

Silence, Invisibility and Agency: Concealing Pregnancies at School in Mozambique

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Biographical note

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Abstract

Silence and invisibility have received relatively little scholarly attention. When they have, they have been mostly considered in deficit: something to avoid and walk away from. In this article, I depart from that mainstream position to contribute to the growing literature around how silence and invisibility may be positively associated with power. I do this by considering the case of Mozambique, in relation to the management of pregnancies in the school setting. Here, national policy 39/GM/2003 indicates that girls that get pregnant while in education should be transferred to night classes. This measure responds to wider imperatives to bridge the gender gap in education by attempting to limit the occurrence of pregnancies in mainstream education. Yet, the policy is met with resistances, as young women in education enact a number of strategies to conceal their pregnancies and, thereby, the transfer to night course. Against this backdrop, I ask: what do silence and invisibility tell us about agency and identity? I engage with this question by weaving the voices and experiences of research participants within theories of development, feminist theories and local discourses of gender. By doing this, I argue that silence and invisibility may be powerful tools for agency, which denote an understanding of the main discourses of gender on the girls' part, but also the capability to use such discourses to one's advantage.

Keywords

Pregnancy, Schooling, Mozambique, Agency, Silence.

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Introduction

This paper considers how pregnant girls and young mothers in selected secondary schools in Mozambique use silence and invisibility in order to exert agency. My aim in doing so is twofold: on one hand I wish to challenge the assumption that teenage pregnancy denotes lack of agency, while on the other I aim to disrupt the association of silence and invisibility with submission and exploitation. These objectives sit, more broadly, within a growing body of research that repositions silence as a tool for agency (Parpart and Parashar 2019, Malhotra and Rowe 2013).

The use of silence by young women weaves within a specific history of invisibility, one that has to do with the place of women in educational spaces. Gender equality within formal education has been at the core of the development agenda for decades, as suggested by its inclusion in both the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2000) and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015). Teenage pregnancy is instead associated with the interruption of education and training, means to personal development through the acquisition of skills leading to formal employment and individual empowerment:

When a girl becomes pregnant, her present and future change radically, and rarely for the better. Her education may end, her job prospects evaporate, and her vulnerabilities to poverty, exclusion and dependency multiply (UNFPA 2013).

This doom-laden definition of in-school pregnancy polarises the nexus education/pregnancy, reinforcing human capital approaches which fail to understand the role played by contexts and structures in understanding individual behaviours. Pregnancy not only prevents the 'development' of girls, but also renders them silent and invisible: without education, they are unlikely to develop a voice, and by being excluded from educational institutions and confined

within their homes, they become invisible. What is assumed here is that pregnancy is never a choice, but a consequence of a lack thereof.

Yet, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have developed progressive local policies which enable girls to either remain in education while pregnant, or to return to their studies after having given birth (Runhare and Hwami 2014). At the same time, these policies may not adequately counteract a stronger discourse that constructs school as a space where pregnancy and parenting are unintelligible (Shefer, Bhana, and Morrell 2013). For example, Mozambique produced ministerial decree 39/GM/2003 (Ngunha 2003), which indicates that pregnant girls should be transferred to night courses and thereby enabled to complete their education. This continuation policy, which I discuss in more depth elsewhere (Salvi 2019b) is progressive, as it enables pregnant girls and young mothers to complete their education, yet still sanctions pregnancy as an obstacle to personal development. For this reason, it has been criticized as exclusionary (Parkes et al. 2013): even if girls are allowed to complete their degrees, the transfer to night courses often encourages dropout. For example, night transport is riskier and the quality of education is poorer, resulting in a disproportionate increase of the opportunity cost of night courses (Salvi 2016). It is in response to this that girls may implement strategies to remain in day classes, suggesting that they are not in a position of power, as they do not have the chance to overtly confront a measure that discriminates against them.

These circumstances evidence how the body – the pregnant body in this case – sits at the intersection between space and subjectivities (Longhurst 2012). Pregnant schoolgirls are encouraged out of the educational space because of specific gender norms, which are necessarily localised. It is through this nexus between bodies and space that the subject is constituted. Yet, the very same nexus also offers possibilities for resistance: silence and invisibility can be tools for oppression insomuch as they can enable agency.

