



Commission for Gender Equality

A society free from gender oppression and inequality

**Russian Roulette: Exploring the
Emergence, Persistence and
Prevalence of Illegal Initiation
Schools in South Africa**

September 2022

Compiled by: Thubelihle Zitha, Lindelwe Motha, Mpelo Malebye, Thabani Mdlongwa and Monalisa Jantjies.

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1. Introduction

This policy brief is based on issues drawn from the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) research report entitled, “Illegal Initiation Schools in South Africa: Assessing Risks to Boys and Young Men.” The study was carried out during the 2020/21 financial year with the aim of examining factors that lead to the emergence, persistence and prevalence of illegal initiation schools in South Africa. The study was undertaken in four provinces, i.e., the Eastern Cape, Free State, Limpopo and Gauteng, as these are the provinces with the highest prevalence of illegal initiation schools in the country.

The policy brief seeks to amplify two key issues that emerged from the findings of the study:

1. Issues related to the prevalence of illegal initiation schools; and
2. Factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of illegal initiation schools in South Africa.

The policy brief is structured in the following manner: brief background on illegal and legal initiation schools, key national policy and legislative frameworks, brief note on methodology, overview of key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2. Brief background on illegal and legal initiation schools

South Africa has in the past few years witnessed heightened media reports of botched circumcisions, poor health outcomes and fatalities of boys and young men admitted to initiation schools. These atrocities are often associated with the emergence of unregulated practitioners who operate initiation schools, without the necessary approval by the government. According to the National House of Traditional Leaders, 80% of initiates who died in 2015 had attended illegal initiation schools.¹

Deaths are a regular feature of initiation resulting from botched circumcisions, abusive traditional attendants, dehydration caused by the misconception that drinking water prolongs the healing process, imbalanced food nutrients and poor environmental conditions. Poor health outcomes associated with initiation are wound sepsis, genital mutilation and amputation of the penis, among other factors.² In the December 2021 initiation period, more than 31 boys died in the Eastern Cape. This was already more than double the previous initiation season’s fatality rate of 14.³ In Limpopo, an 8-year-old boy died after experiencing breathing difficulties during the circumcision process in 2022.⁴

The practice of illegal initiation schools in South Africa has also been characterised by reports of abductions and abuse of underage boys, human rights violations, criminal activities and overall circumvention of regulations promulgated by the government to guide initiation schools. These illegal practices devalue the practice of initiation and the importance of cultural practices and traditions originally associated with initiation schools.⁵

Initiation is one of the world’s oldest traditional practices observed across many different cultures.⁶ The practice is predominant in Sub-Saharan African countries but is also performed by Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa, collectively known as the MENA region, across the Jewish Diaspora, and as far away as Australia. In South Africa, the practice is observed among Nguni groups which include the amaXhosa, AmaZulu, amaSwati and amaNdebele people. It is also observed by other ethnic groups in the country such as BaPedi, the Southern Sotho people, Masemola, Lemba, the Matlala of North-West, the Mamabolo of the Woodbush, and the Shangana-Tsonga, VhaVenda, Lobedu, Hananwa, Letswalo, Khaha and Ntswana people.⁷

Initiation, as a practice, is a means of attaining identity and honour within African tradition and historically gained prominence during difficult times when Africans were subjected to, servitude and slavery. As such, traditional initiation rites were shaped by the historical challenges that encompassed social,

1 Ntombana, L. “Should Xhosa male initiation be abolished?” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 6 (2011): 631–640
2 Douglas, M. and Maluleke, T.X. “Traditional Male Circumcision: Ways to Prevent Deaths Due to Dehydration,” *American Journal of Men’s Health* 12, no. 3 (2018): 584–593.
3 The Citizen. (2022). “Eastern Cape govt blames parents as initiation school deaths rise to 31.” <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/local-news/2947527/initiation-schools-deaths-increase-22-december-2021/> Accessed: 19 August 2022.
4 Ibid.
5 Ntombana, L. “Should Xhosa male initiation be abolished?” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 6 (2011): 631–640.
6 Silverman, E.K. “Anthropology and Circumcision,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 419–445.
7 Hammond-Tooke, W.D. (Ed). “The Bantu speaking peoples of Southern Africa.” (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

political and economic afflictions during the colonial period and the apartheid era that followed it.⁸ Initiation was and still is considered an important, exciting part of the upbringing of young men, without which they can neither participate in the social activities and affairs of their communities nor take up the advances of women in preparation for marriage.⁹ Initiation is further considered as the rite of passage to manhood, which is a source of pride for young men across different tribes within the South African society.

