileges afforded to other children in the school only because he was a male, and hence perceived to be independent and self-reliant. What needs to be considered therefore is the ways in which the boys' masculine identity intersects with their vulnerable social positions, highlighting the intersectionality of their vulnerability, in a sense of emasculation tied in with gendered stereotypes of men being independent and self-reliant. However, these gender norms aggravate the vulnerability that afflicts this learner. Indeed, this illustrates one of the troubling, but real-world and highly esteemed constructions of gender in the schools.

## Social constructionism and intersectionality

The study was guided by social constructionism and intersectionality. Social constructionism states that gender 'is created and re-created out of human interactions, out of social life, and it is the texture and order of that social life' (Lorber 1994:54). Gender identities are not mere products of

natural creation (Berger & Luckmann 1991) but culminate in cultural and social processes that are customarily rooted in traditions, values and social relations within diverse societies (Gergen 2009). Social constructionists such as Berger & Luckmann (1991), Gergen (2009) and Lorber (1994) conclude that it is on these individual society's discourses of gender that the teachers' constructions of gender are founded (Gergen 2009). Norton (2006) describes discourse as societies' individual culture and tradition, their way of talking, thinking and doing things, which sets them apart from other communities. In essence, the teachers' constructions of gender are not only closely entwined with the social structures and processes of gender in their contexts (Gergen 2009), but are also governed and predicated by the social discourses of gender, traditional norms and gender ideologies in their given contexts (Ratele 2013). This means that boys tend to be exalted in assumptions of power at the expense of downgrading girls to subservience, which is the founding logic of the gender inequality scheme, thus socialising learners in the school contexts into unequal gender positions and performances.

Intersectionality, on the other hand, states that vulnerability amplifies gender disparities (Raza 2017). Davis (2008) defines intersectionality as:

the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. (p. 68)

That is to say, the vulnerable boys' and girls' experiences of gender are compounded by and intersect with other variables such as poverty and vulnerability (Banerjee 2016). The teachers' stereotypical constructions of gender, compounded with the vulnerable boys' and girls' social positioning, are therefore likely to affect the vulnerable boys and girls not only in different but also in more devastating ways than other children not affected by vulnerability (Raza 2017). To understand how vulnerable children are affected by the scheme of gender inequality in the school contexts, one has to look at their intersecting social identities within the system of gender inequality. This study therefore focused on how the teachers' subjective constructions of gender intersected with the vulnerable boys' and girls' vulnerability and experiences of gender.

## Research design

### Geographical and socio-economic context of the study

Swaziland is an ethnically homogeneous country in Southern Africa ruled by an absolute monarch. It covers a region of 17 364 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of approximately 1.1 million (Braithwaite, Djima & Pickmans 2013), 76% of which live in the rural areas of the country (UNICEF 2009). The people of Swaziland share a common language and preserve their conventional and static traditional way of life, founded on Christianity and patriarchy (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). The country is divided into four geographically diverse regions: Manzini, Hhohho, Shiselweni and Lubombo.

Muntu\* primary school is located in the Lubombo region, about 42 km from the nearest town of Siteki. Lubombo is largely rural and is the poorest region in the country and severely hit by the effects of HIV and AIDS (UNICEF 2009). Hence, it has the highest number of vulnerable children in the country (Braithwaite et al. 2013). Mjikaphansi\* primary school is located in the rural areas of the Hhohho region, about 25 km from the capital city of Mbabane. The young children (both boys and girls) are usually found roaming the dirty roads, imbibing alcohol with no prospects of completing school. They end up working in the pine tree plantations nearby. Mazingela\* primary school is located in the rural areas of the Manzini region, about 18 km from Manzini city and 11 km from Matsapha, which is known as the industrial town of the country. This area is densely populated and it is where most of the country's illiterate population is found, working in the firms as cheap labour. The children stay either on their own or with parents, usually women who are single parents working in the textile industry.