I put this argument across by relying on primary data generated with Mozambican young women about their experiences of being pregnant while attending secondary school. More specifically, I focus on strategies young girls enacted to conceal their pregnancies: what do these acts of silencing tell us about agency and identity? In this article, I argue that silence and invisibility may be powerful tools for agency, as they denote not only an understanding of the main discourses of gender on the girls' part, but also the capability to use such discourses to one's advantage.

In the next section I articulate the intersections between gender, silence, invisibility and agency: it is within this field that I position the findings discussed here within. Further to that, I describe my methodological position and the methods used to generate data. These necessary steps will enable me to critically translate data into findings, while aiming to stretch the theoretical boundaries of the literature chosen as framework.

Silence and Invisibility: a background

Silence is traditionally associated with submission and exploitation. As Ryan-Flood & Gill (2010, 2) put it:

[...] the liberatory potential of research has been unproblematically assumed to be a linear move from silence to voice,

and especially so from an early feminist perspective, often concerned with issues of 'breaking silence and speaking out' (p. 3). Silence is a response to power and reflects the condition of 'being silenced' (in a subordinate position) more than that of choosing silence (Jungkunz 2008, 7). This is for instance the assumption of the Voices of the Poor series (Naraya et al. 2000), a World Bank funded endeavour to understand poverty from the perspectives of those who experience it, building on the rupture between those who can speak and be seen – those in power – and those who cannot. However, Parpart (2010) criticised the assumption that

silence sits in a dichotomous position in relation to agency and empowerment, whereby voice and speaking out are means to empowerment. I am not denying that silence can be a restricted choice (Kabeer 2010): resorting to silence indicates that pregnant schoolgirls are not in a position to challenge the policy that discriminates against them more overtly. Yet, silence can also be a coping strategy, and offer a space to strategise and make choices (Parpart and Parashar 2019). In this sense, silence is not passive. Similarly, Jungkunz (2012) proposes to consider silence not only as resistance, but as a site for agency. Jungkunz (ibid.) identified silences that empower, in that they provide a means to access resources that might be denied to them. Other silences protest, in that they express disagreement towards certain positions. Other silences resist, as they are meant to be practices of subversion. Others again refuse, as they signal the intention to disengage from the issue altogether. What distinguishes the different silences, Jungkunz continues, is the visibility they rely upon. Whereas silences that protest or empower rely on visibility to reach their desired outcomes, silences that resist and refuse go unnoticed in order to be successful.

These suggestions require the articulation of silence as a possibility for agency. In order to do this, and taking into account Kabeer's point (2010), it is necessary to consider the role played by social norms and the constraints and possibilities they offer. Parpart (2019) claims that the dichotomy between voice and silence is complicated by performance, which enables the challenging of patriarchal privilege. By performing silence – as I shall discuss shortly – pregnant schoolgirls respond to a social norm that stigmatises young motherhood. By so doing, they contribute to the reproduction of that social norm. At the same time, they also resist it, and use silence as a means for self-assertion. This act contributes towards the resignification of in-school pregnancy. Butler (1990) claims that performatives require repetition and re-citation in order to sediment discourses. These repetitions over time render norms unstable and allow for the possibility of subversion and, ultimately, resignification.

As they occur over time, repetitions also imply a possibility for a specific form of agency, one that is relationally constructed (Lovell 2003, 2):

[...] agency lies in the interstices of interaction, in collective social movements in formation in specific circumstances, rather than in the fissures of a never-fully-constituted self.

Agency thus extends beyond the individual, to the social interactions they maintain, and their broader context. The agency of the discursive self is thus a co-constructed agency which also allows space for individuals to react ‘creatively and innovatively’ (Kennelly 2009, 261) in ‘ways that may hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change’ (McNay 2003, 141). This conceptualisation chimes with the tenets of African feminism, which emphasise motherhood and sisterhood as loci for agency (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010), proving very powerful in postcolonial contexts such as Mozambique.

The notion of indigenous feminism (Datta 2016) responds to this very point by articulating performances in the context of post-coloniality as forms of resistance within hegemonic and contested spaces. This theoretical lens enables two specific considerations. The first one has to do with how silence and invisibility can be read – or have been overlooked – within a Global South/Global North discourse of gender. The second one refers to silence and invisibility as part of a specific and localised gender discourse: they are produced by patriarchy, whilst also carrying a strong potential for subversion, in line with Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity.

