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Vulnerable femininities: Implications for rural girls' schooling experiences in Swaziland¹

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Abstract

This paper draws on social constructionism to explore girls' constructions of gender within three rural primary schools in Swaziland. HIV and AIDS in Swaziland have resulted in an unprecedented number of parental deaths, rendering young children, especially girls, susceptible to poverty, various forms of gender-based violence, and unwanted pregnancies. The paper sought to understand the ways in which these girls actively perform gender to navigate challenges associated with schooling within highly patriarchal contexts, and the implications of these on gender equality and the girls' social and academic wellbeing. A qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was adopted, utilising individual and focus group interviews and participatory photovoice for data generation. The participants comprised of 15 purposively selected girls, aged between 12 and 16 years. The paper contributes to the ongoing debates on gender by raising consciousness of how understanding and addressing the schooling plight of girls (as a diverse social group) could be a useful strategy for social change and improved gender equitable relationships in schools.

Keywords: gender equality, femininity, poverty, girls, schools, Swaziland

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Introduction

According to Mollel and Chong (2017), education inculcates self-efficacy. Indeed, education can be seen as "the light that shines the way" (Akpede et al., 2018, p. 1). Vidya and Kadam (2017) argued that investment in the education of girls, in particular, increases the productivity of families and nations. Hence, the importance of high quality and equitable education for girls in Swaziland, a group already affected by the indigent socioeconomic status of the country, cannot be overemphasised. Swaziland

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has a population of around 1.1 million, 63 per cent of whom live below the poverty line (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2017). Swaziland has also been greatly affected by HIV and AIDS, hence, the escalating number of vulnerable children in the country—150 000 in 2016, according to Simelane (2016).

Swaziland's education policy defines vulnerable children as children who are orphaned, living in child-headed households, and children from resource-poor social and economic backgrounds (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2011). These children are locally referred to as *bantfwana bendlunkhulu* [those cared for by the whole community]; their educational fees are catered for by the government (Motsa & Morojele, 2016). HIV and AIDS, the main precipitators of parental deaths in Swaziland, expose many schoolgirls to the above-stated vulnerabilities. In their endeavour to determine their lives and transcend their plight, these girls are often exposed to further social ills, such as gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancies, which increase their likelihood to remain trapped for the rest of their lives in the vicious cycle of poverty and premature death—just like their parents (Mkhatshwa, 2017).

In order to ensure that vulnerable children are not denied access to education, the Swaziland government introduced free primary education in 2010 so they can have “special attention in respect of equity, access, equality and protection—particularly from stigma and discrimination” (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2011, p. x). However, this policy did not provide any practical strategies on how the education system would eradicate gender inequalities skewed against girls in the schools (Khumalo, 2013), or on how teachers should attend to issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and sexual abuse that suffuse the educational system of the country (Mkhatshwa, 2017). The country's constitution does not obligate the state to provide social protection for the poor; rather, Section 27 makes social protection contingent upon the availability of resources (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2005). Hence, many girls in the country face daily struggles to survive within the country's patriarchal ideologies, where domination and exploitation of girls and women is not only prevalent but normalised (Mhlongo, 2017). Studies have highlighted that, despite the inception of free primary education, girls in Swaziland schools still drop out of school in large numbers (Mkhatshwa, 2017).

Crenshaw (1989) has long argued that poverty and vulnerability intersect in complex ways to ensure that the scheme of gender inequalities continue unabated. There is a paucity of research that focuses on girls as a social group that is uniquely affected by poverty and gender inequalities in sub-Saharan countries. Little is known about how vulnerable girls construct femininities, or about the effects of orphanage, child house-heading, and poverty on the social and academic wellbeing of girls. This is despite the body of literature (for instance, Bhana, Nzimakwe, & Nzimakwe, 2011; Maphanga & Morojele, 2016) pointing to these factors as key determinants of children's experiences of schooling—with implications on whether or not children continue to attend school, the quality of education they receive, and their educational success in general.

Against the backdrop of the Swazi peoples' patriarchal society, this article provides a sociological glimpse on what it means to be a girl, looking at three rural primary schools in Swaziland. It seeks to explore ways in which girls affected by vulnerability understand their femininities in these contexts, some of the factors that influence these constructions or understandings of femininities, as well as how these girls' constructions of their femininities impact their lives. The aim is to contribute to ongoing gender debates by foregrounding girls as a social group that is uniquely impacted by the complex and pervasive magnitudes of gender myths and stereotypes inequitably skewed against them—a group already relegated to vulnerability by its socioeconomic status in Swaziland (Mkhatshwa, 2017; Raza, 2017).