### Study methodology and data collection methods

The study used a qualitative narrative approach as its methodological design. The participants, who were randomly sampled, consisted of nine teachers: three teachers from each of the three targeted schools. The teachers' were aged between 24 and 60 years. Open-ended questionnaires and individual semi-structured interviews were used as a platform to solicit the teachers' own constructions of gender and their individual perceptions of vulnerability and vulnerable children as a social group, and how this affects or intersects with the vulnerable children's own experience and constructions of gender. The questionnaires, which each respondent was to fill out individually, were intended to allow the respondents to express their meaning making of and experiences of gender without restraints, at the same time giving them enough time to respond to the questions in their spare time and space without having to worry about learners and school timetables. The researcher addressed all issues of clarity to ensure that the respondents were clear about what they were required to do. The questionnaires were written in English, as this is the second language in Swaziland and a medium of communication in most schools. However, teachers were free to answer either in Siswati or English. Individual interviews were then conducted after all the questionnaires had been filled in to complement the questionnaires and provide more in-depth data. The individual interviews too were conducted in both languages – Siswati and English. Therefore, teachers had the liberty to express themselves in any language they felt comfortable (Mcmillan & Schumacher 2010). With permission from the respondents, the use of a tape recorder helped in the accurate capturing of what each respondent said and to make up for data not recorded in notes.

### Data analysis procedures

All data were transcribed and then translated into English. An inductive process of analysis was followed to derive



patterns and themes in the data (Creswell 2014). This necessitated listening and re-listening to the recorded data whilst reading the transcriptions for accuracy in interpretation (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). Data were then organised, linking pseudonyms with informants. This was followed by reading line by line and listening to the recordings again for familiarity with the data and to identify emerging themes related to the teachers' constructions of gender and their individual perceptions of vulnerability and vulnerable children in their schools. This was guided by the research questions of the study. The tone and voice of the participants were also noted, especially in comprehending their emotions. The emergent themes were then coded, analysed and discussed in view of the theoretical framework of the study.

## Ethical considerations

As a way of respecting the rights of the participants, ethical issues were observed (Creswell 2014). Consent was sought from the Ministry of Education and Training in Swaziland through the director's office. A written permission was also obtained from the school principals through a written letter stating the purpose of the study. Ethical clearance was then obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Office. Letters of consent were thereafter written to the teachers elucidating the issues of confidentiality, privacy and voluntary participation. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this article to depict both the schools and participants. Protocol reference number is HSS/1914/016D.

## Findings and discussions

### Construction of gender in ambivalent ways – Boys and girls as similar but different

The findings revealed that teachers in these schools constructed boys and girls as similar and in need of same and equal educational opportunities. Their constructions however were in ambivalent ways. Their understanding of boys and girls seems to be in ways that were contradictory and also re-inscribed notions of inequity between the boys and girls in the schools. The teacher's narratives illustrate the following:

This year I teach English Language in Grade 7. Even though the boys here do not like reading novels but I try to motivate them, by giving them sports magazines instead, because I know they like sports. Come exam time, then I do not expect the girls to perform better than my boys. I know they are equally capable of doing me proud. (Miss Gama, individual interview, 38 years old, Mazingela Primary School)

It is important that as teachers we give all children equal learning opportunities and resources for their overall development without discrimination. In fact, teachers who treat girls differently from boys are not doing justice to the education system. The right and correct thing is to treat them equally. I personally feel girls especially need education more than the boys do. Especially because most of the vulnerable girls and women here are head of households and without education, life could be very difficult for them. (Mrs Mvulane, questionnaires, 45 years old, Muntu Primary School)

The above narratives highlight that both teachers (Miss Gama and Mrs Mvulane) believe in the importance of giving both boys and girls equal educational opportunities. For example, the boys in Miss Gama's class 'do not like reading' as much as the girls did. Buying reading material that they liked was therefore her way of motivating them to read so that they could do well in her subject, the same way the girls did. By so doing, she recognises the boys' agency to pass 'English Language', provided that she gives them the right support (Ungar, Russell & Connelly 2014), probably because Miss Gama is aware of how important passing English is for these boys. It is also commendable that Miss Gama understood her 'boys' capabilities, and thus motivated rather than castigated them for not getting into the culture of reading which she was trying to inculcate in her English Language class. What Miss Gama did was to tap into the boys' needs, providing them a springboard to use their agency in doing well in English as a strategy in her pedagogic approach (Juan & Visser 2017).