In relation to the first, silence as disempowerment intersects with gender in specific ways. Kolawole (2004) contends that women tend to be portrayed as victims, in a generalised culture of silence. Saunders (2002) argues that this ‘victimology narrative’ (14) fits well with the development apparatus, which is constructed around the hierarchical opposition between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, and reproduced within the opposition between empowered

western women, and victimised non-Western women. This discourse is very pertinent to the case of teenage pregnancy, as young mothers have often been constructed as vulnerable victims and pathologised as ‘deficient’ mothers (Macleod 2003). In South Africa, this victimhood approach has been understood in relation to a broader focus on sexuality, in turns informed by social constructions of femininity and masculinity that view women as passive and submissive, while men are expected to be active and lead (Shefer 2009).

The second consideration leads to a more direct appreciation of agency – an approach that has been applied to teenage pregnancy quite sparsely. Ngabaza (2011) argues that teenagers are far from passive in their responses to pregnancy, and in negotiating their future. Lesch and Kruger (2004) further remind that agency needs to be contextualised as it entails acting on specific options that appear appropriate and viable within particular circumstances. Specifically, the agency of young women is limited when the dominant ideological framing assumes that in-school pregnancy is unacceptable (Bhana and Mcambi 2013). Yet, it is within this constraint that silence may signify agency.

Ebila (2015) observes that Kenyan ‘good women’ are discursively defined as those who are quiet and do not challenge (male) authority. Silence, in other words, is constructed as a form of respect that enables specific forms of identity and belonging. Similar traits are valued in Mozambique, especially for what concerns seniority and respect (Salvi 2019a). This is particularly relevant in the school context, which relies upon the hierarchical difference between pupils and the teacher, reproducing dynamics associated with seniority. This difference also plays out through gender differences (Salvi 2016), a practice that has also been identified by Humphreys (2013) in the context of Botswana. Here, being invisible and silent is a feminine quality, one that can be inscribed within broader social and cultural norms. Moreover, it may enhance young women’s romantic attractiveness to men and subsequent marriageability (Gatwiri and Mumbi 2016, 14).

These points evidence how different normative frameworks are available, and are indeed invoked, around the notions of silence and invisibility. In Mozambique, different regulatory frameworks have developed further to the various attempts at community, state-building and ‘development’, requiring in turn various forms of regulation. For example, Mozambique gained independence in 1975 with the FRELIMO government coming into power (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, the party that still rules the country today). FRELIMO put gender equality on its agenda, creating a women’s wing in the guerrilla army (Arnfred 2004, 113) and formally recognising women’s role within society by actively engaging them as political mobilisers, leaders and soldiers. Yet, in spite of women being actively engaged in public life, included in agricultural work or in healthcare, Urdang (1989, 26) laments a lack of genuine participation in the planning process: one of the biggest obstacles to this inclusion was the ‘failure to consult women, especially on policy that affected them’. The exclusion of women, characteristic of many countries, is also part of the specific history of Mozambique, and constitutes an important aspect of the background.

The specific historic development moreover suggests that a plurality of different frameworks started to coexist - colonial and religious rules, concurrently with local, traditional structures, now supplemented by global ones. This multiplicity also means that there may a number of coexisting discourses that individuals may embrace at the same time. Positioning individuals within discourses does not mean robbing them of their agency, but instead requires an understanding of their nature from a point that is external to them. The self produced through discourse is agentic: agency becomes thus the ‘capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflicting relations of power’ (McNay 2000, 16) while opening up the ‘possibility for resistance, subversion and the emancipatory remodelling of identity’ (McNay 2000, 2).

Gatwiri and Mumbi (2016, 15) rightly identify the contradictory nature of silence and invisibility as both tools for oppression and power. On one hand, silence and invisibility are enabled by a specific set of gender norms, which are oppressive in nature. On the other hand, the performance of silence and invisibility can be repeated and potentially lead to the resignification of the object it is directed at: pregnancy. In other words, by means of oppressing gender identities, silence and invisibility also offer the opportunity of a more constructive engagement (Mazzei 2007). The silences, the acts of secrecy and invisibility recounted by some of my research participants do not deny institutional power regimes and regulation, but suggest that for most pregnant schoolgirls the use of silence and invisibility was an active strategy aimed at remaining in day school. I now turn to clarifying the method I employed in the development of my claims.