The article used the schoolgirls' voices, as the *voice of experience* (Raza, 2017)—a missing, but central, voice necessary in the efforts to understand how to curb the scourge of gender inequalities in Swaziland. Its value lies in how social change agents and gender equality reformists in Swaziland and other similar contexts may use the insights gained from this article in their strategies for enhancing inclusive education and gender equitable schooling experiences for all.

Swazi Femininities

West and Zimmerman (2009) defined femininity as an act of *doing girl*, that is to say, what it means to be a girl in a particular context and time. Individual societies and institutions, through their dominant structures and discourses, govern, construct, and define their subjective feminine gender performances (Gergen, 2009). Rather than being a natural attribute for all girls and women, femininity is a shared gender identity that is both time specific and meaningful within a particular context. Schools, as social contexts, also construct girls' femininities in diverse ways. In South Africa, Bhana et al. (2011) found that school processes give hegemony and control to boys whilst militating against the girls. In Swaziland, Fielding-Miller et al. (2017) reported that schoolgirls are prone to sexual exploitation and abuse by older men and even by teachers who make sexual advances in return for cash—an offer that girls in vulnerable socioeconomic situations cannot decline even though the consequences (like pregnancy and HIV) are dire for them and also often spell an end to their educational aspirations and economic success later in life as adults.

Swaziland is a strongly patriarchal country in which girls and women not only occupy the lower tiers of the hierarchised strata of unequal gendered power relations (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017), but are also considered and treated as second-class citizens (Nxumalo, Okeke, & Mammen, 2014). They are inferior to men in strength and in law (Kuper, 1986; Mabuza, 2017). Respect is therefore imperative for feminine performance, and women and girls are obligated to respect all males who, in essence, command veneration in all avenues of social life (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017). N'guessan (2011) called it, a "mask [they are] compelled to wear and that sticks with [them] like [their] own shadow" (p. 199)—the deep, unchallenged assertion of masculine power and privilege at the expense of femininities, embodied by the country's dominant discourses of respect (Nxumalo et al., 2014). In essence, men and boys and women and girls culturally occupy completely different hierarchical positions, hence, gender equality is ridiculed, viewed as a foreign concept (Nxumalo et al., 2014), and perceived to be against the founding principles of the Swazi nation. It is within these dominant hierarchal ideologies and masculine structures that Swazi women and girls "coexist" with masculinities. Bhana et al. (2011) provided insights into how gender inequities, founded in the wider community and family context, manifest in the schools; in most instances, schools' regimes replicate the hegemonic gender norms and beliefs of the wider society in which they are located. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) found that in school contexts, as in the home, boys tend to be exalted in assumptions of power at the expense of downgrading girls to subservience. Constructions of gender along patriarchal ideologies have been found to be one reason girls in Swaziland drop out of school, further constraining them to persistent poverty and vulnerability (UNICEF, 2009).

Femininity and Vulnerability

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued that feminine constructions are multiple and vary according to cultures and societies. Experiences of gender domination are therefore diverse and in varying degrees; other variables (like race, class, and age) intersect with the existing gendered hierarchy to influence femininities' constructions of gender, which are often supportive of gender inequality and dominance (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Hence, according to Crenshaw (1989), girls, who by virtue of their social status occupy the subordinate position, are "multiply-burdened." (p. 140). This is because their experiences of gender are not only gendered but also classed (Luft, 2016). Consequently, even though

girls in school contexts belong to the broader social category of femininities, their constructions and experiences of gender are both different and aggravated (Raza, 2017). Girls' feminine identity, which is already a socially disadvantaged position, intersects with their vulnerable social positioning to compound their suppression and difference. In essence, the girls' social menial status not only adds an additional layer to the dynamics of gender inequality militating against femininities (Luft, 2016), but also forms structural contexts for their performance of gender (Chowdhury, 2017), thereby exaggerating their subordination and domination (Raza, 2017). Likewise, Banerjee (2016) established that destitution subordinately positions femininities, making their experiences of gender different from other girls not affected by vulnerability. The gendered inequalities prevailing in the schools, as reported by Khumalo (2013), Mkhathshwa (2017), and Nxumalo et al. (2014) are therefore not only an infringement of the basic human rights of girls, but also act as a barrier to their learning and their social and economic development—and that of their vulnerable, destitute families (Vidya & Kadam, 2017).

