Gender violence - What's the evidence? How can we tackle it?

Studies from around the world show that gender violence is a major feature of school life for many adolescent pupils, especially girls. For girls in sub-Saharan Africa, particular aspects of this violence include sexual abuse and harassment by older male pupils and male teachers, and, in the vicinity of the school, by 'sugar daddies' who seek sex in exchange for money or gifts. Boys as well as girls are exposed to regular verbal abuse and insults from both teachers and other pupils, and excessive corporal punishment from both male and female teachers. Boys too may be victims of sexual abuse.

Violent schools are breeding grounds for potentially damaging gendered practices which remain with pupils into adult life. Some may themselves become abusers. When school authorities fail to clamp down on gender violence, they send the message to pupils that it is a 'normal' feature of life. Failure by those in authority to investigate allegations and to report offenders, lack of prosecution of teachers and others guilty of sexual misconduct, and lack of information for parents and pupils about their rights and available channels for complaints, allow such behaviour to continue unchecked.

Gender violence is a sensitive area to research because it involves sexual abuse, which is a taboo topic, one which we would prefer to ignore. Abuse of schoolchildren remains largely hidden because victims are reluctant to talk about their experiences to teachers and parents and those in authority may find easy excuses for a lack of action. In Ghana, as elsewhere, people prefer to talk about abuse as being something experienced by others.

Gender violence includes:
- sexual harassment and abuse
- bullying, intimidation and threats
- verbal abuse, taunts and insults
- physical violence and assault, including corporal punishment and other physical punishments
- emotional abuse (e.g. tempting someone into a sexual relationship under false pretences such as promises of marriage)
- psychological abuse (e.g. threatening to beat a pupil or to fail them in an exam).

The Government of Ghana has made a concerted effort to increase enrolments at primary and JSS levels, especially among girls. The establishment of a Girls' Education Unit in the Ghana Education Service and the appointment of Girls' Education Officers at the regional and district levels to oversee improvements in girls' participation are significant developments. Despite these efforts, girls continue to be enrolled in fewer numbers than boys, and to have higher dropout rates and lower achievement. It may be that abusive and intimidating behaviour in schools undermines efforts to improve girls’ participation.

There is an urgent need for a more coordinated, proactive and system-wide response to combat the problem of school-based abuse. The study revealed weaknesses in terms of linkages between the district education office and the national level response to violence and abuse in the school environment. A holistic approach is required, working with all categories of stakeholders; e.g. teachers, parents, pupils, government officials in education, health and social welfare, the police, child protection agencies and NGOs working with women and children. The example of one head teacher's misconduct is informative, as it shows how difficult it still is for communities to gain redress, despite efforts to delegate powers of educational decision-making to regional and local bodies and to give political voice to the people through district assemblies and bodies such as SMCs.

Accra Workshop

A workshop with 30 representatives from the Ministry of Education, DFID, NGOs and UN agencies was held at Miklin Hotel, Accra in March 2003 to disseminate the findings of the research, raise awareness and develop action plans to address abuse in schools. Follow up activities sponsored by a range of agencies have included integration of school-based abuse issues into:
- the Sara Communication Initiative to improve life skills education in schools
- training for social workers working with victims of violence
- workshops to promote child protection in schools
- training of trainers in human rights education

Additional activities have included: a widely distributed leaflet about abuse of school children, anti-abuse clubs established in 10 Accra schools, and a Community Sensitisation Campaign to stamp out abuse. WAJU (Ghana Police) has scaled up its outreach programme in schools and is collecting systematic data on cases of sexual abuse of school children.
Gender Violence in Schools: Ghana

The research

The research was part of a three-country study of the abuse of girls in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe. In Ghana, it was carried out in three government schools in one region, one urban, one peri-urban and one rural school. Each school covered the full basic education cycle and was selected randomly within each category.