Methods

The findings discussed here stem from a wider study on the construction of in-school mothers in Maputo, Mozambique. Between 2007 and 2011, I spent approximately 10 months in the field carrying out qualitative analysis. This comprised documentary analysis, four focus groups with a total of 20 secondary school teachers, eight focus groups with a total of 40 young men and women (four gender-specific and four mixed-gender) and individual interviews with 10 Ministry of Education officials, 20 secondary school teachers, 33 young people aged 15-24 (25 girls and 8 men/boys) in and out of education and 10 older family members. This paper broadly relies on data generated with young people and teachers, before focusing on the narratives of three research participants: Lucia, Lucinda and Alzira. These voices are particularistic and evocative at the same time as their claims position silence and invisibility very strongly as forms of agency and resistance.

This research was carried out in compliance with the ethical guidelines set out by international conventions (Economic and Social Research Council 2010, Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth 1999, British Educational Research Association 2004). Before fieldwork, this study gained ethical clearance at the Institute of Education, where this research was initially developed. It was granted local clearance through the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, who acted as gatekeeper in Maputo. The process led me to pay particular attention to my own identity as a White, European researcher. At the same time, I felt my identity shifted in relation to the identity of the research participants: although some addressed me as ‘teacher’, others referred to me as ‘sister’ or ‘friend’. An important event that impacted upon research relationships was my own pregnancy, which started shortly before I began my second period of fieldwork in Mozambique. Although in my first term, the pregnancy was quite visible and I made no secret of it: this new identity brought to life Mazzei and O’Brien’s concept of intersectionality (2009, 363), which recognises that researchers simultaneously overlap and diverge from informants.

Research participants (individuals and schools) were recruited through a chain referral system in stages (Bernard 2006, 192). Negotiating consent figured thus more as a ‘chain’ (Kiragu and Warrington 2012, 9) than a one-off event, hinting to the circularities and iterative nature of fieldwork. As this process unfolded, it granted access to a number of gatekeepers and potential interviewees. A total of four secondary schools were selected for the study: Central School, located in the centre of Maputo, Neighbourhood School, on the outskirts and two in a semi-rural town two-hours away from the city centre, District School and District Religious School. The first three schools were established in the 1990s as part of socialist modernisation efforts, while the latter was a Roman Catholic school. Infrastructurally sound, all schools had quite basic facilities: big rooms with scattered chairs, desks and blackboards,

and latrines for boys and girls. School leadership granted institutional consent to the study, and enabled me to access in-school research participant. Pupils attending these schools did not necessarily live in the same neighbourhoods. This was for a number of reasons: fragmented educational careers were sometimes the result of moving homes to a different part of town while striving to maintain allocated school place and existing relationships. Other times pupils actively pursued a disconnect between their communities and the schools they attended, as this enabled them to be 'invisible' and thereby gave them more freedom, as I discuss in more detail in the next section.

Out-of-school young mothers tended to be harder to access as schools did not maintain contacts with dropouts, or, when they did, contact details had become obsolete. I navigated this limitation by relying on the chain referral method of respondent-driven sampling (RDS), a technique well suited to reach hard-to-find or hard-to-study populations (Bernard 2006, 192). In-school mothers thus became chains within the referral system and were usually able to connect me to out-of-school mothers living in their same neighbourhood.

I asked participants to provide informed consent through assent verbally prior to taking part in the research process. I opted for this as I had no assurance that all of my research participants were literate, and I wanted to protect research participants from potential embarrassment or shame. To ensure anonymity, the school names and the real names of participants are also replaced by pseudonyms. Interviews and focus groups were recorded through notes, which were then converted to interview transcripts shortly after the end of the interview. I carried out all interviews and focus group in Portuguese for various reasons. Firstly, I am fluent enough in Portuguese to ensure mutual understanding. Secondly, the themes raised, especially during individual interviews, were often sensitive and required a certain degree of intimacy. The presence of a research assistant could have hindered proximity, ultimately adding a barrier of complexity to the research context. Being open

about my language limitations was also a way to counterbalance power inequalities, as I welcomed advice and corrections from research participants in order to improve my Portuguese.

I initiated data analysis on the field. I used transcriptions as interpretive processes (Gibbs 2007, 10) taking responses through a first stage of analysis. This allowed me to have some initial findings to discuss during focus groups. After leaving the field, I started coding my data systematically (Miles and Huberman 1994) in order to identify common themes. Although silence and invisibility were not included in either aims, objectives or research questions for this study, ‘Concealed Pregnancies’ emerged as a consistent theme and prompt me to develop this paper. By *plugging in* (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) my data within the body of literature identified in Section 4, I aim to break the couplet silence-disempowerment by encouraging to rethink the concept of agency.