As Chege and Arnot (2012) said, the relationship between gender, poverty and education is very complex, considering the role poverty and school processes play in perpetuating gender inequalities. Parnarouskis et al. (2017) reported that, in Libya, girls from low socioeconomic backgrounds had sexual relations with their teachers for grades. For these girls it was imperative that they pass, whatever the cost, even though their situations did not allow for effective learning and good educational outcomes. Similarly, Selepe, Ngwenya, Albers, and Janke, (2017) in Botswana found that girls in destitute situations engaged in sexual relations for financial gain. Indeed, in such dire situations chances of educational continuity and success are steeply skewed against the girls. According to Reddy and Dunne (2007), comprehending how girls in indigent situations construct their feminine identities within gender relations is one way towards enhancing gender equitable school spaces, hence, the purpose of the study. The article is premised on the notion that raising consciousness about the plight of girls in vulnerable situations in Swaziland could be a functional basis upon which to initiate reformist efforts to bring about positive social change and address the prevalent inequitable gender relations in the country. A country's initiative to improve the lived experiences of all girls calls for transformation towards inclusive educational policies, amongst which is gender equality. Understanding the constructions of gender of girls in vulnerable situations could be one method educational stakeholders could use to encourage and maximise inclusive and gender equitable school spaces, and school satisfaction for all girls.

Social Constructionism: The Theoretical Framework

According to Lorber (1994), social constructionism is of the view 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” (p. 54). Feminine identities are not mere products of natural creation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) as determined by human genitalia (Lorber, 1994), but are reliant on cultural ideologies and reflect socially constructed notions of what it means to be a girl in a certain culture and context (West & Zimmerman, 2009). Besides social contexts, vulnerability and poverty also provide structural contexts for constructions, performances, and experiences of gender (Chowdhury, 2017). Social constructionism therefore provided analytical insights to understand the complex processes of feminine socialisation that tend to exalt masculinities (Pitikoe & Morojele, 2017), whilst subserviently positioning girls. Hence, factoring in the gender socialisation and cultural influences on the schoolgirls' experiences and constructions of gender was central to this article.

Research Design

Geographical and socioeconomic context of the study

Swaziland is an ethnically homogenous country in southern Africa, ruled by an absolute monarch. Seventy-six per cent of its population lives in the rural areas (UNICEF, 2009). The people of Swaziland share a common language and preserve their conventional way of life, founded on Christianity and patriarchy (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017). The country is made up of four geographically diverse regions: Lubombo, Shiselweni, Hhohho, and Manzini. The study was conducted in three primary schools: Muntu² primary school, located in the deeply rural Lubombo region: the poorest region in the country, hardest hit by the effects of HIV and AIDS (UNICEF, 2009), and with the highest number of orphaned children in the country (Braithwaite, Djima, & Pickmans, 2013). Mjikaphansi primary school is located in the rural areas of the Hhohho region, where young children (both boys and girls) are usually found roaming the dirty roads, imbibing alcohol, and with no prospects of learning beyond Form 5 and getting work in the nearest pine-tree plantation. Mazingela primary school is located in the rural areas of the Manzini region.

Methodology and Data Collection Methods

The data was collected from January 2017 and took a period of six months to complete. A period of two months was allocated to each school at a time. The study used a qualitative narrative approach as methodological design, chosen for its credence to comprehend human phenomena in context (Creswell, 2014). Through this approach, the study was able to examine the girls' individual and societal actions and perceptions towards femininity (Gergen, 2009) in their contexts of vulnerability (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010). Narrative inquiry was chosen based on the perspective that people are storytellers, and lead lives that are full of stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Besides questions and answers in focus groups and individual interviews, the participants were requested to tell stories that would best describe their experiences and meaning making of femininities. Hardy (1968, p. 5) asserted that people "dream in narratives, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative." In the same vein, Gergen (2001) argued that, "language is our means of conveying our mind to others therefore; language is the bearer of truth" (p. 806). Through the girls' stories therefore, the author could comprehend their daily lived experiences and meaning making of femininity; when they narrated their life experiences, therefore, the words they used were a reflection of their minds and their truths in relation to gender as predicated by the context of their vulnerability (Creswell, 2014).