Interviews were conducted with 48 girls, mostly aged 11-15, from upper Primary and JSS 1 and 2 (16 in each school), 27 boys from JSS 1 and 2 (9 in each school) and 18 teachers (8 female and ten male) together with the school heads, Guidance and Counselling (G&C) teachers, a sample of parents, a number of senior officials from the Ministry of Education, education and social welfare officers, and an officer from the Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU) of the Ghana Police. A similar format but with larger samples was used for the research in Malawi and Zimbabwe.

The research started with a series of two day workshops with pupils in the three schools, followed by interviews (May to August 2001) and the trialling of small scale strategic interventions in September/November 2001. This included the formation of school clubs to develop girls’ confidence to talk about abuse, a workshop for parents and teachers, and a durbar in one community aimed at raising awareness about abuse. This involved the girls in performing a play based on the main issue raised during interviews (the greatest threat to girls came from older boys in the school, but there was also evidence that some teachers were guilty of sexual misconduct with female pupils).

Sexual abuse of schoolgirls

In the Malawi study, out of the total of 106 girls in three schools, 39% knew of a teacher having sex with a girl in the school and 34% knew a girl who had become pregnant by a teacher, but only 11% admitted to having received a ‘love proposal’ from a teacher. 79% of the 65 boys interviewed thought that girls preferred older boys and men as sexual partners.

In the Zimbabwe study, out of a total of 112 girls in four schools (three mixed and one single sex), 92% said that they had been propositioned by adult men, whether strangers, neighbours or relatives, and over half said that they had experienced unsolicited physical contact or assault from male strangers or out of school boys, of whom 13 had been grabbed or pinched on the breast and 7 grabbed by the buttocks. Of the 73 girls in the three co-educational schools, 19% said that they had been propositioned by a teacher and 74% said that they knew of girls who had sugar daddies. Several named girls currently having an affair with a teacher in their school.

Findings: Ghana

The research revealed that abusive behaviour by male pupils, teachers and sugar daddies did exist in the Ghanaian school context. The greatest threat to girls came from older boys in the school, but there was also evidence that some teachers were guilty of sexual misconduct with female pupils.

Teacher violence

Table 1 shows that in the peri-urban school (chosen at random) there was widespread awareness of teacher sexual misconduct. Ten out of the 16 girls interviewed stated that they knew of a teacher having sex with a girl in the school and that they themselves had been propositioned for sex by a teacher; five said that a teacher was having sex with a girl in their class. Seven out of the 9 boys interviewed confirmed this. The culprit turned out to be the head teacher. Significantly, none of the teachers in this school was ready to talk about this, although most said that they had heard of cases in other schools; instead, they suggested that most school-based abuse of girls was perpetrated by boys. Parents did however know what was going on (one parent said angrily ‘How can the school protect girls if teachers are those who trouble our daughters?’) but they did not know how to deal with the situation, or had been too afraid to report it.

Table 1 also shows that some girls knew of a girl who had become pregnant by a teacher in the school (12.5%) but that many more knew of a girl who had got pregnant by a boy in the school (62.5%) or by a man or boy outside the school (37.5%).

45 out of the 48 girls said that they had been beaten at least once by a teacher and 32 girls said that teachers had used verbal abuse to them. Most of the girls approved of some corporal punishment, provided it was given in moderation and for appropriate reasons. Both girls and boys found verbal abuse more upsetting and humiliating than physical punishment; this had a negative impact on their behaviour and full participation in school life. However, fear of excessive corporal punishment also discouraged participation in class and led to absenteeism.