However, even though Miss Gama's actions could appear to be responsive to the boys' educational needs, it appears to be in the ways that polarised the boys and girls. Whilst her use of the words 'the girls ... my boys' could highlight the good relationship she probably had with the boys in her class, which Katz (2016) believes could motivate the boys to try harder. Her nurturing tendencies however were in ways that made her look more concerned with the boys' education than that of the girls (Mollet & Chong 2017). It appears that she made no serious investment towards the girls' educational achievement (Olasunkanni 2009). This differentiated approach was not only inclined to compromise her efforts towards the creation of equitable educational opportunities, but also to exclude and demotivate the girls towards educational attainment. The different ways in which Miss Gama treated the boys and girls in her class in ways also re-inscribed and reproduced the long-standing patriarchal notions that perceived boys as future heads of families, hence making their education more important than that of the girls (Vidya & Kadam 2017). Yet, with the prevailing scourge of poverty, HIV and AIDS in the country, causing mainly girls to become head of households, educating the girl child is equally imperative. Miss Gama's perception therefore compromises efforts towards the education of girls and creation of gender-equitable education. Yet, Vidya and Kadam (2017) argue that educating a girl child could bring drastic changes for individual communities, countries and the African continent as a whole.

Mrs Mvulane, on the other hand, put more emphasis on the vulnerable girls' education in ways that were gender stereotypical because by putting emphasis on the girls' education, Mrs Mvulane seems also to trivialise the boys' education, the same way Miss Gama prioritised the education of boys. This differentiated approach could imply that Mrs Mvulane has recognised the changing nature of family setup in Africa, and especially the rural and destitute contexts in which the vulnerable children lived (Akpede et al. 2018). That is to say, being a teacher in the school for 9 years meant

she was well informed about the diverse gendered challenges faced by vulnerable girls as compared to boys in this context. Mrs Mvulane could also be aware of the responsibilities the vulnerable girls had or that awaited them in adulthood, that is, 'being heads of households', requiring them to be educated (Mkhatshwa 2017). According to Mrs Mvulane, the most feasible practicality for the vulnerable girls for acquiring these responsibilities and indeed transcending their poverty and vulnerability and that of their families therefore meant they had to work twice as hard and indeed receive more help than the other learners (Mollet & Chong 2017).

Her logic could also have been that, even though boys and girls have to be treated equally, there are certain situations where differentiation is necessary in order to be truly responsive to the specific needs and dynamics of vulnerable boys and girls in a given context. The differentiated perception she had of the vulnerable girls and boys could be a way of appreciating the complexities of gender, which transcend notions of gender equality as sameness to a notion that construes gender equality as equitable treatment for girls and boys. From this, we learn that gender equality and equitable treatment should be perceived as an idealised reality for both the vulnerable boys and girls in these contexts, which makes it imperative for teachers to employ individual strategies in their pedagogic approaches, tapping into individual needs and capabilities (Juan & Visser 2017).

## Boys and girls as different social groups

### Masculinities as strong and ferocious

The Ministry of Education and Training's initiative to introduce the school feeding programme, where learners in all public schools are assured of a meal, is a commendable initiative, especially in enhancing inclusive school spaces for the vulnerable boys and girls in these rural and poverty-stricken contexts. The findings however reveal that the school feeding was a source of gender contestations in the schools and had the propensity to create gender inequitable spaces for the vulnerable boys and girls. The interview with Mr Hlata, from Mazingela primary school, below illustrates this:

Mr Hlata: Biologically, boys are stronger than girls. I am not sure then how they can be equal. For example, during the lunch hour, our learners eat rice and beans. What happens is these 'children' literally fight for the food. Hence, we tasked the grade 7 boys and not the girls to control the situation and ensure that the learners make straight lines than pushing each other over the food. Someone would then say, maybe that is not gender equality... like why do we prefer boys over girls... but seriously girls cannot do that job effectively, these children fight...and they fight violently!

Researcher: Ohh that's bad! I would like to know what criteria you use as teachers in choosing the boys who control the lines.

Mr Hlata: For now there is no specific criterion, but mostly it is the 'big' boys in the class. We do not choose those who come from poor family backgrounds... the vulnerable too. The problem is – those boys are either timid or, at most instances, unruly. So we cannot expect them to control the other learners, when they also need to be controlled.

Researcher: Ok I understand sir... you said they fight ... and are the grade 7 boys able to calm the situation?

