Breaking the silence - What action can we take?

A recent study carried out in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe by a team led from the University of Sussex shows that gender violence is a major feature of school life for many adolescent pupils, especially girls. The research found that:

- 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.
- Teachers and pupils use sexually explicit abusive language, which is particularly degrading for girls.
- Teachers are reluctant to report other teachers’ sexual misconduct.
- Teachers dismiss boys’ intimidating behaviour as merely part of ‘growing up’.
- Some teachers administer excessive corporal punishment, especially on boys.

An imaginative and holistic approach is required to tackle gender violence in schools, involving pupils, teachers, teacher trainers, parents, state officials and civil society.

Traditional teaching methods are unlikely to change sexual behaviour. Instead, an interactive pupil-oriented approach using a range of media such as drama and film have proved effective in creating space for young people to discuss gender roles and gender identity, which in turn can lead to more constructive, respectful and consensual relationships. Within such initiatives, it is crucial to work with boys as well as girls to challenge dominant gender stereotypes and behaviours.

Details of two manuals for educators are provided below and some interesting initiatives using interactive media for use with pupils are outlined overleaf. Several examples come from South Africa, where the government, educational institutions and NGOs are working together to counteract historically high levels of violence in society.

Working with teachers - How can we challenge gender violence?

Teaching the teachers

A study by CIET Africa in 2000 of the culture of sexual violence among 30,000 young people in one area of Greater Johannesburg highlights the vulnerability of young girls to violence. One in four men interviewed claimed to have had sex without a girl’s consent before the age of 18. At least half – both male and female – believed that forcing sex on someone you know is not sexual violence; it is just ‘rough sex’. Over half the girls said they believe that they were responsible for sexual abuse. To address this challenge, the Public Health Programme at the University of the Western Cape piloted two training models for primary schools. They focus on identifying and challenging teachers’ own knowledge and attitudes towards gender and gender-based violence, on encouraging teachers to reflect on the messages they send to students, and on identifying strategies to address this violence.

The project aimed to enable educators to incorporate the issue of violence against females into the primary school curriculum. 85 percent of the teachers involved in the pilot felt that gender violence was a significant problem in their schools, but prior to the training only 30 percent thought that schools could play a meaningful role in addressing it. This rose to 70 percent after the training. All the teachers thought that the school curriculum should include content on gender violence and that Grade 5 (age 9-10) was an appropriate stage to begin.

Teachers can be key instruments for change. They have the potential to be positive role models for children but they come with their own experiences as gendered beings. Some are perpetrators of abuse and some have been victims of harassment and abuse. To play an effective role in addressing gender violence in their schools, they first need to understand and confront their own gendered attitudes and experiences.

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Opening our eyes

‘Opening our Eyes: addressing gender-based violence in South African schools, a module for educators’ has been produced by the South African National Department of Education with McGill University in Canada and CIDA. It is designed for use at the school or district level with teachers, school managers and governing bodies. It starts from the belief that teachers must first possess the knowledge themselves in order to implement a curriculum of change. The eight interactive workshops show school staff what is happening in their schools and how they can respond to gender violence.

The module aims to:

- heighten awareness of what constitutes gender violence and sexual harassment and why they happen
- provide tools and strategies for addressing gender violence
- increase awareness of the links between gender violence and HIV/AIDS
- contribute to ‘whole school’ strategies for enhancing the culture of learning and teaching within a safe environment.

The module is a professional development tool and not part of the national curriculum. Teachers, teacher trainers and trainees all need to be familiarised with it. Central to successful implementation is acknowledgment of the links between the module and HIV/AIDS prevention, and government commitment.

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Working with pupils – How can we stamp out abuse?

Drama for self-reflection

Dramaide, a South African NGO, and the University of Natal have worked with groups of learners in two Durban schools to develop plays designed to raise HIV/AIDS and gender awareness. Evaluative research by the learners to test the effectiveness of the intervention helped deepen its impact.

‘Milli: Living Young Men to Care’ used a mixed gender approach, allowing single-sex work and mixed gender interactions. Small single-sex focus groups discussed with a researcher/evaluator the impact of the drama work on their understanding about gender equality. These ‘conversations’ allowed the learners to reflect critically on their lives with a new-found awareness of their gendered selves and to challenge entrenched ideas about gender inequality. Girls in particular were able to ‘test’ their new understandings, for example the realization that it was not obligatory to have sex with an assertive boy or to do the bidding of a fellow male learner, and in this way to challenge pervasive gender relations. For boys, the work led them to take more responsibility for their actions, to be more reflective and more able to express emotions, and to develop an understanding of the possibility of ‘doing masculinity’ differently. In this way, the learners could evaluate themselves through a process of self-reconstruction. Combining mixed and single-sex group work helped with the renegotiation of gender relations.

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Storytelling for change

The Storyteller Group in South Africa has used comic stories as a tool to explore the gendered dimensions of violence within adolescent relationships, showing how it is possible to reconcile the need to reflect the realities of young people’s lives with the need to transform harmful behaviour.

Candid camera

In South Asia, initiatives addressing violence against women have largely focussed on women’s empowerment. But there is a place for men too. The ‘Let’s Talk Men’ project, supported by Save the Children Fund and UNICEF, has made four films aimed at challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and raising awareness of HIV/AIDS among adolescents and violence against girls in the region.

Parents discussing gender and sexuality with their children is unheard of in South Asia. Most children develop notions of gender and power through cinema and television, which portray conservative images of women and men. The films aim to initiate discussions between boys and girls, help them understand how knowledge and femininity/masculinity are constructed and challenge traditional images and power relations between men and women.

In the film ‘When Four Friends Meet’, four boys in a working class area of Delhi share their secrets concerning sex, girls, their dreams, failures, frustrations and triumphs. After the screening, the facilitator leads a discussion on issues such as: What roles do boys play during childhood? How does society view working women, and why? Should boys cry; can they feel anxious or confused? The films present alternative male role models as well as a platform for discussion.

The project highlights the need for professionals to establish a culture of discourse with children, one which solicits their views and encourages them to talk about their experiences, rather than telling them what to do. It also advocates experiential and process-focused approaches to inform and sensitize children on topics around gender, sexuality and violence.

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Gender Violence in Schools:

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