Initiation as a process is undertaken in an area that may encompass a lodge built in a secluded location (sometimes in the mountains) that is not easily accessible or identifiable.¹⁰ This contributes to the culture of secrecy around the ritual that excludes those who have not participated in it yet, and those who are not permitted to take part in it at all. The importance of the secrecy associated with initiation procedures was illustrated in the controversy surrounding “the film *Inxeba*”: *The Wound*.¹¹ The outcry surrounding the film pertained to the exposure of a sacred cultural space, which was considered to have potentially negative outcomes for young boys and men.

The ritual often begins with what is known as the “Separation Stage”. Here initiates leave their familiar environment for an unfamiliar place that encompasses a new routine to which they are required to adapt. This is followed by the “Transitional Stage”, which is the stage where initiates are educated about what this practice entails and the concepts that are associated with it. Within this stage, circumcision takes place and elders continue with education regarding the new skill set acquired as a man. Until this stage, “outsiders” are not exposed to what takes place at the secluded location, and illegal initiation schools benefit greatly from this secrecy by cultivating violent experiences for boys, who are sometimes minors. In other words, the ritual and accompanying process already have limitations regarding the exposure and participation of “outsiders”, and illegal initiation schools thrive on the privacy that this allows them. Lastly, the “Incorporation Stage” involves the reintegration of the newly initiated boys as men into their communities, sometimes with new names.

These stages are what usually constitute the legal practice of male initiation in many South African cultures. However, the extent to which illegal schools follow a similar pattern is not clear given that very little is documented on the practices followed by these bogus schools.

3. Key national policies and legislative frameworks

South Africa recently enacted a law that deals specifically with issues of the initiation of boys and young men. The Customary Initiation Act No. 2 of 2021 is now in place. Chapter 4 of the Customary Initiation Act focuses on several key issues: registration, consent, prohibitions, age and circumcision, discipline and teaching, water, sanitation, food, healthcare, liquor and drugs and provisions for dealing with the death of an initiate. At the time when the study on illegal initiation schools in South Africa was originally conducted by the CGE, this Act was not yet in place. However, there were many other pieces of legislation in place that aimed to regulate initiation practices in South Africa.

Chapter 11 of the Constitution of South Africa states that:

A traditional authority which observes a system of indigenous law and is recognised by law immediately before the commencement of the Constitution, shall continue as such an authority and continue to exercise and perform the powers and functions vested in it in accordance with the applicable laws and customs, subject to any amendment or repeal of such laws and customs by a competent authority.¹²

Fittingly, circumcision of boys who are under 18-years old is also regulated by the Children’s Act No. 58 of 2005. Section 8(a) of Chapter 2 of the Children’s Act prohibits children below the age of 16 from undergoing circumcision and being subjected to conditions that compromise their wellbeing.

8 CRL Rights Commission, “Report on some challenges that lead to deaths and injuries at initiation schools in South Africa.” (2017): 23.

9 Magubane, P. “Initiation of Basotho Men.” <https://southafrica.co.za/basotho-initiation-rituals.html>. Accessed: 13 July 2022.

10 Morei, N. “Cultural Practices and Children’s Rights: The Case of Male Initiation in South Africa,” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 1.

11 Mkhabela, S. “‘Inxeba’ (The Wound) Is An Important Story Told By The Wrong Person.” *OkayAfrica*. (February 2018). <https://www.okayafrika.com/inxeba-op-ed/>. Accessed: 19 August 2022.

12 “Chapter 11 Traditional Authorities (ss. 181), Recognition of traditional authorities and indigenous law.” (1996).

The Act also states that only a qualified medical practitioner or a properly trained person with sufficient knowledge of the social or cultural practices of the communities of the young men to be circumcised is permitted by law to perform circumcisions.

The South African Guidelines for Medical Circumcision issued by the Department of Health (DOH) in 2016¹³ set out the procedures and equipment that should be used for medical circumcision. For a social or cultural circumcision, the person performing the procedure must use the prescribed equipment, including sterilisation and universal infection-control procedures.¹⁴

The National Health Act No. 6 of 2003¹⁵ encompasses specific provincial measures aimed at the regulation of traditional circumcision, with the aim of providing a structured and uniform healthcare system for South Africa. The Act provides a framework within which measures such as the requirement for consent and monitoring can be enforced.