Mr Hlata: ... (silence) Not really (silence again) ... because, not all learners get the food. Some cannot stand the chaos but I've seen those who really want to eat patiently waiting in the queues. The vulnerable children especially, because they usually do not have anything to eat at home so they have no alternative but to do as told. The [vulnerable] boys just do not listen.... they push and you can see that they are desperate for the food. We've had complaints that the responsible boys use violence to control them but there are also cases where the [desperate] boys fight them [the grade 7 boys responsible] but we haven't yet found a solution to that. (Mr Hlata, 31 years old, Mazingela Primary School)

The above interview highlights the vulnerable boys' and girls' desperation for food, which unfortunately becomes sites of their subordination and suppression in the school (Chowdhury 2017). Because of their indigent situations, the vulnerable children are heavily reliant on the meals provided by the school. The teachers' act of tasking the grade 7 'big and strong boys' therefore did not only dominate and suppress the vulnerable girls who were forced to submit in order to get a meal but also the vulnerable boys who because of their socio-economic status, which rendered them 'timid', powerless and subordinates, as they did not belong to the perceived hyper-masculine powerful group in the school (Connell 1995). In so doing, the teachers upheld the domination of hegemonic masculinities at the same time positioning both 'the weak' girls and the vulnerable boys in a lower stratum with respect to their social positioning and power relationships with hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Endorsing the grade 7 boys to positions of power could also highlight the ways in which teachers in the school treated the vulnerable learners differently from other learners. For instance, whilst the grade 7 boys were perceived to be capable of bringing order, the vulnerable boys were perceived to be 'timid and unruly', hence not only controlled but also excluded from positions of power, in ways that exacerbated stereotypes associated with vulnerability in this contest.

Mr. Hlata's response further highlights some contradictions. At one point, the vulnerable boys are different because of being vulnerable; at another, they are still classical boys who are strong and ferocious, and hence they 'do not listen'. Such contradictions denote inconsistencies in teachers' constructions, which denote that teachers' constructions were mere social constructions meant to feed into general societal expectations of these boys, but with little relevance to the lived experiences of these boys, and their genuine potential as humans. Again, as much as he says, the vulnerable boys and girls 'have no alternative but to do as told', he also acknowledges that the very same boys 'do not listen'. Here, Mr Hlata seems to ignore the vulnerable boys' agency in getting what they want. Yet, the vulnerable boys' defiant behaviour could have been their way to get what they desperately needed – food. The findings point to important intersections of poverty and masculinity in the vulnerable boys' gender performances (Crenshaw 1989) and indeed the transactional nature of gender performances. Hence, it was not enough for Mr Hlata to view these boys'

capabilities to simply denote boys' 'timid and unruly' behaviour. There seems to be some form of material gains associated with the choice and timing of boys' unruly masculine behaviours. It appears therefore that the more inclusive and responsive to the learners' needs schooling is, the less likely boys would feel compelled to engage in transactional masculine performances that could be regarded as unruly or unbecoming.

Mr Hlata's stereotypical belief that construes girls as being 'weak', hence 'cannot [manage the lines] do that job effectively', could also be viewed as strengthening particular gender stereotypes, associating management and power with men and boys (Moosa & Bhana 2017:377). In complete disregard of the vulnerable girls' propensity to be violent and strong as observed by Morris and Perry (2017). Morris and Perry (2017) found out that girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds became violent as a means to navigate and negotiate challenges brought by their destitute situations. Mr Hlata's stereotypical perceptions of vulnerability and gender therefore had the propensity to nurture and encourage defiant and violent behaviour in the school (Ungar et al. 2014). Rather, treating all learners in the school equally could encourage a mutual relationship among all the learners where the vulnerable boys and girls would be encouraged to express their desperation through words than through 'uncontrollable or unbecoming' actions.

The same violence was noted at Muntu primary school, where during one of the interviews a teacher came running, and immediately the two teachers (including the participant) left in haste. On his return, he narrated how a group of boys in the school were becoming uncontrollable:

Mr William: I am sorry for the disturbance. We are having a big problem here ... there is a group of boys that is becoming a nuisance. Just now they came with a 5 litre Oros bottle, filled it with rice and beans then ran away. The other learners caught them just before they could cross the road, and there was a fight that nearly turned nasty. So Miss Zitha\* wanted my help in calming the situation. This is stressful, because tomorrow it will be the same issue ... boys running away with food. We are tired!

Researcher: That is bad. But who really is responsible for seeing to it that all the learners get the food and there is no chaos in the queues?

