



Influence of Safety Standards and Guidelines on Students' Sexual Abuse in Public Boarding Secondary Schools in Kitui County, Kenya

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Abstract: Sexual abuse in schools remains a persistent challenge globally, with boarding secondary schools particularly vulnerable due to residential arrangements and limited parental oversight. This study investigated the influence of safety standards and guidelines on students' sexual abuse in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, in the Republic of Kenya. A descriptive survey design with mixed methods was employed, involving boarding secondary schools' target population of 16,719 and a sample of 605 participants. The sample included 200 teachers and 400 students, with 5 education officers for the interview. Purposive (for education officers) and simple random sampling techniques (for teachers and students) were used. Data were collected through structured questionnaires for teachers and students, and interview schedules for the education officers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed with verbatim citations to contextualize quantitative findings. The results indicated that inadequate supervision and insufficient staff training significantly increase students' vulnerability to sexual abuse. The study highlights the critical role of effective implementation of safety standards, enhanced supervision, and functional reporting and response mechanisms in safeguarding students. The findings offer practical, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and child protection stakeholders to strengthen safety interventions and protect learners in boarding schools.

Keywords: Safety standards, Sexual abuse, Boarding schools, Student protection, Kitui County, Kenya

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1. Introduction

School-related sexual abuse, which is a major subset of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), undermines children's rights, health, and learning outcomes worldwide. Globally, estimates and syntheses indicate that schools can be sites of sexual harassment, exploitation, and assault perpetrated by peers, staff, or outsiders, with profound short and long-term consequences for victims' mental health, schooling progression, and

social development (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The problem is intersectional: gender, poverty, social norms, and weak institutional safeguards all shape risk and response (Parkes et al., 2016; Wangamati, 2019).

At the regional and continental level, literature from sub-Saharan Africa documents high prevalence and complex drivers of SRGBV in school settings, with boarding institutions highlighted as particularly vulnerable because students live on campus, often in crowded dormitories, with reduced parental oversight (Beninger, 2021; Tanton et

al., 2020). Empirical reviews argue that robust school safety systems, including safe physical infrastructure, trained personnel, clear reporting pathways, and functioning child protection coordination, are necessary to reduce incidents (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education introduced the *Safety Standards Manual for Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2008) and subsequently issued circulars and updated guidance to strengthen school safety and child protection (MoEST, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022). National survey evidence shows that violence against children (including sexual violence) remains a national concern: the Violence Against Children Survey and other national-level studies report substantial lifetime and in-school exposure to sexual violence among young people (KNBS, 2020). Case studies and qualitative reports from Kenya further document gaps between policy and practice, for example, poor dormitory design, understaffing, weak reporting mechanisms, and cultural barriers that suppress disclosure (Otieno, 2020; Njue & Njeru, 2020; Mwangi & Kamau, 2022).

Kitui County, like other predominantly rural counties in Kenya, hosts many public boarding secondary schools and has experienced media-reported incidents and community concerns regarding student safety. Despite national standards and occasional county guidance, it is unclear to what extent schools in Kitui implement safety standards consistently and whether the presence, quality, and enforcement of those standards are associated with lower rates of student sexual abuse. The dearth of empirical, county-level evidence inhibits contextually appropriate policy and program responses.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of national safety standards and child protection guidelines in Kenya, cases of sexual abuse in public boarding secondary schools continue to be reported. In Kitui County, incidents of student victimization suggest persistent gaps in the implementation of safety measures such as supervision, secure infrastructure, reporting mechanisms, and staff training. However, limited empirical evidence exists on how these safety standards influence the occurrence of sexual abuse in boarding school environments. This gap limits policymakers' and school administrators' ability to design targeted interventions. Therefore, the study seeks to examine the extent to which safety standards and guidelines influence students' sexual abuse in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County.

1.2 Research Objective

To establish the influence of students' sexual abuse implementation on security management in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, Kenya

1.3 Research Question

What is the influence of students' sexual abuse implementation on security management in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, Kenya?