Other legislation exists for ensuring the dignity, respect and preservation of traditional leadership and that its principles are not eroded. This includes the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Amendment Act No. 41 of 2003. In this Act, the state recognises its obligations to respect, protect and promote the institution of traditional leadership in a manner that is in harmony with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and provides for the recognition of traditional communities and the establishment and recognition of traditional councils, as well as a statutory framework for leadership positions within the institutions of traditional leadership.

Different provincial legislation regulates the social, medical, environmental and governance aspects of the institution of initiation, while municipal by-laws such as the Sedibeng Amended Integrated Initiation Schools Policy¹⁶ regulate community governance, with specific reference to the role of traditional leadership, traditional surgeons and healers. Several provinces have promulgated legislation that regulates circumcision. This legislation includes: the Application of Health Standards in Traditional Circumcision Act (Eastern Cape); the Initiation Schools Health Act No. 1 of 2004 (Free State); and the Limpopo Circumcision Schools Act No. 6 of 2016. These provincial pieces of legislation were expected to align with the Application of Health Standards in the Traditional Circumcision Act No. 6 of 2001, and the National Policy on Customary Practice of Initiation in South Africa.

The National Policy on Customary Practice of Initiation clearly states that:

An initiation school must be registered in accordance with the provisions of this policy. In instances where non-registered initiation schools are found to be conducting initiation practices, the children attending such schools must be regarded as “abducted” and the relevant legislation must be enforced accordingly.¹⁷

For the above to be achieved the national government in terms of the new Customary Initiation Act No. 2, 2021, established the National Initiation Oversight Committee, and provincial governments must establish Provincial Initiation Coordinating Committees. The role of these committees is to ensure that all initiation schools comply with the law. According to the Act, if there is any initiation school that is not in compliance with its management and staff not being registered, those liable can be prosecuted. Unregistered traditional surgeons can be prosecuted under the Customary Initiation Act No. 2 of 2021 and Traditional Health Practitioners Act No. 22 of 2007. Traditional surgeons are now required by law to be registered with the relevant provincial Departments of Health.

4. Brief note on methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach in exploring the underlying experiences, perceptions, views and knowledge of key role-players regarding the emergence and persistence of illegal initiation schools in the country. The qualitative approach allowed for a detailed examination and analysis of insights shared by the research participants regarding the subject matter. The study focused on four provinces that had been identified as epicentres of the high prevalence of illegal initiation schools: the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng and Limpopo.

13 Department of Health of the Republic of South Africa. “South African Guidelines for Medical Circumcision.” (2016).

14 Strobe, A.E., Toohey, J.D. and Slack, C.M. “Addressing legal and policy barriers to male circumcision for adolescent boys in South Africa,” *South African Medical Journal (SAMJ)* 106, no. 12 (2016): 1173–1176. Doi: 10.7196/SAMJ.2016.v106.i12.11215

15 National Health Act No. 6 of 2003

16 “Sedibeng Amended Integrated Initiation Schools Policy.” (2018/2019): 6.

17 Department of Traditional Affairs. “Policy on Customary Practice of Initiation in South Africa.” (2015).

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilised to select participants, based on their comprehensive knowledge of the operations of initiation schools and the sector in general. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, while two focus group discussions were conducted in the Free State, with the intention of triangulating the methods of data collection to ensure the robustness of the data.

The following categories of participants were identified and interviewed:

- Government officials from national and provincial government departments i.e., the Departments of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlements and Traditional Affairs (COGHSTA), the DOH, the South African Police Service (SAPS) and local municipalities.
- Traditional leaders, members of the provincial Houses of Traditional Leaders, and members of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA).
- Members of local Community Policing Forums.
- Traditional surgeons.
- Principals of legal initiation schools.

It should be noted that, even though the study was primarily focused on investigating issues related to illegal initiation schools, it was understood that it would have not been easy for the operators of such unlawful establishments to subject themselves to the scrutiny of a Constitutional body such as the CGE, particularly due to some of the atrocities and human rights violations that reportedly occur at these sites. As a result, the operators of illegal initiation schools were not included as participants of the study. The CGE, instead, relied on the experiences and knowledge of the above-mentioned role players, who were also well placed to articulate factors that explain why illegal initiation schools continue to exist, as well as what sustains them in the face of law enforcement interventions, legislation and other local regulations aimed at combating them.

Data emanating from the study was analysed using thematic analysis and presented in the research report under the various themes identified for the study. Lastly, the research ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity were observed in the study.

