

Gender Violence in Schools 1

what is it and why does it happen?

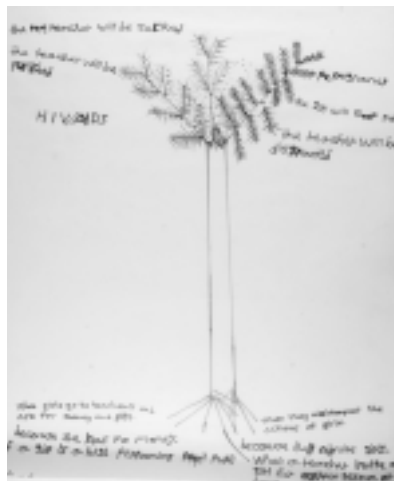
Conspiracy of silence – Why is gender violence so common in schools? Why is so little action taken to tackle it?

A recent study, carried out in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe by a team led from the University of Sussex UK, provides disturbing evidence that gender violence is a major feature of school life for many adolescent pupils, especially girls. The failure of school management to clamp down on sexual abuse and aggressive behaviour sends messages to pupils that violence is 'normal'.

The research found that:

- m Some male teachers as well as older male pupils routinely proposition girls for sex; sugar daddies seek out schoolgirls for sex in exchange for money or gifts
- m Teachers and pupils use sexually explicit abusive language, which is particularly degrading for girls
- m Teachers are reluctant to report other teachers' sexual misconduct
- m Teachers dismiss boys' intimidating behaviour as merely part of 'growing up'
- m Some teachers administer excessive corporal punishment, especially on boys
- m Powerful peer pressure encourages girls to make themselves attractive to boys and older men, and boys to show prowess in sexual conquest, using coercion if necessary to obtain girlfriends
- m Some girls enter sexual relationships out of choice but poverty pushes others to engage in transactional sex in order to pay school fees or meet living expenses; such dependent and potentially exploitative liaisons put girls at serious risk of HIV infection

violent schools are breeding grounds for potentially damaging gendered practices



Girls' drawing of a 'cause and consequence tree'.

- m Not all parents, teachers and girls disapprove of teachers or older men having sexual liaisons with schoolgirls, whether for economic or cultural reasons.

Girls are more vulnerable to sexual violence than boys because of their lower status in society and their limited opportunities for casual income. However, boys (and teachers) may also be victims of violence, especially those who do not conform to dominant patterns of male and female behaviour. Young female teachers are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

Similar studies in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the world confirm that violent schools are breeding grounds for potentially damaging gendered practices, which remain with young people into adult life. Sexual abuse by male pupils and teachers is only one aspect of a wider problem of school-based violence, which includes excessive corporal punishment and bullying. Failure to take action against all forms of violence by those in authority, lack of information for parents and pupils about their rights and channels for complaints, and a reluctance to believe girls who make allegations, allows abuse to go unchecked.

Only an imaginative holistic approach – bringing together teachers, teacher trainers, parents, pupils, state officials and civil society – can make schools safe environments for pupils. Educators need to challenge the notion of violence as a societal norm and to take firm action to stamp it out. Traditional teaching methods are unlikely to change patterns of sexual behaviour. Instead, participatory approaches and the use of interactive media such as drama, film and storytelling have proved effective with pupils in challenging dominant views of gender identity and sexual relationships. The accompanying Newsletter *Gender Violence in Schools – what can be done?* provides

Scared at School

A recent report by Human Rights Watch entitled 'Scared at School: sexual violence against girls in South African schools' documents the scale of sexual violence against girls by male students, teachers and other staff. Girls of every race and economic class can be targets. Some male teachers view sexual relations with students as a fringe benefit to compensate for low pay and seek to bribe girls for sexual favours with promises of better grades and reports – they may threaten beatings or punishments if the girl refuses. Girls' subordinate status in society, poverty, deprivation and fear of retaliation make it difficult for them to resist or complain. At the same time, school officials, police, and prosecutors often shift responsibility to each other, leaving perpetrators unpunished.

In the face of greater public awareness of the issue, the South African government must develop a proactive, coordinated, system-wide response involving schools, police, the judiciary, medical and legal systems. Teachers facing allegations should be suspended pending the outcome of prosecution and those convicted banned from teaching anywhere in the school system.

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some examples.

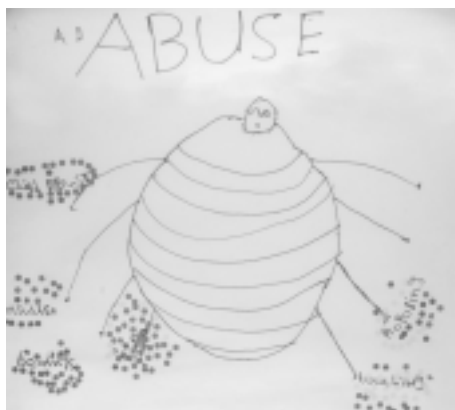
It is recommended that:

- m schools become less authoritarian, more pupil-friendly and more supportive, especially of girls, so as to promote effective learning and personal development
- m teachers, pupils and communities are trained to identify school-based abuse, understand the penalties that it incurs and the available channels for complaints and investigations
- m the teacher training curriculum covers issues of ethical conduct, sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS and guidance on how teachers can challenge negative stereotypes about female and male behaviour
- m officials ensure effective dissemination and vigorous enforcement of regulations about teacher misconduct and sexual abuse, with prompt disciplinary action and prosecutions when necessary
- m ministries provide clear guidelines to all stakeholders on the regulations regarding professional misconduct and appropriate responses to allegations of rape, sexual assault or harassment.