Mr William: When I came to the school 3 years back, we had prefects, both boys and girls doing that job. With time the girls could not take it, as the learners always fight for the food. We then decided that the boys should do it, especially the older boys from each class. But what has just happened is a clear indication that these children are becoming uncontrollable by the day. (Mr William, 52 years old, Muntu Primary School)

The irony is that, according to Swazi culture, preparing food and cooking is not only boys' responsibility but also that of women and girls (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). Ndlangamandla (2010) says the kitchen is not only perceived as a space inhibited by girls and women but also it symbolises their subjugation and taming within a patriarchal society. These findings denote a deviation from this cultural norm

and dominant discourse in these schools, particularly because it bestowed the boys a position of power, control and responsibility (Connell 1995). The violent reactions by some vulnerable boys to this school practice denoted the multiplicity of forms of masculinities (Connell 2005). Also the likely contestations over power and control among the boys all point to a deep flaw in the scheme of using the 'older' boys to signify particular dominant forms of masculinities for power and control within these schools. Indeed, the teachers' constructions of hegemonic masculinities as strong and good managers did not only re-inscribe the disgraceful notions that bequeath hegemonic masculinities with absolute power (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), but was also the functional source of violence, contestations and unpleasant gender relationships. With vulnerable girls and boys bearing the minority social status in these contexts, they are likely to withstand the worst of the situation (Crenshaw 1989). Investing in constructions of gender as multiple, fluid and acquired girls' and boys' human abilities would go a long way in the creation of gender-friendly, equitable and peaceful schooling environments (Morojele 2011).

### Girls as beautiful and fragile

The findings of the study revealed that some teachers constructed the difference between boys and girls through the girls' sexuality. For example, a teacher from Mjikaphansi\* primary school felt expecting the same things from boys and girls would be detrimental to the girls' future prospects for marriage. This emanated from the wider society's discourse where girls are socialised to live their lives for the approval of men – as good wives and good wife material (Akpede et al. 2018). The following narrative illustrates this:

The learners here take turns collecting firewood from the mountains [to cook their meals]. Even though, both boys and girls are expected to go there ... but sisi Ncami, I do not like that. Manual work is for boys...how then do we teach our girls to always be neat and beautiful when we expect them to work in the scorching sun. Personally I do not send the girls to the mountain. Even though the principal once complained, but then that is what I believe in. Besides, the boys in my class too... they do not mind doing all the work because they are aware that...it is the kind of work only men are expected to do. Honestly speaking, besides girls being fragile, no one wants to come next to a girl who smells of sweat [rolling her eyes and smile] [then a loud laugh] do you think sis Ncamsile ... any man would ever want to come next to you, if you smelled of sweat??? So let us not be unfair on our girls! (Miss Lukhele, individual interview, 24 years old, Mjikaphansi Primary School)

The learners in this school were expected to collect firewood from the mountain as a school routine. But just because Miss Lukhele believed that the girls were 'fragile and had to stay neat and beautiful', the girls in her class did not go to the mountains, lest the 'scorching sun' spoils their beauty. Gender stereotypes are again reinforced with girls being expected to be neat and beautiful. This is problematic. Earlier responses from teachers referred to girls as frequently having to head households. This would suggest that they too would need to do labour or work that has been previously defined as



a 'man's job'. Yet, whilst Miss Lukhele says that it was tolerable for boys to smell of sweat, it was completely obnoxious for the girls. Miss Lukhele's view seems to reinforce division of labour in gender stereotypical ways (Moosa & Bhana 2017) because there were jobs that she felt were meant only for men or boys and not for women or girls. This therefore raises the question on how the vulnerable girls could head households (as mentioned earlier) if they are socialised in ways that restricted them from doing manual work, because 'it is the kind of work only men are expected to do'.

Although Miss Lukhele seems to be showing love and affection for the girls, this is in ways that re-inscribe patriarchal notions of gender that have always relegated women to poverty (Watkins 2000). In essence, Miss Lukhele was socialising the girls in her class that their mere existence was for men, 'so they should not smell of sweat because men would not come closer to them'. This logic draws from the wider Swazi normative discourse that women live their lives as subordinates, owned and provided for by men (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016), and hence had to stay beautiful for the same men. Miss Lukhele was therefore 'teaching' the girls that physical appearance and beauty but not education was their ticket to a better livelihood. This dependent feminine mindset and chauvinistic way of thinking had the disadvantage of making the vulnerable girls – a group whose gender identity intersects with poverty – to think that their value and contribution to the society lies in only being beautiful (Watkins 2000). Hence, this not only encourages male dominance but also traps the vulnerable girls in destitution for years and, indeed, makes gender equality a far-fetched dream for them. Yet, affirming the vulnerable girls through their capabilities and not their attractiveness would go a long way in helping them thrive to come out of their poverty and be inspired to aim higher and not be restricted by their femininity and sexuality (Ungar et al. 2014).