5. Overview of the findings

This policy brief focuses on two issues that emanate from the broader study. These are (1) issues related to the prevalence and location of initiation practices in the four selected provinces, and (2) factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of illegal initiation schools.

5.1 Issues related to the prevalence of illegal initiation schools

The study findings revealed a noticeable prevalence of illegal initiation schools across all four provinces selected. However, this information was based on the knowledge and views of the participants who were interviewed, as no authoritative information, including reliable statistics, could be gathered on these illegal initiation schools. This is understandable given the illegal and therefore clandestine nature of these schools in South Africa. Many of these illegal operations are conducted secretly, and with the purpose of avoiding detection, given the legal consequences for those involved.

To illustrate the point of illegal initiation schools being prevalent, however, information obtained by the National Assembly's Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) can be used. In July 2022, the Portfolio Committee conducted oversight visits in the Eastern Cape and reported that the number of illegal initiation schools was higher than that of legal schools. The Committee discovered that there were 66 legal initiation schools, while 68 others were operating illegally in the OR Tambo District Municipality alone.¹⁸ It is clear from these figures that the number of illegal initiation schools was higher than the number of registered schools in this district, which potentially demonstrates the extent of the situation more broadly.

¹⁸ The Citizen. "Nine boys die in Eastern Cape as illegal initiation schools sparks concern: Parliament has urged the NPA to prioritise the prosecution of cases relating to illegal initiation schools." <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/3137187/initiation-school-deaths-parliament-9-july-2022/> Accessed: 07 September 2022.

In provinces such as Gauteng and the Free State, the CGE study findings revealed that there were clearly identifiable locations and residential areas in specific municipalities where such illegal initiation schools were likely to operate. It emerged that kidnapping and assaults existed dominated by Basotho initiation schools. In the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, the specific patterns of geographic locations and prevalence were not clear. In most cases illegal initiation schools were not based in permanent locations and they were thus mobile during different initiation seasons. This was believed to be because the school operators were in fear of being caught and arrested, given that their practices contravene the law. Given the aforesaid, it then made it difficult for the relevant authorities and departments to play an oversight role in these schools' daily operations in line with the rules and regulations. Details regarding the extent of provision of healthcare needs to the initiates, the welfare and safety of the young men and boys enrolled in these operations, and their access to water and sanitation and food security among others were thus obscure.

It is vital to note that in provinces such as Gauteng and the Free State, certain schools were fraudulently registered. Robust allegations were made that fraudulent registration papers were being issued by personnel at local municipalities for a fee, without following due processes as prescribed in their respective provincial legislations. This practice made it difficult to differentiate authentically registered initiation schools from those that had been issued with illegal registration papers.

Commercialisation of the tradition of initiation was perceived by those interviewed for the study as being responsible for the escalation of illegal initiation schools. As already mentioned, in some provinces such as Gauteng and the Free State, the location of these illegal schools was well known to government officials and the traditional sector, although no action had been taken to curtail their existence and operations.

Participants through interviews demonstrated that this was due to government officials such as the police and municipal authorities working hand in glove with the people who ran these initiation schools. It was alleged that the aforesaid officials were often on the payroll of these illegal institutions, which resulted in poor law enforcement. This finding suggests that the owners of illegal initiation schools are well known to law enforcement units and are protected by them.

A practice was also reported where foreign nationals from Lesotho cross the border into South Africa with the purpose of abducting boys and young men, who are then taken to initiation schools in Lesotho without their parents' knowledge. These culprits were alleged to be operating freely, while several boys and young men's rights were being grossly violated. Some of the reasons for this practice will be deliberated upon in the section that follows in the brief.

5.2 Factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of illegal initiation schools

The findings from the interviews conducted with key role-players revealed several common push and pull factors regarding the establishment of the illegal initiation schools. For the purposes of this brief, 'push factors' are explained as those conditions and circumstances that compel the initiates (often against their will) to subject themselves to the practices of illegal initiation schools. "Pull factors" are those factors that are attractive and positively associated with the act of initiation, circumcision, and the cultural and eventual social positioning associated with the transition to manhood status. These factors as a result, encourage the initiates (and their legal guardians) to view this process as favourable.

One of the key push factors identified was peer-group pressure. Such social groups and networks exert considerable force, which often entails pushing young men and boys towards initiation schools, especially illegal initiation schools as these schools do not adhere to the stringent standards set to govern the initiation schools in South Africa. Many boys and young men in local communities and schools, at least in the Free State, Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, and presumably in many other parts of the country are part of social groups and youth networks that impact and shape their day-to-day behaviours and subsequently, their path to adulthood.

