



EQUATE TECHNICAL BRIEF: Addressing School-related Gender-based Violence

International campaigns aimed at increasing access to schooling worldwide have led to unprecedented numbers of children attending school in recent years. As more students attend school, what happens in and around schools becomes more of a concern. Students experiencing harm on the basis of their sex is emerging as a systemic form of violence and this violence is having an adverse effect on students' learning experiences and their health and well-being. Estimates indicate that almost half of all female students and a sizable number of male students experience some form of sexual violence in the educational context.¹ An unknown number of students are subjected to physical and psychological forms of gender-based abuse such as corporal punishment and bullying. This technical brief explores the prevalence of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in its various forms and its implications for young people's education and health.

What is School-related Gender-based Violence?²

School-related gender-based violence results in sexual, physical, or psychological harm to girls and boys. It includes any form of violence or abuse that is based on gendered stereotypes or that targets students on the basis of their sex. It includes, but is not limited to: rape, unwanted sexual touching, unwanted sexual comments, corporal punishment, bullying, and verbal harassment. Unequal power relations between adults and children and males and females contribute to gender violence. Violence can take place in school buildings (including dormitories), on school grounds, or going to and from school and may be perpetrated by teachers, students, or community members. Girls and boys can be victims or perpetrators.

There are three major types of SRGBV: sexual, physical, and psychological. **Sexual** violence is the most commonly identified form of SRGBV, and it involves violence or abuse by an adult or another child through any form of forced or unwanted sexual activity where there is no consent, consent is not possible, or power and/or intimidation is used to coerce a sexual act. Sexual violence and abuse include direct physical contact, such as unwanted touching of any kind or rape. Regardless of the legal age of consent, sexual activity between a teacher and student is considered abuse because of the age and power differentials between the two. Sexual violence can also be perpetrated verbally, through sexually explicit language or any repetitive, unwanted sexual attention such as teasing or taunting about dress or personal appearance.

¹ Varying methodologies and sample sizes make it difficult to estimate global prevalence rates. This estimate was based on limited available data.

² The definition of SRGBV and the three types of violence are based on a conceptual framework, which draws upon internationally recognized definitions from the education, child rights, health, and child protection sectors, developed for the EGAT/WID-funded Safe Schools Program, which is implemented by DevTech Systems, Inc.

Girls and boys experience **physical** violence or abuse by an adult or another child through corporal punishment, forced labor, fighting, and bullying. Among these, corporal punishment is the most widely administered and tolerated, and it involves any punishment in which physical force is used to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however minimal. This type of violence involves hitting children with the hand or an implement (e.g., whip, stick, belt, shoe, or spoon). It can also involve kicking, shaking, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair, boxing ears, burning, scalding, forced ingestion of soap or hot spices, throwing children, or forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions.

Psychological abuse entails harassment or exploitation with the intent to degrade or demoralize someone on the basis of his/her sex. Girls and boys experience psychological violence and abuse from both peers and teachers through verbal harassment, bullying, teasing, or degrading and cruel punishment. Teachers may use non-physical punishment that belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares, or ridicules children. Constant criticisms of an unjustified nature, refusal to praise, unclear boundaries, and unpredictable behavior eventually take their toll on young people. Bullying can range from teasing to physical violence perpetrated by students or teachers, and it tends to occur as a pattern of behavior rather than an isolated incident. Observing violence against others can have a psychological affect on students, causing them to feel afraid or helpless.

Contextual factors affect the prevalence, severity, and forms of SRGBV. Harsh social or economic inequalities, conflict, and political unrest often heighten the prevalence of SRGBV. For example, Fleishman (2003) describes a self-perpetuating cycle where girls in conditions of poverty and economic dependency enter into risky and exploitative relationships in order to ensure access to food, shelter, and schooling. Reports from conflict areas in South Asia demonstrate how social strife and the abduction of children into forced labor impacts education by increasing dropout rates (UNICEF 2005a). In times of conflict, girls are often targeted sexually through rape and forced prostitution, while boys are disproportionately forced into physical combat and hazardous environments (Bensalah et al. 2001).