Table 1: Girls’ views of sexual relations and pregnancies in their school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Peri-urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total (48)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know at least one teacher having sex with a girl in the school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know a girl in her class having sex with a teacher</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has herself been propositioned by a teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know of at least one friend propositioned by a teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know a girl in the school who got pregnant by one of her teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know a girl in the school who got pregnant by a boy in the school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know a girl who got pregnant by a man/boy outside school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know a girl in the class with a sugar daddy or older boy as boyfriend</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A study of the sexual health status of 400 in-school and out-of-school adolescents in Dodowa found that adolescent premarital sexual activity was common. Out of 49 JSS girls included in the sample, 39% were sexually active, of whom 68% had engaged in sex for money. 63% had had sex with a stranger, 63% had experienced forced sex (JSS girls recorded higher levels than SSS and out-of-school girls) and 16% had had multiple partners in the last year. Most sexual activity was with their peers, but two JSS girls reported having had sex with a teacher and 5% of all instances of forced sex was with teachers. Focus group discussions revealed that girls thought that those teachers having sex with students were mainly national service personnel serving in schools, younger teachers and head teachers (in that order). Girls might have sex with teachers to obtain extra tuition, higher marks in exams or exam questions in advance.

Pupil violence

Both girls and boys were reluctant to talk about their own sexual activity and whether they had a sexual partner, but they were relatively willing to talk about others. Although only a quarter of the girls interviewed admitted to having been propositioned for sex by boys in the school (Table 2), a high number said that boys’ behaviour troubled them and some felt it affected their studies. The boys’ interviews confirmed that peer pressure pushes boys into trying to get girlfriends so as to increase their status in the group. Boys largely saw getting girlfriends as a competitive game and would sometimes falsely oust a girl. Over half had admitted using threatening behaviour at times towards girls. However, teachers were more likely to discipline boys for being late to school than for assaulting a girl.

Other male violence

Table 3 shows that 41.7% of girls had been propositioned for sex by a male stranger, relative or neighbour and that girls in the urban school were twice as likely to be propositioned than in the other schools. Most girls were propositioned in a public place. Disturbingly, a large number of girls thought that girls are trapped into having sex, whether by sugar daddies, teachers or older boys, and in some cases raped (72.9%). Most thought that girls were trapped by the need or the desire for money, but peer pressure also played a part.

Consequences

Although older male pupils pose more of a daily problem for girls, the impact of the minority of male teachers who engage in sexual misconduct is much greater because of their position of trust in the school and community. Teacher misconduct negatively affects enrolment and daily attendance; in the community with the abusing head teacher enrolments were low, especially among girls, and many parents preferred to send their younger children to a private school in the village. Male teacher misconduct also presents a negative male role model to boys.

Where victims or parents make official complaints, the schools often fail to discipline offenders. By not wanting to report or prosecute teachers out of a desire to protect their image or the reputation of the teaching profession, education authorities are shielding perpetrators and helping to perpetuate serious sexual misconduct. In those cases where teachers are disciplined, they are usually transferred to another school, which is an insufficient deterrent to prevent further abusive behaviour.

Girls who report to the school authorities are often victimised, ridiculed and stigmatised by pupils and teachers. Suffering the effects in silence damages their confidence and self-esteem and retards their educational progress and achievement.

Such attitudes continue to foster an authoritarian culture where the behaviour of teachers cannot be questioned and girls come to accept such behaviour by boys as well as by teachers as an inevitable part of their daily school life. Violence within the school encourages pupils, especially girls, to drop out; in such cases girls will be more at risk of sexual violence from men in the community.

Table 2: Girls’ views of abusive behaviour by boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Peri-urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total (48)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls propositioned by boys</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls troubled by boys’ behaviour</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of whom:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls whose studies are affected by this</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Girls’ views of abusive behaviour by men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Peri-urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total (48)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositioned by men</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of whom:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the house or compound</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a public place (e.g. market, bus terminal)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe girls agree to have sex with older men</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe girls are raped</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A 2001 survey of sexual harassment among 560 secondary school students in Botswana found that 67 percent said they had been subjected to, among other things, unsolicited touching, patting or pinching and pressure for dates. A quarter said they had been subjected to such harassment on a regular basis. Twenty percent said they had been asked by teachers to have sex with them. Almost half (42 percent) of these accepted, mainly because they feared lower grades if they refused. The vast majority of students believe that having a sexual relationship with their teachers is wrong. They say students lose concentration, fail exams and end up on the streets.