The participants were 15 girls affected by vulnerability, five girls from each of the three schools, and aged from 12 to 16 years. To collect data, the study used individual interviews and focus group interviews in order to place participants in the centre of the study—to make them not only active participants who can contribute to a drive for change but coresearchers who have a credible voice in matters affecting their lives (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). For that reason, a participatory photovoice technique was also utilised (Wang & Burris, 1997). First, the participants were given disposable cameras with 27 frames each, and trained on how to use the cameras. Then, they were urged to capture their chosen salient spaces and places that held meaning for their real-life gendered schooling experiences—either in an affirmative or undesirable way (Joubert, 2012)—for a period of four days. After the four days, the cameras were collected and frames developed. The photo imagery was then used as a basis for both individual and focus group interviews as ingress into the views, perspectives, and lived experiences of the study participants (Harley, 2012).

² All school names are pseudonyms

The researcher is a native Swazi, all interactions and interviews with the girls were therefore conducted in the native language, siSwati, to allow participants to talk and express themselves without any linguistic restrictions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This was also to ensure that what the participants said was not only what they meant but also that the researcher understood well what each participant meant. Each participant had the liberty to choose pictures that she liked to discuss with the researcher, and each picture told a distinct story on the girl's constructions of femininity. Focus group interviews, which involved all five participants in each school, were held to discuss the girls' shared constructions of gender. Individual interviews were then conducted to provide more in-depth data. With permission from the participants, the use of a digital voice recorder assisted in the accurate capturing of what each participant said, and to make up for data not recorded in notes. Field notes were used to record the participants' emotions and body language. The tone and voice of the participants were also closely monitored to comprehend their emotions. Even though there were psychological counsellors on call for each school, none of the participants utilised their services.

Data Analysis Procedures

All data was transcribed then translated into English. An inductive process of analysis was followed to derive patterns and themes in the data (Creswell, 2014). Data was then organised, linking pseudonyms with participants. 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 girls' constructions of femininity. The emergent themes were then analysed and discussed in view of the theoretical framework of the study.

Ethical Considerations

As a way of respecting the rights of the participants, various ethical considerations were observed (Creswell, 2014). Consent was sought from the Ministry of Education and Training in Swaziland through the director's office. Written permissions were obtained from the school principals through a letter stating the purpose and objectives of the study. Ethical clearance was then obtained from the university research office, after which letters of consent were written to the parents or caregivers of the girls in siSwati, elucidating the issues of confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary participation. Considering that some girls had neither parents nor guardians, letters of consent for such participants were written to the *umgcugcuteli* [community caregiver]. Given that the study considered children to be competent human beings who can decide on issues that concern their lives, the girls' assent was also sought. Trust and respect was maintained throughout the research process, with all the research participants. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study if and when they so desired, without any undesirable consequences. Before taking and discussing the pictures, participants were informed that some of their pictures would be used. Their permission to use these was sought from caregivers and the participants themselves. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this paper to depict all schools and participants.

Findings and Discussions

Femininities as economically reliant: Exposure to sexual abuse

Despite common understanding that construes primary school children as sexually innocent (Bhana et al., 2011), heterosexuality in this study was at the centre of the girls' feminine constructions. The financially dependent feminine discourse, around which heterosexual relationships are organised, exposed the girls to violence and provided structural spaces for their oppression and domination, as the following data illustrates:

It's nice having a boyfriend who gives you money . . . but not when he forces you to do things you do not want. Like this day my friend Zuzu's boyfriend told her to come to his house. He had promised to give her money. Zuzu did not want to go there because, the last time she went there, the guy forced her to have sex . . . but she had no alternative . . . she needed the money. Besides, had she refused the guy would have simply had another girl visit him. (Swakhy, 16 years old, Mjikaphansi, individual interview)

One Friday afternoon, on my way home with my friends, my ex-boyfriend [the boyfriend was 7 years older and worked as a bus conductor] assaulted me using a belt all over the body. All he kept saying was, "I want my money. . . I want my money!" Now I know that the best thing is not to take these people's money, because at the end you suffer for it. It is tempting though when you see other girls bragging about their money and the things they buy. For example, one day I asked my friend to let me use her lip-gloss, and she just said "Haaaa Futhy . . . find a man!" (Futhy, 14 years old, Mazingela, individual interview)