1.4 Study Gap and Justification

Existing studies provide strong general evidence that safety standards and child protection frameworks matter for reducing SRGBV, but they are largely national or located in urban settings (Otieno, 2020; Parkes et al., 2016). Few peer-reviewed studies focus specifically on public boarding secondary schools in rural Kenyan counties, and even fewer quantify the relationship between safety standards implementation and measured sexual abuse outcomes at the county or school level. In particular, Kitui County lacks an empirical assessment that links (a) structural and procedural measures required by national safety guidance (e.g., dormitory design, lighting, staff vetting, reporting mechanisms), to (b) prevalence and patterns of sexual abuse among boarding students.

This study addresses that gap by assessing implementation levels of safety standards and guidelines in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County and examining their influence on students' experiences of sexual abuse. Findings provided targeted evidence to county education authorities, school managers, child-protection actors, and NGOs to strengthen protective measures where they are most needed.

2. Literature Review

The section reviewed a relevant theory, being the Routine Activity Theory. There was a review of the literature following a funnel approach. The reviewed literature was from global to regional, Kenya, and then Kitui County.

Theory: Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) suggests that sexual abuse happens when a motivated offender encounters a vulnerable student without effective guardianship. In public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, this theory indicates that weak supervision, poorly designed dormitories, inadequate reporting systems, and insufficient staff training create conditions that increase students' vulnerability to sexual abuse. By

examining how safety standards and guidelines are enforced, this study uses the theory to assess whether strengthening guardianship through better infrastructure, supervision, and policy enforcement can reduce sexual abuse in boarding schools.

UNESCO and partner agencies define school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) as acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence that occur in and around schools and are rooted in unequal power relations and gender norms (UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2022). Sexual abuse in schools includes a spectrum from sexual harassment and exploitation to attempted or completed sexual assault, perpetrated by peers, teachers, staff, or third parties.

2.1 Global Evidence on School Safety Standards and SRGBV

Global syntheses emphasize that multi-component safety systems, combining safe infrastructure, supervision, reporting, survivor support, and community engagement, reduce SRGBV risk and increase reporting when survivors feel safe to disclose (UNICEF, 2019; Parkes et al., 2016). Systematic reviews show that interventions emphasizing staff training and clear response protocols produce measurable improvements in school climate and protective practices, though effect sizes vary by context (Parkes et al., 2016).

2.2 Regional Evidence

Studies across sub-Saharan Africa highlight that boarding schools present particular vulnerabilities: crowded dormitories, limited privacy, and weak supervision raise opportunities for abuse (Beninger, 2021). Research also points to the role of cultural norms and stigma in preventing disclosure and effective follow-up (Tanton et al., 2020). Importantly, several regional evaluations show that policy existence alone does not guarantee protection; enforcement, resourcing, and local accountability are decisive factors (UNICEF, 2019; APHRC, 2024).

2.3 Kenyan Studies and Policy

Kenya's *Safety Standards Manual* (MoE, 2008) and subsequent guidance (MoEST, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022 circulars) set out minimum requirements: secure dormitory design and spacing, adequate lighting and fencing, staff vetting/criminal checks, guidance and counselling services, confidential reporting channels, and coordination with local child protection actors. National data (KNBS, 2020) indicate ongoing exposure to sexual

violence during childhood and adolescence, including in school contexts. Qualitative research in Kenyan secondary schools has documented recurrent themes: under-resourced facilities, insufficient supervision, uneven implementation of vetting and training, and low levels of trust in reporting mechanisms (Wangamati, 2019; Njue & Njeru, 2020; Mwangi & Kamau, 2022).

2.4 Local Evidence and Gaps

County-level and school-level empirical studies in Kitui are scarce in peer-reviewed literature. Local media and county education reports occasionally document incidents, but without systematic data on prevalence or standardized measures of school safety implementation. Consequently, there is limited evidence on the causal or associative links between safety standards compliance and sexual abuse outcomes in Kitui's public boarding schools. This study fills a pressing local evidence gap and provides actionable recommendations grounded in county realities.

3. Methodology

The research methodology adopted here was a mixed methodology approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data from school teachers and students were collected using questionnaires. Qualitative data from education officers were collected through interviews. This methodology was chosen due to its strength in that there could be insufficient arguments, meaning that neither quantitative nor qualitative could bring about enough evidence, since the methods supplement each other. Secondly, the more the evidence, the better the results, and thus combining quantitative and qualitative methods brought better and more reliable results (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011).

3.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design. Quantitative components measured the extent of safety standards implementation and prevalence of sexual abuse across sampled schools and tested statistical associations; qualitative data (interviews) provided contextualized explanations of implementation processes, barriers, and lived experiences.

