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 within schools.

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 it easy to excuse a lack of action. In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, people prefer to talk about abuse as something experienced by others.

Girls are particularly at risk of violence and abuse because:
  - Women and girls occupy a subordinate status in society and are expected to be obedient and submissive; this makes it difficult for them to resist or complain
  - Boys learn that masculine behaviour involves being aggressive towards females
  - Girls who make allegations of sexual abuse by teachers and other men are often not believed
  - Teachers often fail to take action against boys who use aggressive and intimidating behaviour towards girls
  - Girls have fewer opportunities to earn casual income than boys, so poverty pushes some girls into exploitative relationships as a means of paying school fees or meeting living expenses.

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 Zimbabwe is committed to achieving the goal of Education For All. Enrolments at primary level are higher than in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with roughly equal participation by gender. However, more boys than girls enter JSS and much larger numbers of girls drop out, especially in Forms 2 and 3 (often due to pregnancy). Girls’ achievement also tends to be lower than that of boys. Little has been done to address violence and harassment in school and it may be that intimidating and abusive behaviour by boys undermines efforts to improve girls’ participation.

Zimbabwe has one of highest HIV infection rates in sub-Saharan Africa, with a prevalence rate estimated at 33.7% by UNAIDS in 2002. Many children are now orphans. It is well known that girls in the 15-24 age group are the most vulnerable to infection, sometimes 5 times more at risk than boys in the same age group. Both girls and boys are becoming sexually active at a much younger age. Some, especially girls living in poverty, engage in transactional sex (for money or gifts) and/or have multiple sexual partners; this increases their risk of HIV infection.

Schooling is important in increasing adolescent knowledge of HIV/AIDS, but if the school is a site of sexual abuse, this knowledge may be of little use. 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 local level institutions and the regional and national levels in terms of the response to gender violence in schools. 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.

Africa University Workshop

This 3 day regional dissemination workshop was held at Africa University in January 2001 and was attended by 42 participants. These included: education officers from the Ministry of Education, social welfare officers, head teachers, teachers and pupils from a number of schools, lecturers from the two regional teachers’ colleges, social workers, representatives from FAWE, UNIFEM and a number of NGOs working with women and children. At the workshop, an action plan, consisting of a series of participatory and intervention-oriented strategies, was developed to reduce schoolgirls’ vulnerability to abuse, to be implemented and monitored by the stakeholders over the following months. The action plan included:

- staff development activities aimed at raising awareness of gender issues, HIV/AIDS and the importance of counselling for students; collaboration with NGOs such as Musasa Project and Women’s Action Group to include schoolgirls in their on-going work on violence against women; participatory activities with groups of schoolgirls, creating space for them to analyse their own situations and think constructively about how to improve them; and meetings between head teachers and regional/district education officers to discuss collaboration in making schools a safer environment for all pupils. A follow up meeting took place in March 2004 to assess progress on implementing the action plan.
The research

The first phase of the research was carried out in Zimbabwe in 1998-1999. Four government junior secondary schools (JSS) in Manicaland Province were chosen, one urban, one peri-urban and two rural schools. The urban school was an all-girls school but the others were co-educational. A second phase of the research (2000-2001) concentrated on designing and trialling strategies to address the abuse of girls in school, and included research in two more countries: Ghana and Malawi.

In the first phase in Zimbabwe, interviews were held with girls aged 13-17 in Forms 1-3 of JSS. They were conducted in three rounds, the first with 112 girls, the second with 73 girls and the third with 17 girls. The first round focused broadly on girls' problems in school and the second and third picked up on specific cases of sexual harassment and abuse. Interviews were also held with 59 boys, 23 teachers (11 male and 12 female), three heads teachers and one deputy head, 37 parents and a number of officials, including the regional Victim Friendly Court police officer. The interviews were followed by two day workshops using Participatory Research Appraisal (PRA) methods in two of the schools, aimed at exploring further the extent of abuse, why it exists and how it can be tackled. A similar format was used for the research in Ghana and Malawi, although only one round of girls' interviews was conducted and the PRA workshops took place at the start of the research rather than at the end. These proved to be an effective and safe forum for pupils to raise and discuss their problems openly and confidently.

