Victims too afraid to report educators

FOR many South African children, going to school means facing their rapist every day. An increasing number of children are being sexually abused by teachers, who often get away with their crimes, a damning report has revealed.

The research disclosed how many teachers used their power and an “exaggerated sense of sexual entitlement” to rape or sexually violate those in their care. For many of the victims, who are usually girls, their school marks drop, some leave school and others fall pregnant.

The report, “Sexual Violence by Educators in South African Schools: Gaps in Accountability”, was conducted by Wits University’s Centre for Applied Legal Studies, Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Centre for Women and Justice, and the International Human Rights Clinic.

It revealed how victims and the teacher’s colleagues were often too afraid to report the abuse because they were intimidated or their lives were threatened by the perpetrator or teachers’ unions.

When they did report the abuse, sometimes it was covered up to protect a teacher who brought in good matric results or to ensure the name of the school was not tarnished.

In those schools that did take action, the victims faced interrogation at various levels.

The teachers’ disciplinary processes could drag on for years, leaving the perpetrator free to resign and join another school.

The research noted a dramatic rise in reported abuse by teachers, exacerbated by the many government departments and officials who failed to bring the wrongdoers to book.

“The absence of meaningful consequences for perpetrators lends legitimacy to their behaviour, arguably giving licence to this harm,” the research found.

Disciplinary processes were also frustrated by the “almost militant” role played by some trade union representatives, who used bribes and intimidation of witnesses to make complaints disappear.

The Teddy Bear Clinic’s Shaheda Omar said the reality was that the child victims were damaged by the trauma of being violated by someone in a position of power.

“[Children] feel guilty; a state of powerlessness, helplessness and betrayal by their educators. They do not feel protected or believed,” she said.

Port Elizabeth social worker Dr Heather Rauch said while she had not noted an increase in cases where teachers were sexually abusing children, she had worked on a number of cases over the years.

She said parents needed to discuss things like “good secrets and bad secrets”, so that children felt open to tell them anything that made them feel uncomfortable.

“Children who are being sexually abused by a teacher are incredibly conflicted because this is someone they are meant to trust.” – Additional reporting by Lee-Anne Butler