Silence and Invisibility: Tools for Agency in Mozambique

Salvi (2016) explains how night courses are not particularly appealing to girls, who, as a consequence, develop a number of strategies to remain in their day classes. These often entail the concealment of their pregnancy, of their body, and silence over the name of the father of the baby. In reviewing those strategies, this section considers how individuals push the boundaries of existing regulatory frameworks while simultaneously existing within and working with them.

Concealing Bodies

Lucia, attending District School, recounts:

I got pregnant in 9th grade. See, my belly did not grow much, so I managed to hide it. Also, my last term coincided with the summer holidays, because I gave birth on the 5th

January. So I simply did not tell anyone, and I could go back to 10th grade in the new year.

Lucia's pregnancy highlights a number of factors that enabled her to conceal her state. For example, she was lucky in that pregnancy came to full term outside of the school year. Although this was not within her control, it enabled her to remove her body from the institutional gaze at the time her pregnancy was visible the most. In this she was aided by the disconnect between her school and family I pointed to in Section 5. Lucia did not attend school in her neighbourhood area, meaning that her immediate community – who may have been aware of her pregnancy - and her school connections remained two distinct groups, with limited opportunity for overlap. Fernando, participating in a boys-only focus group, offers some more insight:

Going to the local school? You are crazy. Then my family would know what I am doing in a matter of seconds... everybody knows me there already you know... what does it add?

Schools thus provide a space, different from that of the household or community, where individuals can carve an identity beyond the control of their families. This tendency can be read in connection to social change, as formal schooling implies a shift of control over the younger generation from parents to the school system. It thereby creates a 'disconnect' between generations, which weakens the impact older generations have on young people (Furstenberg 1998, 246). Moreover, it leads to a second disconnect, between families or communities and the school. These two spaces cease to intersect in the regulation of young people's subjectivities, transferring some degree of control over to young people themselves. In other words, the disconnect creates a space within which girls can exert control over their own identities. In the case of in-school pregnancy, it enables them to become invisible.

Lucia also mentioned that she hid her pregnancy. This may entail covering oneself with various layers of clothing. This is a rather common strategy: Lucinda, 17, for instance, looked tiny, but also ‘bulky’ somehow. I could not detect her pregnancy, so I asked her about it:

Researcher: What month are you in?

Lucinda: I am 7 months pregnant.

Researcher: Wow I would have never guessed. How did you manage to hide it?

Lucinda: Yeah, it is a lot of layers!

Researcher: Does it feel comfortable?

Lucinda: Not really. But I have not been formally approached, so it is worth it.

Lucinda did not have an enormous belly but she almost disappeared in the various layers of clothing she was wearing. The act of covering one’s body is in response to the institutional view that pregnant girls do not fit within mainstream day education, and should be transferred to night courses. This example illuminates Longhurst’s claim (2012) that spaces and subjectivities are interconnected, as the normative regulation of in-school pregnancy enables specific responses from individuals who inhabit that space. As night courses were initially developed for adult literacy, transfer symbolises a significant shift in girls’ identities: pregnant schoolgirls are no longer children, as their entry to night classes identifies them as adults. The transfer between the two institutional spaces is tightly interwoven with an institutional discourse that categorises youth as either children or adults, but which struggles to make space for the multiple identities young people perform. This can also be read against the notion of ‘leaky bodies’ (Shildrick 1997), referring to the impossibility to clearly identify the boundaries of subjects and bodies, which carries clear consequences onto how such subjects (and bodies) fit within certain spaces and are perceived by others. The word ‘leakage’, however, suggests women’s passivity in that they are unable to contain themselves. Yet, covering oneself entails an active process of self-control that may enable girls to fit in

with the social and cultural expectations of the space they wish to inhabit (Grosz 1994, Tyler 2000), the school, in this case.

Attempts at hiding one's body can also be read against common beliefs that pregnancy is not conducive to learning. This was the position of Mr Francisco, teacher at the Neighbourhood School:

Last, but not least, pregnant women create hindrances. For instance they tend to faint, they do not feel good overall, and often have to leave the room. This means constant interruptions for them, but also for the rest of the class, and we need to protect those students first and foremost, as they did not choose to put something else before their education.