Again, socialising the vulnerable girls within the feminine beauty discourse predisposed them to being sexually abused by rich men who embodied conformist masculinities. This is because the vulnerable girls are being 'taught' that their mere existence and livelihood depend on masculinities that would normatively provide for them (Mollet & Chong 2017). The below narratives illustrate this:

One of my best students has just dropped out of school because of pregnancy. It is so sad that the person responsible is married. Such sad stories are prevalent here and as a teacher it is very sad to see these children being taken advantage by men only because they are poor and need men who can take care of them. I just wish the government could do something in that regard; otherwise these children will live their lives as sex slaves. (Mr William, questionnaires, 52 years old, Muntu Primary School)

We have a big problem here. The girls, especially who are destitute, usually have sex with the older men who work in the nearby farms in order to buy things for themselves, their siblings or even take care of their families. These men give them something like 50 cents or E10/E20 (equivalent to R10/R20) on better days. It is a very sad situation because as teachers there is very little we can say against that, because these children are

being pushed into this 'prostitution' by their home situations. For example, the other day I talked to a grade 5 learner and she told me that she needed the money in order to buy sanitary towels. Unfortunately some get raped and end up being pregnant. (Mrs Hlatjwayo, individual interview, 60 years old, Mjikaphansi Primary School)

Even though Mrs Hlatjwayo associates the vulnerable girls' act of engaging in transactional relationships with older men to 'prostitution', but by considering its motivating factors, it could be understood as the vulnerable girls' way of navigating their destitute life situations. Selepe et al. (2017:169) argue that in prostitution, the 'payment to a *client* is predetermined'. The fluctuation of the price, from '50 cents... E10 or E20', therefore highlights that the vulnerable girls had no power over what the men gave them in exchange for sex. Jewkes et al. (2012) call this kind of sex 'sex for survival' and not prostitution. Again, whilst the 'blessor' discourse in South Africa implies that girls find rich men to fund their lavish lifestyle (Selepe et al. 2017), but for these vulnerable girls, engaging in sex for money was for their minimal survival. From a young age, Swazi girls are socialised to be submissive and respect male adults (Jones 2006) and for the marriage system where they would become men's properties. After the payment of lobola (dowry), of course, the husband is often considered as a guardian, a provider and a father to his wife, thus privileged to have the same (if not more) power, control and authority over the wife, as the wife's father (Kanduza 1996). Therefore, the logic of vulnerable girls receiving money from elder men is normalised as part of a bigger scheme of gendered heterosexual ritual, where marriage serves merely to formalise this exploitative gender regime. Such stereotypes get reinforced by the knowledge and/or lack of alternative information on gender provided in the school, and broader societal discourse. The following narrative further illustrates this:

Gender is not part of our curriculum and I do not have the opportunity to talk to my learners about issues of gender. Even though I'm well aware that most of the children here no longer have parents to talk to them, but I just do not do it. (Miss Juana, questionnaires, 43 years old, Muntu Primary School)

Clearly, gender was not regarded as a primary subject of discussion and curriculum in these contexts. Morojele (2011) has found how indeed gender was regarded as not a subject of discussion in South African and Lesotho primary schools, respectively. This notion is mostly premised on notions of primary school children's innocence and immaturity, which are thought to render gender education inappropriate for them – as if 'gender does not matter'. However, the findings indicate that, in these contexts, gender matters, especially for the vulnerable girls. The gender stereotypes gave exaltation to gender performances that signified hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and generally made vulnerable girls to internalise as the norm (Morojele 2014) subordination based on their sexual identity, hence making them easy targets for sexual abuse and exploitation, where information on how to confront and navigate gendered spaces would have come handy. This therefore evokes the concern over the logic of not mainstreaming gender in the

Swazi primary school curriculum, where there is a population of more than 150 000 vulnerable children (Simelane 2016).

