

## BULLYING OVERWHELMS TEACHERS AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

[Bongekile Macupe](#)



(John

McCann/M&G)

Lineo\* had to steal money from home to buy protection from bullies at her former primary school in Kimberley. Eleven years old at the time, she was allegedly stabbed with a sharp pencil, suffocated with a plastic bag and had her hair butchered.

When her mother tried to report the plastic bag incident, the child's teacher responded: "Oh, that."

The bullying continued for two years, and attempts by the girl's mother to convince the provincial education department to place her in another school failed.

In 2017, Lineo was moved to a private school, also in Kimberley. But the bullying continued.

"They would call her a slut and say she is HIV positive," Lineo's aunt, Omphile\* told the *Mail & Guardian*.

According to the child's family, the private school did not take steps to end the bullying either.

As a consequence, Lineo started self-harming — she cut her arms and refused to attend classes.

This year heralded a new start for the young woman. She moved to yet another new school and started attending therapy sessions. Her family says she is doing "much better".

But the bullying affected her academic progress, and at age 16, she is now only in grade eight.

[School bullying](#) is again in the spotlight after a video clip of schoolgirl Lufuno Mavhunga being attacked at [Mbilwi Secondary School](#) in Thohoyandou, Venda, went viral on social media. Fifteen-year-old Mavhunga killed herself a day after the incident. She was buried two weeks ago. Her 14-year-old attacker was arrested.

"My niece could have very well been like Lufuno and killed herself. But I guess she was able to speak out and say, 'This is what's happening to me' and she saw that we were also fighting for her. When the self-harming was happening that was a very scary time," said Omphile.

In a separate incident, the Mahlabathini magistrate's court in KwaZulu-Natal last week handed down a year-long community-based sentence to a 16-year-old schoolgirl after she was convicted in March of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm.

That case relates to another bullying incident from last year, which was also recorded and a clip posted on social media in [September](#).

In that incident, the female victim had her buttocks exposed by the schoolgirl attacker and was dragged by her underwear along a gravel road until the panties tore. This took place in full view of other learners. Both the learners attended Mathole High School in Mahlabathini.

The sentence stipulates that the perpetrator will be supervised by a probation officer for a year. She will also be referred to intensive therapy to manage whatever led her to commit the offence, and will have to write a letter of apology to the victim. The probation officer has been tasked with facilitating mediation between both girls.

### **Ignoring the problem**

Teachers who spoke to the *M&G* said that even though there were policies in place to deal with bullying in schools, there was simply not enough staff capacity to deal with the problem.

An Eastern Cape teacher, who spoke to the *M&G* on condition that his identity not be revealed, said that in most cases, teachers dismissed reports of bullying made by learners. The allegations only received attention only when something drastic happened.

“When these cases are reported, we shrug them off and say: ‘Hayi suka, yinto yabantwana le [Ah, go away. This is what children do] and ignore it,” said the teacher.

“All in all I do not think we are equipped enough to deal with bullying. When the case is drastic — and by that I mean physical — we call both parents to talk about it and that is where it ends, there are no follow-ups on whether the bullying has stopped or not.”

He said that school policies on bullying, as with other policies, only existed on paper and were not implemented.

“You know, in our schools teachers are not even equipped to deal with children who are gay or lesbian. They discriminate against them even though policies encourage us to accept everyone for who they are.”

The teacher said that at rural schools — such as the one at which he is based — bullying could also be found in the form of cultural practices.

Boy learners discriminated against each other on the basis of who had attended initiation school and who had not, he said, adding that this had led to learners stabbing or even killing each other. Others had dropped out of school.

“If you did not go to initiation school they do not allow you to use the toilets, and some wait until after school to relieve themselves at home. Those who cannot handle the humiliation drop out,” he said.

When these fights did take place, the male learners refused to be addressed by teachers who had not attended initiation school, he said. “Ayontsomi le ndikuxelela yona [this is not a tale], it is reality.”

In 2019, during a hearing on school safety, Basic Education Minister [Angie Motshekga](#) told a joint sitting of the portfolio committees of basic education and the police that school violence remained a concern, and that it had a negative effect on the department’s work.

“Bullying remains a major challenge, as it most often occurs in the classroom, generally in the absence of a teacher. The rate of bullying is high in terms of international standards and poorly managed schools tend to have more incidents of violence.

“Studies have shown that where communities take ownership of their schools, the rate of violence is low. School violence most often occurs on school premises, but it also takes place on the way to and from schools. Bullying is increasingly taking place online and with the use of mobile devices,” the minister said.

### **Bullies become women-beaters**

The nonprofit organisation [1000 Women](#) — which mobilises against domestic violence, rape and abuse — has been running WhatsApp training on bullying since 2019.

A trustee of the organisation, Tina Thiant, told the *M&G* that the group started the training because their research revealed that 90% of boys who are bullies at school become perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) when they are adults.

“And obviously, we want to stop GBV, so it was very important that we make a programme that would help,” she said.

The training was reintroduced this year after 1000 Women’s trauma counsellors said they had been receiving reports about school bullying being ignored.

Thiant said that about 900 parents and teachers were currently involved in the programme and that, earlier this month, the Limpopo education department had approached the organisation for help in schools. The organisation had noticed through the training that, in most instances, the perpetrators did not consider that what they were doing was bullying, even though they had been taught about it in class.

She said teachers tended to shrug off bullying incidents as the acts of children just being naughty, and that “overwhelmed” principals were prone to throwing their hands in the air and praying that the problem would go away.

1000 Women’s training programme explained bullying to teachers, learners and parents in layman’s terms, and also encouraged the learners to speak up when they saw that something wrong was being done to another learner.

The teachers who spoke to the *M&G* said it would help, particularly in rural and township schools, to have psychologists visiting regularly to raise awareness about bullying and help empower teachers and learners on how to tackle it.

But one Free State teacher said psychologists needed to be more proactive because they only visited schools after bullying incidents had been reported.



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