Mr Francisco expresses concern over pregnancies and conceptualises them biomedically in terms of the symptoms they show and how these may hinder a 'normal' day at school. By opposing pregnant schoolgirls to those that are not, and referring to these ones as those who choose education, Mr Francisco is othering pregnant schoolgirls as being in deficit: they are not fit for schooling and as a consequence, they should be excluded. A by-product of this process is that the person behind the pregnancy has become invisible and replaced by an outcome: pregnancy. As a consequence, Mr Francisco's concern cannot be for the girl who is pregnant, but needs to remain with the rest of the class, who deserves an education, and needs to be protected against the possibility that their tuition may be affected by someone else's pregnancy.

Paradoxically, the symptoms associated with pregnancy, which supposedly hinder learning, may act as self-fulfilling prophecies. Layering up for example, in overcrowded classrooms, in a country where the seasonal heat makes it often barely tolerable to attend school, may act as a tipping point. Sweating, lack of concentration, physical discomfort and fainting are likely to increase. As a consequence, these become commonly associated with pregnancy. Pregnant girls may then face a double failure: in the short term, girls may increase

the chances of being found out about, while in the long term they may reinforce the perception of pregnancies as obstacles to learning.

Pregnant schoolgirls are usually well aware of these risks. Yet, girls like Lucia and Lucinda are prepared to accept them in order to resist being found out and subsequently transferred. This suggests that that pregnant schoolgirls understand their contexts and the norms available to them, contextualising thereby their agency (Lesch and Kruger 2004) and navigating the contingencies they are situated within. Pregnant schoolgirls manage relations of power – for instance between teachers, who can enforce policy indications, and themselves, who cannot – by invoking relevant frameworks, such as the gendered value of silence and invisibility, discussed in Section 4. By so doing, they interweave a local discourse of silence with a modern discourse of the values of formal education: if successful, the first becomes conducive to the latter.

Another strategy girls use to keep their pregnancy secret is to avoid leaving their seats, not even during breaks. This was Alzira's behaviour:

I was very scared that they might find out and send me to night courses. So I stopped leaving the room during breaks, to avoid teachers having a good look at me and wondering what was going on. While in the classroom I would always remain at my desk, and not go to the blackboard for instance.

By hiding in the classroom, Alzira wants to make herself invisible. Once again, this strategy can be detrimental to girls' learning. Pregnancy may require girls to leave the room more often (to use the toilet, for example). Forcing oneself not to do so may result in difficulties in participating in class activities, or in paying attention for prolonged periods, feeding the general belief that pregnant girls are not fit for schooling. Refraining from going to the blackboard when requested may contribute to the same end. Yet, leaving a potentially overcrowded classroom may expose girls' bodies, increasing the chances of being found out

about. For example, in 2012 the pupil to teacher ratio (PTR) was 58:1 (Directorate of Planning and Cooperation School Construction and Equipment (DIPLAC) and Ministry of Education (MINED) 2013), a piece of data that often masks striking differences between schools with a relatively healthy PTR and others with $PTR > 100$.

This constant self-monitoring also has consequences. For example, I talk elsewhere (Salvi 2019b) of how schoolgirls are forced to internalise the institutional gaze, thereby becoming an extension of the surveillance mechanism. The threat of exclusion from day classes means girls become active subjects in their self-exclusion, achieved through concealment. Failure to engage with tuition may also be read in consequence to this. Consequently, girls may be viewed as especially passive in the classroom, thereby reinforcing the gender stereotype identified in Botswana that ‘good girls’ do not talk back (Humphreys 2013). This possibility sits well with traditional and gendered approaches to silence as discussed in Section 4. Moreover, it identifies young women as fully embracing traditional values by accepting their position within a patriarchal system and actively contributing to its reproduction. In this sense, pregnant schoolgirls gain visibility – they exist - by embracing a normative framework that constrains their identities. Again, this does not indicate passivity, but an understanding of the social norms at play, and active reliance over them in order to pursue one’s own interests.

Silencing Voice

Once a pregnancy has been discovered, another opportunity to retain control over it arises. Decree 39/GM/2003 indicates how to deal with the man responsible for the pregnancy, implying that his identity should be clarified. *Quem è o autor?* Who is the father? Or more literally, who is the author, suggesting that the agency, the will behind a pregnancy, is not to be located within the girl who carries it, but within the male she was sexually active with.