My sister Zanele had a boyfriend here at school. The boy was doing Grade 7 but his family was not well off. When schools opened in May, she had a new boyfriend. One day after school, just next to this dam, Zanele was with the new guy and the ex-boyfriend came. I saw them arguing and within a short space of time I saw Zanele bleeding. We were all scared, but it was never reported to the teachers. The teachers would have punished Zanele instead because she was the one who started all this. So being a cry-baby wouldn't have helped her. (Lindz, 14 years old, Muntu, focus group interview)

The girls' socioeconomic status shaped their constructions and experiences of femininity, and poverty was the major factor influencing girls in these contexts to engage in heterosexual relationships (Selepe et al., 2017). The importance of heterosexual relationships for girls, in terms of being provided for within these rural and poverty stricken-contexts, cannot be overemphasised. Being a girl meant that one way they could navigate their penurious situations was "to find a man." They saw men as their only way to financial freedom, and their idealised feminine identities were therefore established around a masculine figure that could provide for them. The narrations reveal the wider societal Swazi discourse that ascribes the financially dependent position to femininities. Futhy's narration evidences that such stereotypical perceptions were even regulated by the other girls in the school: it was considered a norm and one way to get what they wanted. According to Swazi culture and tradition, after the death of a father, male children (and not females) or uncles take over as heads of the family; and, in marriage, the woman is supposed to depend on and submit to the husband (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017). In essence, the normative discourse is that females live their lives as subordinates, owned and provided for by men—a logic that enhances gender inequality. At first glance, the girls' need for money could be viewed as mere fascination for a good life (of lip-gloss) that they could not afford (Selepe et al., 2017). Spending time with loved ones may also seem to be exciting, especially for teenage girls (Arai, 2009). However, love and affection did not seem to be the legitimate reason for these girls' engagement with heterosexual relationships. Rather, it was their desperate means to be provided for in the absence of available options to ensure their survival and that of their destitute families (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, such constructions, in most instances, exposed the girls to gender-based violence and sexual abuse. Financial strength provided structural contexts for the dominant masculinities to be domineering and violent towards the vulnerable girls, when they did not conform to the normative feminine discourse (Morojele, 2011). The girls had to conform to the submissive feminine discourse and be subserviently positioned in order to be provided for (Groes-Green, 2011). The girls in the study expressed that they felt pressured by their boyfriends to have sex and, due to their socioeconomic status and desperation to be provided for, they consented. If sexual coercion failed, the fear of being replaced was also enough to make the girls conform to the boys' sexual advances, whatever the cost

(Parnarouskis et al., 2017), to ensure that they had stable providers and means for survival. For example, Swakhy's friend was so desperate for money that she had to give in to her boyfriend's sexual advances, because that was the only way she could get the money. According to Boonzaier and de la Rey (2004), by unwillingly and helplessly enabling the dominant boys to provide for them, the girls limited their sexual choices and made their bodies "site[s] for male control" (p. 456)—physically and sexually disregarding their choices, body integrity, and independence. Raza (2017) noted that girls are not only oppressed because they are feminine and belong to a group that is subserviently positioned, but also because their indigent situations compound with their feminine identity in ways that expose them to exploitation and, hence, exacerbate their experience of gender inequalities. As N'guessan (2011) rightly put, for the girls in the study, it was trivial that their bodies had become "a land of conquer" (p. 187) because they passively and compliantly looked beyond the submission and its negative consequences to what they stood to gain. What mattered most was the money and being provided for in the contexts of their vulnerable circumstances, hence, endorsing inequitable gender and heterosexual relationships.

The vulnerable girls' refusal to be "cry-babies" could be viewed as reflecting the broader cultural issues around girls' socialised indifference and subordination in relation to challenging sexual violence (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2004). However, by not reporting incidences of gender-based violence, this could imply that these girls have embraced and normalised domination and exploitation. Being subserviently positioned and accepting inequitable gender and heterosexual relationships seems to be their only survival strategy. This logic reveals a bleak future for efforts towards curbing the spread of HIV (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017), promoting gender equality, and the elimination of gender-based violence in these contexts. To help girls in vulnerable circumstances transcend this predicament and enhance gender equality would mean calling for the state to implement poverty alleviation strategies and consider the social needs of the girls beyond providing them with free education. This could open up gender equitable spaces and effective learning experiences for girls in these contexts.