Rationale: mixed methods permit triangulation, quantitative results establish patterns and associations, while qualitative data explain mechanisms and institutional dynamics (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

3.2 Target Population

Study area: public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, Kenya. The target population was 16,719, which included 1,800 school teachers, 14,903 students, and 16 education officers.

3.3 Sampling procedures and sample size

The sample consisted of 605 participants. These included 200 teachers sampled randomly, 400 fourth form students sampled randomly, and 5 education officers purposively sampled.

Table 1: Population and Sample

Category of Population	Population	Sampling Procedure	Sample Size
Teachers	1,800	Random	200
Fourth Form Students	14,903	Random	400
Education Officers	16	Purposive	05
Totals	<u>16,719</u>		<u>605</u>

Source: The researcher, 2025

3.4 Data collection Instruments

There were Likert scale questionnaires for teachers and students, and interview schedules for the education officers.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Construct validity: pilot testing was used to assess whether indices behave as expected (e.g., higher supervision scores associated with perceived safety). Factor analysis (exploratory) was used to confirm multi-item scales. Reliability: internal consistency for multi-item scales was measured using Cronbach's alpha (target $\alpha \geq .70$). Test-retest reliability (subsample) may be conducted if feasible. Inter-rater reliability for observational checklists will be assessed during piloting (Cohen's kappa).

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected in several phases to ensure accuracy and completeness. First, research authorization was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) and the County Education Office. After securing permission, the researcher visited the selected schools to brief administrators, teachers, and students about the study's purpose and procedures. Questionnaires were administered to students and teachers, while interviews were conducted with education officers. The multi-method approach enhanced data completeness and reduced bias (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). Completed instruments were collected immediately to minimize the risk of loss and ensure high response rates.

3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires were coded. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, summarized participants' responses. Qualitative data were presented in narratives and verbatim citations consistent with social science research standards (Field, 2020). Again, qualitative data from interviews were transcribed, categorized, and analyzed thematically to complement quantitative findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from NACOSTI, and informed consent was sought from teachers and students, while assent was obtained from students who were minors. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Personal identifiers were omitted to protect participants'

identities. The study adhered to international standards for research involving children and vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2021), ensuring that no harm occurred during or after data collection.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Teachers' Responses to Student Abuse Protection

The researcher sought views from the teachers through their questionnaire. The results were presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' responses on student abuse protection

Statements	D (1)	SD (2)	U (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
There is escalating sexual abuse practised in boarding schools, which can affect the enhancement of the security management of the learners	f 56 32.56 %	f 36 20.93 %	f 20 11.63 %	f 50 29.07 %	f 10 5.81 %
It has been said that homosexuality and lesbianism are being practised in boarding schools, hampering the security of students	f 24 13.95 %	f 22 12.79 %	f 15 8.72 %	f 95 55.23 %	f 16 9.30 %
Students are normally protected as they travel to and from school to avoid sexual abuse and enhance security management	f 51 29.65 %	f 18 10.47 %	f 13 7.56 %	f 68 39.53 %	f 22 12.79 %
Guidance and counselling on human sexuality is done to enhance security management in boarding secondary schools	f 08 4.65 %	f 03 1.74 %	f 08 4.65 %	f 97 56.40 %	f 56 32.56 %
Sexual relationships among teachers and students, homosexuality, sodomy, and lesbianism can be practised in boarding schools, threatening security management	f 38 22.09 %	f 28 16.28 %	f 13 7.56 %	f 81 47.09 %	f 12 6.98 %
Students are cautioned against motorcycle taxi drivers known as boda boda , who cause pregnancies to school girls and sell drugs to boys on their way to and from school, to enhance security management	f 14 8.14 %	f 12 6.98 %	f 10 5.81 %	f 97 56.40 %	f 39 22.67 %