The policy indicates that he should also be transferred to night courses, provided he is in the same school (although Decree 39/GM/2003 establishes means for the punishment of men as well, I found no evidence of this happening during my fieldwork). However, girls are not necessarily ready to give this piece of information away, as it may be more strategic for them not to make that name public, especially if they want to get some support. This is Mr Francisco's view:

Does it become clear, who the father is? It depends. For instance, on how much girls are being strategic and trying to 'milk the cow'. Sometimes it pays not to make the name of the father public because you may get some informal contribution. If you make it public, things can get out of control, especially if the authorities are involved. Take for instance the case of a girl who got pregnant with a teacher. If the information reaches the director, that teacher will lose his job. Then, of course he will not be able to provide for the girl, nor he will be willing to help out at all!

Silence, in this case, becomes a strategic tool that can be associated with pregnancy and parenthood as livelihoods. This is to be understood in a context of poverty, as Ms Nelia (Ministry of Education) points out:

Most adults will look down at them [pregnant girls], and consider those pregnancies as mistakes, or unwanted. They will think girls got pregnant out of ignorance, and boys got them pregnant because they do not like to use condoms. I do not agree with those views. I think those pregnancies are very much wanted. You know why? Because people still struggle to get to the end of the month, to make ends meet. To get married is still the best option, if you want to survive, if you want to sustain yourself and your family.

Pregnancy, within a local discourse of family formation, is inherently connected to marriage (Salvi 2019a), and therefore a valid strategy to secure sources of income. These would rely on – and reproduce – a specific notion of femininity, whereby women are financially dependent on men. This case illuminates the contradictory nature of silence as both oppressive and empowering (Gatwiri and Mumbi 2016). By using silence, young women are

invoking a traditional system that relies on patriarchy and which position women as dependant to men. Yet, young women use it to disassociate themselves from the imposition of a specific identity: that of being passive and dependent. This behaviour is agentic in nature, and identifies women as decision makers.

Silence can also be associated with deceit, as it can be seen as a strategy to withhold information. Nina, a 15 year old attending District School, explained to me that

[...] the only way to know the truth about something is to “see”, to catch somebody in the act of. Language, words, they cannot trusted. So sometimes it is better to say nothing. Especially if you are trying to protect yourself.

Nina is extremely critical of voice, once again challenging its association with power and truth this paper departs from. Voice is not inherently better than silence, although it has been constructed as such (Saunders 2002). The expectations of truth and power it carries are just a façade: voice can deceive or can lead to deception. Silence then, can also become a way to protect oneself, independently from the expectations placed on significant others. In other words, a coping mechanism (Parpart and Parashar 2019) that can help dealing with uncertainty with a view to assert oneself against discriminatory school regulations, and in an effort to continue with school education. This type of silence can also signal disengagement: it is a silence that refuses (Jungkunz 2012). What it turns down, is the embracement of a specific identity. Naming the father, as I discussed above, triggers a specific mechanism directed at the implementation of norms related to family formation. Withholding that information means young women may remain in control and decide if and how to invoke traditional norms. Alternatively, they may want to keep the identity of mother distinct from that of wife, an aspect that has been previously theorised by Amadiume (1997). In this context, silence plays out as a by-product of the disconnect between wifhood and motherhood.

Keeping a pregnancy secret, concealing one's body and refusing to name the father of their babies are all strategies girls actively use to remain in their day classes. Engaging with them has pointed to the role played by agency in dealing with a pregnancy. Moreover, it can be insightful in clarifying the relations between silence and invisibility. Jungkunz (2012) claimed that whereas silences that protest or empower rely on visibility to reach their desired outcomes, silences that resist and refuse go unnoticed in order to be successful. This classification is extremely powerful as it helps to deconstruct the binary relation between power and silence. At the same time, it does not adequately provide for the type of silence identified in relation to in-school pregnancy. Secrecy and concealment in relation to a pregnancy require invisibility in order to be successful. This would correspond, in Jungkunz's classification, to a silence that resists. At the same time, succeeding in keeping a pregnancy secret may allow pregnant schoolgirls to remain in education, hence to gain access to a resource – day classes – which would be denied to them if they were to be open about their pregnancy or found out. This silence needs to remain invisible in order to both resist current school regulations, and empower those individuals that opt for it. Pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers choose silence, and by so doing, construct silence as agentic. Silence, in other words, reflects girls' agency in resisting sites of oppression. It becomes a means for transformation, as girls who are successful in enacting it may gain their desired outcome of remaining in their class. This is doubly empowering. It breeds success because it enables a burgeoning self-confidence in one's abilities while also allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to remain in charge of their own identities.