The Gender Dynamics of SRGBV

SRGBV takes place within a context of existing social norms and gender inequities. Often, gender inequities are so embedded that their effects go unquestioned. Attitudes and cultural ideas about male and female sexuality and roles dictate certain forms of “gender scripting” which underlie and help perpetuate SRGBV.

Gender scripting is a process by which one is conditioned to adopt certain behaviors, preferences, and attitudes considered appropriate for one's sex. Such constructions of masculinity and femininity work to reinforce prevalent power dynamics which contribute to SRGBV.

Gender scripting involves a stereotypical masculinity that mandates strength and aggressiveness in boys. Some individuals argue that masculinity must be earned or proven, often through sexual conquests or displays of physical violence (Bannon and Correia 2006). In contrast, girls often adhere to a submissive female script, which promotes passivity among females and the perception that girls cause their own victimization. “To the extent that schools accept and do not challenge the traditional gender ideologies that promote

sexual aggression in boys and submissiveness in girls, they are harming both girls and boys” (Leach 2003).

Gender roles influence how punishment is meted out in schools, with boys generally experiencing more corporal punishment and girls experiencing more sexual harassment. Corporal punishment often acts as a technique for grooming boys and molding their masculinity. Sexual violence against girls, especially violence perpetrated by teachers, reinforces their powerlessness. Recent research suggests that different forms of SRGBV may be related, with sexual abuse occurring less frequently in schools where corporal punishment is not allowed and where reporting systems are in place (Save the Children Norway 2005).

Gender dynamics refer to the relationships and interactions between and among boys, girls, women, and men. They are informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. Depending upon how they are manifested, gender dynamics can reinforce or challenge existing norms.

Reinforcing gender inequities perpetuates SRGBV, as males exert power (physical, sexual, and psychological) over their female peers and less powerful males in and around schools. The gender dynamics associated with SRGBV, however, are more nuanced than the commonly held perception that violence is perpetrated by adult males against young female victims. The perpetrator-victim relationship transgresses the bounds of authority (teacher-student interactions) and sex (male-female interactions). Socially-condoned homophobia often serves to openly sanction violence against students perceived as homosexual, ranging from verbal and physical abuse to being expelled from school. Such instances point to the varied and complex ways in which SRGBV occurs.

Prevalence: A Global Snapshot of SRGBV

Estimates suggest that half of female students and a sizeable number of male students (where study samples included boys) are subjected to sexual violence in connection with their educational pursuits.³ A report from Ecuador indicated that 22 percent of girls were victims of sexual violence, despite public awareness that the violence was occurring (CEIME 1994). A study conducted in Goa, India found that 33 percent of male and female students had experienced some form of sexual abuse in the previous year, with no difference in reporting by sex (Patel and Andrew 2001). Sixty-seven percent of girls in a Botswana-based study on violence reported harassment and teasing by teachers (Rossetti 2001). A Ugandan study showed that 98 percent of students across five school districts experienced physical violence with 28 percent of that violence occurring in school (Naker 2005). In the same study, more than 98 percent of students reported experiencing emotional violence, with 21 percent of incidents occurring in school.

These studies offer a glimpse into the prevalence of SRGBV. They also highlight research gaps in SRGBV, including insufficient research on SRGBV outside of Africa and a lack of research on male victims. The vast majority of studies also focus on sexual violence, and

³ Varying methodologies and sample sizes make it difficult to estimate global prevalence rates. This estimate was based on limited available data.

studies that provide statistical information on prevalence rates for psychological and physical forms of SRGBV remain scarce.

Addressing SRGBV at Multiple Levels

Gender violence impacts both the health and educational status of students, whether they are affected directly as victims or indirectly as bystanders. The consequences of SRGBV include a lack of motivation among students, failing grades, absenteeism, and increased numbers of dropouts. Research indicates that SRGBV also demoralizes students, affecting their ability to achieve their educational goals.