Findings: Zimbabwe

The research provided evidence of abusive behaviour towards girls by older male pupils and male teachers in the three co-educational schools and by adult men (sugar daddies) in the vicinity of the school, seeking sex in exchange for money or gifts. Girls who attended the all-girls urban school were also accosted by older men as they travelled to and from the school, e.g. at bus stops and in the market place.

By failing to discipline perpetrators (whether pupils or teachers), denying that gender violence exists and fostering an authoritarian culture in which teacher behaviour cannot be questioned, schools are institutionalising male aggression. Pupils then learn that it is a normal feature of school life, which reflects violence found elsewhere - in the home, the community and the workplace. An unsettling and sometimes violent school environment is neither conducive to learning nor to the formation of mature relations between pupils (with implications for the spread of HIV/AIDS among adolescents).

Teacher violence

Of the 73 girls from the three mixed schools who were interviewed in the second round and asked about specific incidents of abuse, 14 girls (19%) said that they had been propositioned by a teacher. However, a much larger number (63%) said that they knew of other girls who had been approached. A number of girls were named repeatedly as having an affair with a teacher, and two to four teachers were named repeatedly by boys as well as girls as having affairs with girls in each of the mixed schools. Teachers pursued their amorous advances quite openly during class and sports activities, apparently without fear of being sanctioned. Girls were believed to have sex with teachers primarily for money but also to be favoured in class, to feel important, to avoid punishments, e.g. beatings, or to secure higher grades. Although almost all the girls said they disapproved of such relationships, a few thought them acceptable if the teacher was genuinely in love with the girl and intended to marry her.

Sexual abuse is linked to other forms of violence in schools, including the illegal and excessive use of corporal punishment, which is widespread and mostly in violation of strict Ministry regulations. 96% of the girls in the three mixed schools said that they had been beaten by at least one teacher, despite its use being banned on girls; in the all-girls school, the ban was strictly enforced but some girls reported having been beaten at primary school. Although the majority of girls (62%) disapproved of corporal punishment, a small minority thought it was sometimes justified (10%) and the remainder (28%) thought it was acceptable. This compared to 76% of teachers interviewed who were in favour of its use. Most pupils thought that male teachers beat them more than female teachers, who preferred to use verbal abuse, and that boys were beaten more than girls.

Pupil violence

Both girls and boys were reluctant to talk about their own sexual activity and to say whether they had a sexual partner, but they were relatively willing to talk about others. Both confirmed that there was strong peer pressure to enter sexual relationships. Dominant views of masculinity and femininity pushed boys into trying to get girlfriends so as to boast about their conquests and to affirm or increase their status in the male group, while girls were encouraged to make themselves attractive to boys and to be the recipient of gifts and favours. Boys were also subjected to bullying, especially if they did not conform to expectations of masculine behaviour.

Corporal punishment

Beatings with a thick stick, cane, belt or blackboard eraser are common, also pulling of pupils' ears and hair. Pupils can be beaten on the palm of the hand, the knuckles or finger tips, the back, legs or buttocks, also slapped on the face and back of the neck. Such punishments are given for arriving late, fighting, making a noise in class, not doing homework, insubordination, not listening to the teacher's instructions, ignoring other punishments, failing to answer questions in class or failing a test.

Verbal abuse

Verbal abuse by both teachers and pupils is widespread. Examples from teachers (in English or Shona) are:

- good for nothing
- lazy bastard
- scumbag
- you pig
- you dog
- baboon
- bullshit
- I'll beat you shitless

Verbal abuse directed at girls is often sexually explicit and particularly demeaning. Examples include:

- you whore
- you prostitute, you think I'll propose to you
- you think I'll sleep with you like your boys do
- you think I'm here to touch your breasts

Sexual abuse of schoolgirls

In the Ghana study, in one school 10 out of 16 girls reported that they had been propositioned for sex by a teacher in the school, 5 reported that they knew of a girl in their class who was having sex with a teacher, and 3 knew of a girl in the school who had become pregnant by a teacher. In this school, it turned out that the guilty party was the head teacher who had been abusing schoolgirls for many years. After an investigation by the district education office, his only punishment was to be transferred to an all boys' school.