It is at this point that the possibility for relational agency acquires significance. The repetition over time of this specific use of silence may lead to resignification (Butler 1990) of the very object silence is directed at: in-school pregnancy. This is because the successful

concealment of a pregnancy may eventually challenge a discourse that excludes pregnancy and parenthood from educational spaces.

This analysis of silence points to acts of resistance as means to highlight the tensions between regulatory frameworks, the discourses they produce, and individuals. By resisting dominant regimes, girls navigate the disconnects in the institutional regimes, the interstices in which instances of their agency can be teased out. This is made possible by their own inextricable connection with institutional discourse: pregnant schoolgirls are constructed 'in deficit' by institutional regimes, and as a consequence of this conceptualisation they resort to silence as a means to assert themselves. Yet, their silence indicates that they are still subject and subordinated to the power regimes of the institution (Kabeer 2010). I believe, with Humphreys (2013), that identities are not 'free-floating', but constrained by social structures. By conjoining their actions within different normativities, young people render themselves intelligible via different discursive formations, which are, in turn, both at the beginning and at the end of their own performances. It is performances, Parpart and Parashar (2019) remind, that complicate the dichotomy between voice and silence: they identify ways other than voice to oppose power and patriarchal privilege. Similarly, by concealing themselves, the young women I discuss here resist normative structure they disagree with. This invisibility, paradoxically, gives them freedom as it emancipates them from the sanction and stigma attached to in-school pregnancy. The act of suturing themselves within a discourse of oppression is thus not only the reflexive act of *doing* identities, but also figures as a repetition through which resignification occurs (Butler 1990). In this sense, by performing their identities, young people also contribute to shifting regulatory frameworks.

Conclusion

With this article, I used the case of in-school pregnancy to engage with silence and

invisibility as sites for agency. Decree 39/GM/2003 indicates that pregnant schoolgirls should be transferred to night courses, and as day courses are preferable, girls affected by the policy enact a number of strategies to prevent their transfer. By so doing, they exert control over their bodies and the contexts within which they operate.

In the first section, I have discussed strategies girls use to hide their growing bellies. These include covering oneself with extra layers of clothing, but also limiting one's participation in the classroom by refusing to go to the board and never leaving the classroom to avoid the institutional gaze. This has a number of repercussions: for instance, strategies such as these may render the time spent at school particularly uncomfortable, to the point that it hinders attainment. This defeats the purpose of attending school, and may increase the stigma attached to in-school mothers, who are perceived as unfit for learning. Moreover, as staff are aware of these strategies, there is always a chance they may be particularly alert and responsive to such behaviours, increasing the chances girls will be found out about. Further to that, I have considered how girls may decide to keep the name of the father. Decree 39/GM/2003 requires the identities of both to be known to the authorities, so that due action can be put in place. However, it may not be in the girls' best interests to lead the father to unemployment, as this would drastically reduce the chances of receiving any financial support.

The contributions of this paper are varied. The case of in-school pregnancy and the strategies identified above have allowed me to illuminate and contrast a mainstream discourse of silence that associates it with disempowerment. By reading my findings through the lenses of Jungkuz (2012), I have identified a gap: silence and invisibility are connected in multiple ways, and the case of in-school pregnancy suggests that both may be needed in order for empowerment to occur. In other words, the silence concerning girls' pregnancies requires

invisibility in order to allow girls to remain in education. Silence and invisibility are therefore chosen, not incurred in. As such, they denote agency.

The specific form of agency identified here relates to the individual: girls who are successful in performing silence and invisibility may remain in mainstream education. At the same time, the instances of silence and invisibility discussed here point to relational agency. A plurality of women using silence to challenge a specific gender norm that penalises them carries the possibility for resignification. Pregnancy will eventually cease to be an impossibility within educational spaces. In this sense, the repetition of these strategies carries the seed for social change as these acts of resistance slowly change perceptions over the incompatibility of schooling, pregnancy and parenthood.

Last, this paper has contributed to challenge a Global South/Global North dichotomy by suggesting that notion of agency coined in the Global North may articulate well with others produced in the Global South. This is the case, for instance, of the notion of relational agency (Lovell 2003, Kennelly 2009) and concepts of indigenous feminism that identify sisterhood as locus for agency (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010). The analysis of silence and invisibility I carry out here relies on both theoretical constructs, and contributes to localising global theoretical tools.

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