Eliminating gender-based violence is even more urgent in the face of the AIDS epidemic because adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, have a higher risk for infection than other age groups. Young women are not only biologically and physiologically more vulnerable to HIV infection, they are also socially, culturally, and economically more vulnerable than their male counterparts. In the Caribbean region, young women aged 15 to 24 are more than two times as likely to be infected as young men (UNAIDS, UNFPA, and UNIFEM 2004). In Sub-Saharan Africa, UNAIDS and WHO (2004) report that women and girls make up 57 percent of all people infected with HIV and that 76 percent of all young people living with HIV in that region are female. These statistics have led some researchers to focus on gender violence in and around schools and gender relations between boys and girls (Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006).

School-related gender-based violence, therefore, has a dual impact on children, increasing both their risk of educational failure and negative health consequences such as physical injury, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS), or emotional/psychological ill-health.

“We will not achieve universal primary education unless children are safe in school. The spread of HIV/AIDS will not be halted until we also stop the violence against girls that helps fuel the pandemic.”

—UN Secretary General Kofi Annan
(Pinheiro 2006)

There are a number of examples of interventions counteracting the effects of SRGBV at the individual, community, institutional, and policy levels. At the **individual level**, greater awareness of SRGBV through curricula on reproductive health and life skills is helping generate a better understanding of what is appropriate behavior in the school environment. Involving boys as strategic partners in addressing SRGBV increases awareness among male and female students, while motivating boys to help ensure school safety. A Save the Children-UK and Save the Children-Norway program in Nepal introduced curricula through school clubs that built self-confidence and communication skills which enabled students to stand up to and resist perpetrators. At the students' suggestion, the schools built and worked to maintain separate latrines for girls and boys, helping to ensure a safer space and minimizing the potential for SRGBV (Save the Children 2005).

The USAID-supported Girls' Education Advisory Committees (GEACs) in Ethiopia demonstrate a successful **community-level** initiative for addressing SRGBV. Composed of students, parents, teachers, and a teacher advisor, GEACs ensure the safety of girls by initiating community-based responses such as improving reporting and accountability mechanisms for SRGBV, providing counseling, academic, and support services to victims, and establishing a school police group that protects students going to and returning from school. The committees also work with community leadership to discourage and curtail abductions and early marriage (DevTech 2004).

At the **institutional level**, schools, teachers' unions, teacher training colleges, and ministries of education can all play a role in addressing SRGBV. Establishing and upholding an agreed-upon code of conduct for teachers and staff reminds authority figures of expectations regarding their conduct. Moreover, including a discussion of codes of conduct in teacher training curricula is also important for addressing SRGBV. *Opening our Eyes: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in South African Schools* is an example of an in-service training manual which is being used to heighten awareness of SRGBV among teachers. Enabling teachers to confront their own attitudes about and experiences with gender-based violence is a critical component of teacher training programs (Mlamleli et al. 2001).

The USAID-supported Safe Schools Program simultaneously implements activities at the individual, community and institutional levels in an initiative being piloted in 30 communities each in Ghana and Malawi. This integrated approach trains students, teacher, community leaders and community-based volunteers in ways to prevent and respond to school-related gender violence in their communities.

Policy-level initiatives on SRGBV are helping to increase societal awareness of the issue and some governments are demonstrating a willingness to eliminate gender-based violence. The Gambian government instituted a sexual harassment policy for schools in response to studies showing high levels of sexual violence (UNICEF 2005b). The government of Benin recently approved legislation prohibiting sexual harassment in schools, homes, and workplaces (Amusa and Mowad 2006). However, these countries are the exception. Some of the most difficult barriers to addressing SRGBV include the lack of sufficient laws, regulations, and reporting systems and limited support in implementing or enforcing stated policies where they do exist. Cultural barriers such as a fear of teacher shortages and a hesitancy to question authority also limit the ability to address SRGBV.

Conclusion

The prevalence of SRGBV in its sexual, physical, and psychological forms proves a serious detriment to students' educational outcomes and health status. Addressing existing barriers and working at the individual, community, institutional, and policy levels to prevent and respond to SRGBV is essential to enabling more boys and girls to access and complete their studies. Transforming the gender dynamics within the education system that perpetuate gender violence will make schools safer and improve the educational experience for all.

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