Source: The researcher, 2025

From the table, more than half, 92 (53.49 %) of the teachers who filled the questionnaire did not think that there was escalating sexual abuse practised in boarding schools. This could have been the case because sex in African traditions is a taboo that is not discussed openly, and in this matter, only the school administrators handled these issues without involving teachers. However, 60 (34.88 %) of the teachers thought the opposite. Another 20 (11.63 %) did not want to decide as they remained undecided. The majority of the teachers 111, (64.53 %) accepted that homosexuality and lesbianism were being practised in boarding schools. About a quarter 46 (26.74 %) of the participants thought that these evil practices were not taking place in the schools, and 15 (8.72 %) remained undecided on the matter. Of the participants, 90 (52.32 %) thought that students were normally protected as they travelled to and from schools to avoid sexual abuse. However, it is alarming that 69 (40.12 %) of the teachers did not think that learners were safe between schools and homes. The majority of the teachers, 153 (88.96 %), agreed that guidance and counselling on human sexuality was being done in schools. Only a small minority of 11 (6.39 %) did not think so.

This is in line with the United Kingdom (*The Real Truth*, 2019), whereby the numbers of school sex crimes were 5,500 between 2012 and 2015 academic years. This was the highest documented incident in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Sexual relationships among teachers and students, homosexuality, sodomy, and lesbianism could be practised in boarding schools, as 93 (54.07 %) of the teachers indicated. However, 66 (38.37 %) of the same sample thought that those evils could not happen in schools. This indicated a threat as far as student abuse protection was concerned.

It was established that students were cautioned against motorcycle taxi drivers known as *boda boda*, who caused pregnancies to school girls and sold drugs to boys on their way to and from schools. This was judged by a majority of 136 (79.07 %) of the teachers. Only a small minority of 26 (15.12 %) of the sample did not think likewise. The majority of the teachers, 114 (66.28 %), did not agree that corporal punishment was practised in many secondary schools in Kitui County. Interestingly, 38 (22.09 %) of the same group agreed that the evil was going on in the learning institutions. Surprisingly, 20 (11.63 %) of the

participants did not want to take sides; they remained silent.

4.2 Students’ Responses to Student Abuse Protection

The investigator administered the questionnaire for the students to solicit their views on the same objective regarding student abuse protection, and the responses were presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Students’ responses on student abuse protection

Statements	D (1)	SD (2)	U (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
There is an increase in sexual abuse in schools, which can affect learners in secondary schools and hamper security management	f 82 22.34%	f 197 53.68%	f 15 4.09%	f 31 8.45%	f 42 11.44%
There is homosexuality and lesbianism practised in schools, which can affect students’ behaviour and threaten security management	f 84 22.89%	f 183 49.86%	f 17 4.63%	f 57 15.53%	f 26 7.09%
Students are protected when they travel to and from school during midterms and closing/opening to avoid sexual abuse and enhance security management	f 96 26.16%	f 75 20.44%	f 32 8.72%	f 88 23.98%	f 76 20.70%
Guidance and counselling on human sexuality is done in your school to ensure safety and enhance security management	f 30 8.17%	f 45 12.26%	f 11 3.0%	f 117 31.88%	f 164 44.69%
Sexual relationships among teachers and students, homosexuality, sodomy, and lesbianism are a threat to schools nowadays and hamper security management	f 71 19.35%	f 107 29.16%	f 25 6.81%	f 78 21.25%	f 86 23.43%

Source: The researcher, 2025

From the table, the majority of the students, 279 (76.02 %), did not think that there was an increase in sexual abuse in schools, which could affect them. Only a minority of 73 (19.89 %) thought the opposite. Again, a majority of 267 (72.75 %) of the sample said that there was no homosexuality and lesbianism practised in institutions, which could affect their behaviour. However, 83 (22.62 %) accepted the statement. The researcher wanted to establish if students were protected when they travelled to and from schools during midterms and closing/opening days to avoid sexual abuse. The learners were divided into two equal parts on the statement. Some 164 (44.68 %) said that they were protected, while almost the same percentage, 171 (46.60 %) said that they were not protected. Only 32 (8.72 %) were undecided. This indicated danger when more than half of the participants were not protected from sexual abuse.

Guidance and counselling on human sexuality was conducted in institutions to make learners safe, as indicated by a majority of 281 (76.57 %). Some schools did not care about counselling learners, as 75 (20.43 %) indicated. The researcher stated that sexual relationships among teachers and students, homosexuality, sodomy, and lesbianism were a threat to learning institutions today. Some 178 (48.51 %) disagreed with the statement, while 164 (44.68 %) agreed. Another 25 (6.81 %) did not want to make a decision. The

percentage that agreed indicated a looming threat in the learning institutions. There was, no doubt, a huge problem in the schools.