Alternative femininities: Pathways to self-destruction?

The intersection of femininity and vulnerability in these contexts (Luft, 2016) gave birth to cunning and scheming femininities. The findings revealed that the girls at Muntu and Mjikaphansi primary schools had propensities to adopt ingenious performances of gender as expressions of alternative feminine performances. The girls expressed that, in most instances when they engaged in heterosexual relations, the motive was money and not love. However, these inventive feminine constructions heightened the girls' susceptibility to unfavourable situations like pregnancy and sicknesses, thus, exacerbating their poverty and vulnerable situations as the three narratives below illustrate:

Being a girl is not good sometimes. My friend Sno (she was 14 years by then) had a lot of boyfriends and her mother liked it because the men gave her [Sno] a lot of money. When we came back to school last September, Sno was a changed person and was no longer the cheerful girl we used to know. She also had a foul smell and other learners refused to sit next to her in class. One day I heard one of the boys in her class shouting, "wena Sno soyadayisa" [Sno you are now a prostitute]. She cried the whole day. Towards the end of the term, she disappeared from school and we later heard that she had committed an abortion and nearly died . . . Now she works as a maid in town. (Owethu, 15 years old, Mjikaphansi, focus group interview)

Life is difficult here and without money you cannot survive. My brother once told me to go and look for a job, but I cannot do that, I want to learn. The easiest way therefore is to find a boyfriend . . . and just hope that he gives you money (laughs). (Zwakele, 16 years old, Muntu, focus group interview)

True... all we need from them [males] is money..... siyabahlambisa [we are taking our power back] just to prove how weak and foolish they are. It is not like we love them . . . we just need their money . . . and we will not stop taking it! Even though they call us names, but we do not mind. (Hlutjy, 13 years old, Muntu, focus group interview)

The girls in these contexts all seem to have adopted cunning feminine identities. Whilst having multiple partners is a dominant masculine norm in Swaziland, and a male can have as many heterosexual relationships as he possibly can (Fielding-Miller et al., 2017), for females it is unheard of, frowned upon, and ridiculed. The girls' behaviour, though, seems to be sanctioned by parents or caregivers—like Sno's mother—in these contexts. The family's needy situation seems to have been the reason the mother was prepared to “sell her daughter to the highest bidders” without minding the consequences, even at the expense of Sno's education and welfare. Sno's experience resonates with the Swazi people's feminine investment discourse, whereby through payment of bride-price women are reduced to the level of acquired property (Kuper, 1986). The way in which Sno maintained multiple heterosexual relationships cannot be comprehended for a 14-year-old girl. In a poverty-stricken context, though, this seems to have been the only means for Sno and her family to survive. This archetype of gender hierarchy, though, consequently militated against the girls in ways that directly negated gender equality and the creation and adoption of powerful social identities for them (Parnarouskis et al., 2017). Furthermore, forcing girls like Sno to drop out of school, and exposing them to sexually transmitted diseases, increases their vulnerability. These feminine performances were also likely to be emotionally and physically overwhelming for the girls, considering their age. Conforming to the feminine monogamous discourse did not seem to be an available option for girls like Sno because they would then be deprived of means of survival for themselves and their destitute families.

The cunning ways used by the girls to get money were not only insensible and selfish (N'guessan, 2011), but also revealed how far they were prepared to occupy the subservient position in order to get financial support from boys and older men. Even though the girls established themselves as clever because, through their ingenious feminine identities, they could get the money they so desperately needed, their loving façades still reflected the orthodox feminine submissive discourse. Whilst heterosexual relations provided a space where the girls could draw financial resources and enjoy relationships that, on the surface seemed mutual and more beneficial to them, in the end, such relationships seemed destructive for the girls. Hence, by constructing themselves as inventive and loving, the girls were not only actively submitting to patriarchal norms but also heightening their vulnerable situations and unequal heterosexual relations. This consequentially made them allies in their perpetual dominance (N'guessan, 2011), especially in cases where they fell pregnant and dropped out of school, as these narratives illustrate:

This is my elder sister's son. He is four years old and my sister dropped out of school immediately after passing Grade 7. The child doesn't have a father. In fact, my sister refuses to even talk about him [the father]. Now, the child has become an extra problem. It hurts to see him cry because of hunger and so I usually bring him food from school. At least we are adults and we are used to going to bed without having had anything to eat . . . but for him . . . it is difficult. (Lindelwa, 13 years old, Muntu, individual interview)

These boys are just too easy . . . they want love right . . . and we need their money . . . so it's a 50/50 situation. But when you get pregnant, then you are in hot water. Most of these boys either disappear or do not want anything to do with the child. (Qondile, 13 years old, Mjikaphansi, focus group interview)

Phumlile [the participant's 15-year-old sister] dropped out of school in Grade 6 because she was five months pregnant. The baby's father is doing Form 3 [equivalent to Grade 9].

She seems so happy though because the boy still gives her money and the boy's mother too takes care of her and the unborn baby. (Wenzy, 12 years old, Mazingela, focus group interview)

By virtue of their social status, survival means for these girls and their families were challenging and an extra responsibility was unquestionably overwhelming. An additional mouth to feed was not only an extra load and the responsibility of the young mother but other family members were equally affected. For some of the girls, like Wenzy's sister, pregnancy came with an idealised life of being loved (Mkhatshwa, 2017), a sense of belonging, and an escape from a life of poverty (Arai, 2009). But for most of the girls, pregnancy limited their future employment opportunities and inhabited their life of poverty with an overwhelming responsibility—fatherless children. Whilst pregnancy spelled the end of the girls' schooling, the boys responsible usually continued with their education, thus enhancing gender inequality. N'guessan (2011) said girls who become pregnant at a very young age are on the path of being constructed as a "man's subaltern, a constructed subject, an abject . . . [the] dependant other" and a subject of male domination, with no value in society for life (p. 198). Without education, rising above poverty and vulnerability and, by extension, male dominance, for the girls in these contexts seems to be a far-fetched dream (Selepe et al., 2017). It also meant these girls were inclined to remain subordinated and poor within the dominant patriarchal ideologies of their individual societies—remaining subserviently positioned, passive, and obedient in order to be provided for, hence, validating their oppression.

Even though teenage pregnancy in Swaziland has been prevalent in the recent years, it is still stereotypically considered a taboo and perceived as signalling promiscuity for young girls. Principals and teachers therefore find it difficult to take priority of the girls' education over their own ethical views about teenage pregnancy (Simelane, Thwala, & Mamba, 2013), and most girls who fall pregnant are expelled from the school system. In order to enhance inclusive school spaces for girls, the government needs to have proper structures put in place to ensure that pregnant girls are not expelled because, without education, the girls' lives, those of their families, and of their children are doomed (Mollel & Chong, 2017). By performing femininities through expressions of heterosexuality, the girls seemed to be contesting the normative society's gender discourses of young girls as being innocent and untouched by the cares of the adult gendered world (Bhana et al., 2011). The girls positioned themselves as active social agents in the construction of femininities (James, 2010), albeit influenced by their vulnerable situations that, unfortunately, had the likelihood to further relegate them to hardship that perpetuates the vicious cycle of gender inequalities. Hence, there is need for social change reforms in these contexts to capitalise on the young girls' agency to subvert dominant constructions of femininities. However, this would not yield positive social change in these girls' experiences and social positioning without simultaneously strategising to remove the socially induced structural barriers of poverty and HIV and AIDS, which were found to be the source and compounding factors on girls' vulnerability. These girls require urgent implementation of strategies that work towards the inculcation of self-efficacy so that they could be assisted in their performances to navigate indigent situations in ways that are more sustainable and life affirming.

Teachers' scolding and shaming is not helping us

Even though there was evidence to suggest that the principal of Muntu primary school did not expel pregnant girls from the school, the hurtful discourse used by both teachers and other learners directed to the vulnerable girls, especially when they fell pregnant, was equally destructive, as this narrative illustrates:

Fine, our principal does not expel pregnant learners, but I don't think I can continue with school when I am pregnant. I cannot stand the rude words from teachers . . . and other learners call you "hluphekile's mother" [implying that you are carrying a baby that you will not be able to take care of]. The best thing is to stay home and give birth to your baby and just forget about school. Right now, teachers . . . tell us that we are loose, not real women and we like boys. How much more then, if you are pregnant? (Hlutjy, 13 years old, Muntu, individual interview)