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 mixed schools, some girls had formed seemingly happy relationships with boys but all too often male behaviour was aggressive. Boys largely saw getting girlfriends as a competitive game and would often fight over them. Typically, the older boys in the school would force themselves onto the younger girls’ attention, accosting them in the corridors and school grounds, entering their classrooms uninvited and, in one school, ambushing them on their way home from school. Boys would also ‘propose’ to girls by sending them love letters; if they turned them down, they would issue threats, shout obscenities and sometimes beat the girl. They would be particularly abusive if the girl had accepted a gift or money. Money played an important part in these demonstrations of male sexuality; boys sometimes gave small gifts of money to girls or bought them snacks. Girls who had pocket money to spend during break times were admired and popular.

34 out of the 73 girls (47%) in the mixed schools said that they had experienced unsolicited physical contact from boys; this included touching, pinching or grabbing a girl’s breasts or buttocks, twisting her arm, blocking her way, and in a few cases hitting her. During lessons, boys also used sexually explicit language and drawings and showed condoms to embarrass girls. This aggressive behaviour may have put pressure on some girls to form a relationship with a boy or a teacher for protection, also to consolidate their position within the female peer group. The boys’ interviews confirmed the importance of securing girlfriends, the well-developed ritual of ‘proposing’ and the threatening behaviour of some boys towards girls. They saw girls as fair game and held them in uniform contempt, as being only interested in men for money, and hence preferring older men. However, they showed even greater contempt for male teachers, whom they considered as unfair competition in securing girls for sex. Although some girls responded positively to boys’ advances and according to some pupils even encouraged them, many reported being irritated, embarrassed and confused by this unsolicited attention. They talked of loss of concentration in class, crying, feeling anxious and bothered, and being too frightened to leave the classroom at lunch and break times. Very few took retaliatory action; instead they developed strategies to deal with the boys’ behaviour, for example always walking home with other girls, moving around the school together and avoiding passing near a crowd of boys. They had little faith in their teachers and so did not report incidents.

### Other male violence

Out of a total of 112 girls in the four schools, 103 girls (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 adult men or out of school boys. 13 said that they had been grabbed or pinched on the breasts and 7 grabbed by the buttocks. Three quarters of the girls said that they knew of girls in the school who had sugar daddies. This was the case even in the all-girls’ school, where girls came from wealthier homes. It would appear therefore that not only poverty but also peer pressure and the desire to have fun encouraged girls into sexual relationships with older men.

### 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. Male teacher misconduct also presents a negative 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 of silence may damage their confidence and self-esteem and retard their educational progress. 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.

### Girls’ interviews

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<th>Total 73 %</th>
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<tr>
<td>Has been propositioned by a teacher</td>
<td>14 19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knows a girl who has been propositioned by a teacher</td>
<td>46 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has received one or more love letters from a boy</td>
<td>59 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has experienced unsolicited physical contact from one or more boys</td>
<td>34 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows one or more girls with a sugar daddy</td>
<td>54 74</td>
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### Gender Violence in Schools Newsletter

1. What is it and why does it happen?
2. What can be done?
3. Ghana
4. Malawi
5. Zimbabwe

### Production: Fiona Leach with Pamela Machakanja

Design: Robert Wheeler

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### Contacts

Dr Fiona Leach, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9QQ, UK.
T: +44 (0)1273 678256  E: f.e.leach@sussex.ac.uk  W: www.sussex.ac.uk/education

Pamela Machakanja, Africa University, PO Box 1320, Mutare, Zimbabwe.
T: 263 20 60026/60075/6161  Email: Pamela Machakanja: iplg@africau.ac.zw  W: www.africau.ac.zw
Recommendations

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

The Ministry of Education (national and regional)