It has been known that girls learn sexual perversions in schools. Some students from Moi Kadzodzo Girls’ School in Kilifi County confessed that they were having lesbian relationships in their institution. The girls were reported to have immodestly touched and caressed one another in the school (*Capital News*, 2019).

4.3 Research Findings from the Interview Schedule

The education officers agreed that sexual immorality in schools was evident, as EO1 said,

“We sometimes handle issues to do with sex among teachers and learners, but we refer them to the County Director of Education for disciplinary action” (A Male Education Officer aged 44 years).

And EO2 added,

“From the media and schools, there are all kinds of sexual perversions going on in our learning institutions” (A Male Education Officer aged 46 years).

The TSC has been punishing sexual errant teachers, as EO4 laments,

“It is a pity that despite the sackings by the TSC, this evil continues in our learning institutions; teachers are parents, they should not do this!” (A Male Education Officer aged 50 years).

It was evident that sexual evils like lesbianism and homosexuality were practised in the schools, as EO5 said,

“We cannot deny that these evils are there, but they are discussed less due to the stigma that they may cause; I think it is high time we come out in the open and educate our children without fear or shame” (A Female Education Officer aged 52 years).

At the same time, EO1 blamed Western culture,

“Some of these sexual issues did not exist in our African traditions; I think they are borrowed from the Western ways of life” (A Male Education Officer aged 44 years).

All these voices sounded like a warning that all was not well with the institutions as far as sexual abuse protection was concerned. There seemed to be many incidents that were clandestine among the learners. The officers distanced themselves from sexual matters in the institutions as much as possible.

4.4 Expected Contributions

This study may provide empirically grounded, county-level evidence on how the implementation of safety standards and guidelines influences student sexual abuse in public boarding secondary schools. Results will support targeted policy recommendations for county education departments, school managers, and NGOs to strengthen practical enforcement of safety standards, particularly infrastructure, supervision, and reporting mechanisms, and improve survivor support systems.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, conclusions and recommendations were derived.

5.1 Conclusion

The study established that safety standards and guidelines play a critical role in protecting students from sexual abuse in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County, Kenya. Inadequate supervision, weak reporting mechanisms, and insufficient staff training were identified as key factors that increase students' vulnerability to sexual

abuse. The findings demonstrate that merely having safety policies is insufficient; effective implementation, monitoring, and staff capacity are essential for safeguarding learners. Strengthening physical infrastructure, enhancing supervision, establishing reliable reporting systems, and providing continuous staff training are imperative for creating safer boarding school environments. By addressing these gaps, policymakers, school administrators, and child protection stakeholders can significantly reduce sexual abuse incidents, promote student well-being, and foster a secure and conducive learning environment.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to reduce sexual abuse and strengthen student protection in public boarding secondary schools in Kitui County:

1. **Enhance Infrastructure Safety:** Schools should invest in secure dormitories, adequate lighting, fencing, and private sanitation facilities to reduce opportunities for sexual abuse. Regular safety audits should be conducted to ensure compliance with national safety standards.
2. **Strengthen Student Supervision:** Boarding schools should implement robust supervision policies, including adequate staffing ratios, clear duty rosters, and routine checks during dormitory hours to ensure students are effectively monitored.
3. **Improve Reporting and Response Mechanisms:** Confidential and accessible reporting channels should be established, accompanied by clear protocols for timely investigation and follow-up. Schools should encourage a culture of trust to ensure victims feel safe to report incidents.
4. **Capacity Building and Staff Training:** All school staff should receive regular training on child protection policies, identification of sexual abuse, and appropriate response procedures. Continuous professional development should be institutionalized to reinforce compliance with safety guidelines.
5. **Policy Enforcement and Monitoring:** The Ministry of Education and the County Education Office should strengthen monitoring and enforcement of safety standards, including periodic inspections and accountability measures for schools failing to meet required guidelines.
6. **Community and Stakeholder Engagement:** Schools should collaborate with parents, local leaders, child protection agencies, and NGOs to

create a supportive environment that reinforces student safety and discourages abuse.

Implementing these recommendations can significantly reduce the risk of sexual abuse, ensure safer boarding environments, and enhance the overall well-being and learning outcomes of students.

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