Male teacher misconduct presents a negative role model for boys

Gender Violence in Schools Newsletters:
1 What is it and why does it happen?
2 What can be done?
3 Ghana
4 Malawi
5 Zimbabwe
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Recommendations

The following are for consideration by stakeholders at every level of the education system.

Ministry of Education

The MOE can strengthen policies, structures, guidelines and procedures.
- Develop and adopt a plan of action on school-based violence, in wide consultation with parents, pupils, teachers, social workers and NGOs
- Establish a special unit for children's rights and protection within the Ministry and GES. GES should record and report all cases of child abuse to WAJU and work with the police to identify proper procedures for handling cases.
- Develop a stronger and more transparent national policy for handling cases of abuse; revise the teachers' code of conduct to take into account new legal and disciplinary procedures; suspend teachers during criminal investigations and not transfer them until cleared of all charges.
- Set out guidelines for schools on appropriate action in cases of abuse, creating easily accessible procedures for girls to make confidential complaints.
- Conduct a national public information campaign, e.g. through radio, TV and newspapers, to sensitize the public to the scale of the problem, the negative consequences in particular for girls, the rights of parents and pupils, and the procedures to follow in reporting cases.

The Ghana Education Service (GES)

The GES can make a positive impact at the community, district and school levels through improving communication and ensuring effective enforcement of regulations.

Community
- Organise regular participatory durbars to sensitize communities on children's rights, teacher accountability and legal procedures to follow in cases of abuse in school, especially if it is sexual in nature.
- Hold Parent-Teacher workshops in schools to raise awareness of abuse and parental responsibility for children's education, and to develop community-based action plans to handle allegations of abuse.
- Strengthen PTAs and SMCs through training and support from the District Education Office; give SMCs powers/skills to monitor teacher behaviour and pupil attendance; revise the PTA and SMC training manual to include regulations on teacher misconduct and clear procedures for reporting cases of child abuse.

School principals and teachers

School principals are crucial in ensuring that pupils learn in a supportive environment. Less authoritarian schools are not necessarily ones with poor discipline. Strong leadership is key.

Studies show that schools with high attendance and achievement are those where expectations of both teacher and pupil behaviour are high, where the school culture is supportive of both (and includes teacher professional development) and where regulations are enforced fairly and firmly.

School principals can work with teachers to:
- Create a pupil-friendly environment which is conducive for learning, by working with pupils, especially girls, supporting their personal development and protecting their rights.
- Attach importance to gender equity in a whole school approach
- Take effective action against cases of abuse and bullying in the school, confront the issue and deal with it as a serious disciplinary matter
- Consider setting up a Student Council with pupil representation and involvement in decision-making
- Foster more trusting relationships between pupils and teachers. The research showed that pupils distrust their teachers and rarely confide in them.
- Strengthen G&C teaching so that it engages pupils with the issues and develops understanding. A traditional didactic approach is not suitable. Allow space for reflection, analysis and open discussion of taboo topics. Life skills should promote consent, negotiation and consultation in adolescent relationships rather than power, domination and control.

Teachers colleges

Teachers are key to change in the school setting but to do this effectively they need to have the necessary awareness and skills to act.
- Provide gender-based training courses and workshops for all teacher trainers and trainees to promote awareness of the ways in which teachers perpetuate negative stereotypes about female and male behaviour, often unconsciously, and the need to treat girls and boys equally.
- Raise awareness about the importance of ethical professional conduct so that they understand the seriousness of abusing the trust that has been placed in them.
- Familiarise all trainees with the teachers' code of conduct and the penalties and procedures for dealing with misconduct and negligence.
- Train a specialist cadre of G&C teachers in participatory methods.

Parents

Parents and carers should be encouraged to:
- Listen to what children tell them and refrain from blaming girls when they make allegations.
- Provide their children, especially girls, with basic school items.
- Refer from entering into negotiations for compensation with teachers who have made their daughters pregnant.

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