- ensure a rigorous selection of trainee teachers, to include routine background checks (e.g. for a criminal record) and vetting of teacher appointments (e.g. investigate why teachers are asking for a transfer)
- select head teachers on record of good performance and leadership skills rather than seniority; provide training in management, leadership and effective disciplinary action
- try to place married teaching couples in the same school or locality
- make Guidance & Counselling a specialised full time position, with adequate training, materials, syllabus and guidelines
- provide a gender awareness component in all initial and in-service training courses
- establish a more effective, and less cumbersome, reporting system to encourage heads to take action in cases of abuse while also making them responsible if they fail to report such cases
- create a helpline or letter box in regional Ministries so that abused pupils can ask for help or report cases, whether at home or in school
- improve links with other regional authorities and agencies involved in child abuse, e.g. police, health, social welfare, NGOs, so that there is better recording and sharing of information
- share experience with other bodies working to counteract abuse, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence, and to promote women's and children's rights, with a view to educating children about their rights.

School principals

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 culture

- change the school culture of violence and complacency by enforcing effective disciplinary measures against those who indulge in abusive behaviour
- create a pupil-friendly environment which is conducive to learning, by working with pupils, especially girls, to support their personal development and protect their rights; foster more trusting relationships between pupils and teachers
- promote gender equity in a whole school approach, e.g. by ensuring that girls and boys are treated equally and given equal responsibilities, by encouraging girls to take up leadership positions
- consider setting up a Student Council with pupil representation and involvement in decision-making to teach pupils greater self-esteem and autonomy; involve them in planning and leading school assemblies, school clubs etc.

Teaching and training

- include training for teachers in staff development sessions on how to tackle abuse within the school and to deal with pupils' problems, especially girls'
- provide awareness raising around gender issues so that teachers understand how they can undermine pupils’ self-confidence, perpetuate negative gender stereotypes, and dampen girls’ aspirations
- ensure G&C is officially on the timetable and taught by a qualified teacher through a participatory approach, engaging pupils with the issues and allowing space for reflection, analysis and open discussion of taboo topics.

Enforcement of rules

- ensure that teachers, pupils and parents are familiar with school regulations and understand that they will be enforced fairly and consistently
- ensure that teachers know that cases of sexual misconduct will be reported
- moderate the use of corporal punishment and verbal abuse by teachers; ensure that the reasons for punishments are clearly explained to pupils and are aimed at correcting behaviour.

Outside resources

- invite resource persons from outside to talk to pupils about sexual health, abuse and children’s rights (e.g. health, medical and social welfare officers, police)
- invite respected members of the community to talk to pupils about their lives and the role that schooling played in it, especially successful women in public, professional and business life who can provide affirmative role models for girls
- invite girls or women who dropped out of school through pregnancy to talk about the negative consequences of this; consider inviting HIV-positive members of the community to speak
- work closely with parents and the community to make the school more accessible and welcoming; consider parents’ suggestions and avoid reprimanding them.

Teachers

Teachers are key to change in the school setting

- create a more friendly and supportive environment to encourage pupils to approach teachers with their problems
- take greater responsibility to help pupils make informed decisions about their lives and to address their problems constructively; recognise the importance of positive role models for both girls and boys
- encourage greater understanding, respect and maturity between boys and girls; encourage them to work collaboratively, e.g. when doing homework, rather than antagonistically
- encourage girls to take on positions of responsibility, e.g. as group leaders, monitors etc; motivate them to excel; use the new human rights curriculum to highlight girls’ rights and issues of equality; show boys that they share responsibility in a sexual relationship (e.g. if a girl gets pregnant)
- enforce rules on uniform, correct appearance and punctuality, so that pupils understand that they are working in a disciplined environment
- avoid verbal abuse and corporal punishment at all times.

Teacher training colleges

Teachers need to have the necessary awareness and skills to bring about change

- 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, 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 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 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
- refrain from using abusive language towards children
- show interest in their children’s progress in school, monitor their attendance and discuss their education with teachers
- refrain from entering into negotiations for compensation with teachers who have made their daughters pregnant.

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