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Girls' drawing of an 'abuse spider'.

Mixed messages

Governments rely on the national curriculum to promote sexual health in schools but the school culture often reinforces gender inequality, which risks undermining government strategy. Research with 13-18 year old pupils in Uganda revealed extensive gendered practices and a male dominated school culture. This means that the high knowledge that schoolchildren have about HIV infection may count for nothing.

Male domination in schools takes the form of:

- m preference for male pupils and male teachers in leadership roles
- m restricted access for girls to high status knowledge (e.g. science)
- m different disciplinary measures on boys and girls
- m strict 'policing' of girls' sexuality, e.g. what to wear, how to sit in public, how to talk to boys
- m sexual harassment which goes unchallenged by staff
- m boys' control of classroom language and

physical space, which forces girls to face insults whenever they speak up – or to remain silent.

Outside the classroom, sexual harassment of girls is reinforced by graffiti on walls, girls being touched on all parts of the body and degradation of the female body through abusive language and forced sex. Girls who refuse a boy's advances risk being subjected to taunts, abusive language, physical harassment or assault. In this way, social conformity to ideals of male leadership, manhood and male rights to sex are integral to school culture and passed on through the generations.

The new AIDS curriculum in Uganda contradicts this dominant school culture. Central to the 'official' AIDS message is that negotiation and partnership in sexual relationships are fundamental to HIV prevention. However, these require equal power and status between partners. Endemic harassment and violent relationships deny girls the right to make a choice or voice independence. The government needs to promote better understanding of how unequal gender relations contribute to the AIDS epidemic,

to address gender inequality within schools and to promote democratic learning in sex and AIDS education programmes within the curricula.

- Practical suggestions include the need to:
- m address a wide concept of sexual health including positive aspects (such as sexual orientation and the good sides of sex) within the school curriculum
 - m teach sex education in single-sex groups to give pupils greater freedom to discuss sensitive issues and greater control of their learning
 - m adopt a whole school approach (human rights, family planning, democratic learning) that challenges the social injustices brought about by gender discrimination
 - m initiate teacher-training courses that explore ways in which gender discrimination can be challenged within schools
 - m embark on serious gender mainstreaming initiatives offering equal opportunity for all.

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From guns and drugs to gender safety

School shootings in the USA have attracted much national attention and incited much panic. National and educational media reports of these acts focus exclusively on gangs, guns and drugs without recognising that gendered relationships are elements of school based violence, e.g. that most attacks are carried out by white boys upset about the break up of a relationship, rejection by a girl, or because they do not meet traditional expectations of masculinity. Yet, findings from a recent survey of 2000 students in 8-11th grade reveal that 83% of girls and 79% of boys have experienced sexual harassment in school, while 54% of students admit that they have sexually harassed someone during their school life.

In response, Wellesley College in the USA has developed and promoted the notion of 'gender safety' aimed at shifting attention away from the focus on gangs, guns and drugs towards an acknowledgement of the gendered dimensions of the threat to safety. These are not currently being addressed in research or in school or social policy. For example, school staff often witness incidents of sexual harassment but fail to take action because they do not label them as such. Although new legislation holds officials in all publicly funded schools liable in cases of peer to peer sexual harassment, the current focus on a 'zero tolerance' approach – 'one strike and you are out' – means that increased vigilance towards sexual harassment may result in outright expulsion and suspension of offenders (largely boys), without addressing the root causes of the problems.

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A safe space for girls

Many parents in Nepal refuse to send their daughters to school, fearing them to be at risk of 'inviting abuse' and affecting their and their families' reputation. The potential role of children in improving their environment and taking control of their own lives is largely ignored.

Save the Children in Nepal has facilitated research by children to address this issue. For example, girls in one district expressed strong feelings of vulnerability in their school and community. In school they were exposed to teasing, intimidation and verbal abuse by boys, and over-familiar behaviour by male teachers. They felt unsafe moving about the village. In the Save the Children project, the girls carried out the research themselves, using participatory tools to explore, map and analyse the types of space they occupied. In this way, they determined the characteristics of a safe environment and developed an action plan to take back their 'space'.

In order to reclaim their 'space', the girls identified the need:

- m for parents to recognise the importance of girls' education
 - m to avoid conservative traditions such as gender discrimination within castes, between sons and daughters, and early marriage
 - m for girls to be able to demonstrate their ability within the community
 - m for people to speak out against the oppression of girls
 - m to raise awareness of girls' rights and enable their access to equal opportunities.
- By sharing findings and

interacting with local government, schoolteachers and parents, children have begun to mobilise support for change. The research process has helped girls and boys to influence key players in the community and to bring about change. Some examples are:

- m the girls' group has been consulted by community members on various cases of abuse or mistreatment of girls in the area. In one case, where a local policeman kidnapped an 11 year old girl, the girls intervened by writing to the local police commissioner, the girl was freed and an investigation conducted.
- m Teachers and boys now pay greater respect to girls. Boys who were initially 'teasers' now support girls' efforts to manage change and advocate respect for girls through drama. Support groups for abused girls have been established by local communities.
- m Local government bodies often cite the support groups as success stories, inviting them to events related to girls' rights and safety.

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