The second key push factor appears to be the lack of financial resources, especially for many young men and boys from impoverished families who are desperate to undergo the initiation process. The findings across the four

provinces indicated that, to a very large extent, the lack of financial resources emerged as a paramount push factor for boys and young men to opt for illegal initiation schools, implying that such schools are more affordable. The findings indicated, however, that there is insufficient data to determine the comparative average costs, not only among illegal initiation schools, but also between legal and illegal initiation schools within the various provinces.

Another push factor was the fear of parental disapproval, as one of the prerequisites for being an eligible initiate as per the rules and regulations is parental approval. Boys and young men desperate to undergo initiation therefore opted for enrolling in illegal initiation schools, where admission procedures and eligibility were lax and less onerous, and parental consent in such facilities was usually not required.

In terms of the pull factors as defined earlier, it emerged from the findings that initiates voluntarily subjected themselves to initiation and circumcision practices by illegal and unregistered facilities. Initiates attended these schools without considering important issues that might impact their lives while they were there. Issues such as healthcare, safety and security, food security, shelter, access to water and sanitation, which are crucial basic human rights services that need to be taken into consideration as per the initiation rules and regulations. The findings revealed that initiates attended these schools to show respect for the cultural practice by both the caregivers and the initiates; the idea of transitioning from boyhood to manhood; and the promise of the benefits of being an adult, such as the ability to take a wife and be given adult responsibilities, and thus avoiding the disrespect that comes with being an uninitiated young man or boy.

Both pull and push factors were found to be crucial in driving young men towards illegal rather than legal initiation schools and subjecting them to risk their health, welfare, safety and their lives in general and degrading or devaluing a culturally dignified tradition.

While there were prominent pull and push factors driving young men and boys to enrol in illegal initiation schools voluntarily, the findings also revealed that some boys and young men were kidnapped into the initiation schools. The findings pointed to this practice as being more prevalent in the Free State, especially along the Lesotho and South African border. The owners of these illegal initiation schools would kidnap the children and extort exorbitant amounts of money from the parents and guardians of the children. These kidnappings led to loss of lives in some cases and amputation of their children's manhood and other body parts in some instances, as a negotiation strategy to extort money in exchange for the life of the victim.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

From the findings presented in this policy brief, the CGE concludes that the existence of illegal initiation schools is widespread even though actual figures, including trends and comparisons, could not be drawn owing to the clandestine and sporadic manner in which illegal initiation schools operate.

There are a number of push and pull factors, ranging from social to economic justifications, that attract young men and boys to enrol themselves in illegal initiation schools despite the risks to the health, welfare and lives of initiates. It appears that the social benefits of being a graduate outweigh the risk of undergoing a potentially harmful and even fatal route of illegal initiation by those who enrol in these schools.

Furthermore, poor oversight and enforcement associated with the practice of traditional initiation and circumcision in some parts of the country have laid fertile ground for the rise and co-existence of illegal, unregistered or fraudulently registered initiation schools, alongside the registered initiation schools in South Africa. The secrecy that usually surround this practice has also created an enabling environment for illegal initiation schools and formed the foundation for illegal and criminal activities.

Finally, the numerous problems identified in this policy brief have led to the conclusion that the traditional initiation sector suffers not only from the lack of effective enforcement of current laws, rules and regulations but also from a lack of effective, direct and ongoing monitoring of the activities of initiation schools.

6.2 Recommendations

From the above conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- The CGE recommends that the Department of Traditional Affairs must ensure that norms and standards for the regular oversight, monitoring and evaluation of the work of traditional initiation schools are enacted in line with the new Customary Initiation Act, No. 2 of 2021.
- The Commission recommends that the SAPS at provincial-level, along with municipal police bodies develop and strengthen their detective and intelligence-gathering units to build capacity to combat the proliferation of illegal initiation schools and the criminal activities associated with them, such as the kidnapping and killing of initiates.
- The Commission further recommends that effective community educational awareness programmes should be conducted by the provincial Houses of Traditional Leaders, working closely with municipalities and other key role-players (especially parents, school principals and educators) in communities affected by the problems of crime and the anti-social consequences that result in illegal initiation schools.
- Finally, it is vital that the CGE works closely with other relevant institutions, such as the South African Human Rights Commission and the Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities to ensure that initiates undergo the cultural practices of initiation and circumcision in safe and secure environments, where their cultural, human and sexual reproductive health rights are not violated.



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