Even though the girls' narratives highlight that, being feminine and living in destitute situations exposed most girls to undesirable situations like pregnancy (Mkhatshwa, 2017), the country does not have a policy clarifying the issue of pregnant girls in schools. It is therefore left to the principal's prerogative whether or not to expel girls who are pregnant. It is commendable that the principal did not exclude pregnant girls, but the teachers' and other learners' actions compromised efforts for inclusive and gender equitable school spaces in this school. For example, other learners called the girls who fell pregnant a name that was highly denigrating and condemning. Teachers too, rebuked the girls for performing gender unacceptably—without giving them correct, positive, and constructive ways of doing girl (West & Zimmerman, 2009). The teachers' use of the shaming discourse to regulate the girls' sexual performances was equally destructive, oppressive, and enhanced gender inequity. However, ridiculing girls and telling them that they were not real women did not seem to deter them from their destructive feminine constructions as the narrative below illustrates:

It's not like I love my boyfriend but I need the money. Our teachers always rebuke and advise us to take good care of ourselves because our bodies are God's temple . . . but still, we find ourselves doing it [sex]. The only thing I am scared of is getting pregnant because I want to learn. (Smise, 15 years old, Muntu, focus group interview)

In spite of the reprimands and advice given by the teachers, the vulnerable girls "still found themselves doing it [sex]." This was probably because their gender performances were not only guided by their feminine identity but also influenced by destitution (Luft, 2016). Being "loose" was therefore the only way they seem to have constructed the feminine persona and transcended their penurious situations. Hence, without giving the girls support or informing them of available options to transcend their vulnerable situations, scolding could and would not yield the desired results. From this, we learn that teachers should refrain from being judgemental on girls for straying outside normative and traditional feminine discourses. Judging girls not only disregards their socioeconomic and cultural situations but also makes situations like pregnancy an individual instead of a sociological problem (Gergen, 2009)—hence, disregarded and allowed to continue unabated. Rather, viewing the girls' sexual identities as social problems, contextually specific (Chowdhury, 2017), and propelled by their penurious life would aid the teachers to be better positioned to provide efficient solutions to these girls' problems, which are obviously deeper than just being loose. Teachers should strive at empowering and inculcating girls with knowledge on how to deconstruct patriarchal ideology and construct self-efficacy feminine attributes with egalitarian attitudes (Groes-Green, 2011) beyond the limiting prescripts of orthodox femininities. For example, teaching girls how to transcend their penurious life without conforming to the conventional "investment" feminine discourse would be one way towards enhancing inclusive, affirmative, and gender equitable spaces for the vulnerable girls.

Conclusion

The findings denote that poverty and vulnerability were strong determinants of the schoolgirls' constructions and performances of gender. In their desperate efforts to get financial support, in the absence of available options for ensuring their survival and that of their poverty-stricken families, these girls constructed their femininities around heterosexuality. Unfortunately, such constructions

predisposed them to situations like sexual coercion, exploitation, pregnancy, and gender-based violence. The socioeconomic context of Swaziland's schooling was found to deprive vulnerable girls of their self-efficacy, thus relegating their lives to become dependent upon boys and older men, who mainly provided financial rewards in return for sexual favours. The findings denoted that the dominant discourses of gender, poverty, and social destitution in Swaziland relegated schoolgirls to construct and perform femininities in ways that were detrimental to social change aimed at improving gender relations in these contexts. Even though the girls belonged to the broader social category of femininities, their destitute economic status made their experiences of gender different from other girls who were not affected by vulnerability. The prevailing androcentric gender discourses, poverty, and vulnerability did not only provide structural contexts on which their performances of femininities were predicated but also added a layer to their subordination, suppression, and experiences of gendered inequalities. Heterosexuality formed the basis for the girls' constructions of femininities. Love and affection were not the reason for heterosexuality; the girls invested in these relationships as means of survival. The dominant boyfriend–girlfriend culture in the schools predisposed girls to the experiences of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and gender inequality in far-reaching ways. The passivity with which the girls expressed these experiences revealed a deep rooted complacency towards gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. For these girls, such experiences could not equate to the benefits of being in relationships that gave them a life-line. The girls' financially dependent position compromised their entitlement to gender equality and mutual heterosexual relationships. Some of the girls claimed ingenuity in relation to the dominant masculinities but their efforts to establish powerful feminine identities and performance of gender along this logic was destructive and consequentially militated against them.

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