Therefore, having a formal curriculum on gender would allow teachers a targeted opportunity to educate vulnerable children about the social processes of gender socialisation and reinforcement that produce unequal gender relations, and what the school, communities and vulnerable girls and boys could do to break this vicious cycle of gender socialisation in order to enhance gender equality. Teachers should expose both vulnerable girls and boys to schooling environments that are not gender-stereotyped to enable their analytical minds to flourish, rather than be suppressed. Only when the schooling environments are underpinned by these values are gender-equitable school spaces for their learners likely to be created, as teachers would work towards the best interests of both vulnerable girls and boys without discrimination and suppression of other group's capabilities. Gender-sensitive and responsive schooling environments also need to play a critical role in nurturing the resilience of and alleviating the plight of vulnerable girls especially (Ungar et al. 2014), who bear a double burden of being positioned in menial works based on both their gender and status of vulnerability (Crenshaw 1989). This would also go a long way to help mitigate the vulnerable girls' and boys' plight as a group already suppressed by their socio-economic status (Raza 2017) by ensuring that they do not get exposed to further suppression because of a school regime which socialises acceptance rather than confrontation of gender spaces of constraints, dominance and exploitation.

## Conclusion

The teachers in the study drew heavily on the dominant discourses of gender in their wider societies. The findings highlighted the various sociocultural dynamics that informed the teachers' constructions of gender in ways that were inequitably and variably skewed against the vulnerable boys and girls. Whilst generally constructing femininities in somewhat menial terms, they exalted hegemonic masculinities above other ways of being and performances of gender. Such constructions drew their logic from the biological differences of girls and boys as a predetermining factor for children's abilities, gender performances and sexual preferences. Using the intersectionality lens, this study has illustrated how teachers' stereotypical constructions of gender compounded with the vulnerable boys' and girls' social identities, and hence worsened the social injustices against them. This therefore made gender equality an idealised reality for both vulnerable boys and girls in these contexts. For example, it was found that masculine strength as ascribed to masculinities did not define the vulnerable boys, yet the teachers affirmed or discriminated the boys based on these. The vulnerable boys were victims of such discrimination if they did not conform to the normative masculine performances as expected by the teachers. This was because their poverty and vulnerability intersected with their masculine performances and subserviently positioned them as compared to hegemonic masculinities. Again, socialising the

vulnerable girls along the normative dependant discourse did not only constrain their human abilities but also made them easy targets for sexual abuse and exploitation. 'Rich' men as embodying conformist masculinities were found to be taking advantage of the vulnerable girls' indigent situations, and hence sexually exploited them. The absence of any school policy that obligated the teachers to educate vulnerable children about gender issues was found to play a role in rendering the current scheme of gender inequalities invisible. As such, teachers found themselves either actively reinforcing inequitable gender relations among the children or being complacent in this social order by not challenging it (Morojele 2014). The findings indicate the urgent need to change the manner in which gender relations are construed in the wider society, how vulnerable children are socialised into unequal gender relationships and enhancement of vulnerable children's agencies to transcend constraining gender polarisations.

## Recommendations

The teachers' stereotypical perceptions of gender were found to be re-inscribing particular gendered notions that serve to differentiate the vulnerable boys and girls in these contexts, hence compromising efforts towards the creation of gender-equitable school spaces. It is the government's obligation therefore to help teachers deconstruct these perceptions if indeed the education of both vulnerable boys and girls is equally prioritised in the country, as enshrined by the 2011 Education Sector Policy. The following recommendations are meant to support initiatives aimed at addressing gender inequities and improving the quality of the vulnerable boys' and girls' welfare and lived gender experiences in these school contexts:

- Pre-service training and in-service workshops should be held where teachers would be skilled on how to deconstruct dominant constructions of gender because of the implications it has on the vulnerable children's own constructions of gender and general well-being at the schools.
- In these workshops, teachers should be informed on the intersectionality of gender and the adverse effects their stereotypical constructions have on the vulnerable boys and girls – a group already suppressed by its socio-economic status.
- Introduction of gender issues in teacher training colleges where patriarchal notions of teachers' perceptions of gender could be both deconstructed and transformed.

However, the suggested strategies would be futile without foregrounding teachers' views and experiences, as key role players in caring and supporting vulnerable children, and those of the vulnerable girls and boys as the brand bearers of the scheme of gender inequalities within the schools.

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