

The Safe Schools Program

Context

The World Health Organization estimates that 150 million girls and 73 million boys are sexually assaulted each year, many of these acts occurring on the way to or at school.¹ The Global School-based Health Survey found that between 20 and 65 percent of school-aged children said that they had been verbally abused or bullied in the past 30 days.² Only 50 percent of countries worldwide have policies banning corporal punishment and despite these policies, corporal punishment is still practiced in many school settings.³

Program Description

The Safe Schools Program is a five-year initiative (2003-2008) funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Office of Women in Development and implemented by DevTech Systems, Inc. The Safe Schools Program works in 40 communities each in Ghana and Malawi, focusing on male and female students in upper primary and lower secondary school, ranging in age from 10 to 14 years old.⁴

The objective of the program is to reduce school-related gender-based violence to improve educational outcomes and reduce negative health outcomes. Gender-based violence can be physical, psychological or sexual and includes any form of violence from verbal harassment to rape that is based on gender stereotypes or targets students on the basis of their sex. It may occur at the hands of teachers, students or neighbors. The perpetrators can be male or female. At minimum, school-related gender-based violence can result in the inability to concentrate, difficulty in learning, anxiety, depression, withdrawal from school and a heightened risk of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.



Many young girls and boys were afraid to walk to and from school each day until their community instituted a "walk a child home" activity whereby every child was escorted to and from school by an older student or adult.

The comprehensive approach to this problem involves teachers, parents, students, community members and local non-profit organizations on the one hand, and government officials from education, health, social welfare and security on the other. The *Doorways* series of training manuals for teachers, community counselors and students has been developed and tested. Codes of conduct for teachers have been developed in collaboration with ministries of education and teachers' unions. These codes include standards for ethics, teacher roles and responsibilities toward students and reporting systems

¹ World Health Organization (2006). Global Estimates of Health Consequences due to Violence Against Children.

² Hediger, Mary (2004). Health Behaviors in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study: International report from the 2001/2002 study survey. National Institutes of Health.

³ Human Rights Watch (2005). *Failing Our Children: Barriers to the Right to Education*. Retrieved September 5, 2007, from <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/education0905>.

⁴ There are 80 communities, of which 20 are control sites and 60 are intervention sites.

for code violations. Communities are involved in finding ways to prevent and respond to violence; reduce child labor, corporal punishment, sexual relations between teachers and school children, and sexual harassment; and provide private, clean and secure lavatories at schools and safe routes to and from schools.

Major Achievements

- Advocacy efforts in both Ghana and Malawi significantly raised awareness of the issue of school-related gender-based violence, with national news programs (both radio and television) periodically airing pieces on the issue.
- New Codes of Conduct have been developed for teachers in Ghana and Malawi through close consultation with ministries of education and teachers' unions.
- 329 teachers and 80 peer leaders have been trained to deliver the *Doorways* Student Program.
- 240 local leaders have completed the *Doorways* Community Counselor Program and have created a network of counseling and referral services available to approximately 30,000 students.
- 364 teachers and over 40 senior education administrative personnel participated in the *Doorways* Teacher Program.

Key Results

- Teachers became more aware of how to report a violation related to school-related gender-based violence: prior to the Safe Schools Program, 45 percent knew how to report, after the intervention more than 75 percent knew how to report a violation.
- Teachers' attitudes towards acceptability of physical violence changed: in Malawi, prior to the intervention, 76 percent of teachers thought whipping boys was unacceptable; after the intervention approximately 96 percent of teachers thought whipping boys was unacceptable.
- Teachers' awareness of sexual harassment of girls at school increased: in Ghana, prior to the Safe Schools Program, roughly 30 percent of teachers agreed that sexual harassment of girls occurred in schools, after the program that number increased to nearly 80 percent.
- Students became more confident that they had the right not to be hurt or mistreated: in Ghana, the percentage of students agreeing with the statement "You have the right not to be hurt or mistreated" increased from 57 percent to 70 percent.
- Students' attitudes towards teen pregnancy changed: in Malawi, the baseline study showed that just of 70 percent of girls disagreed with the statement that it is okay for a teacher to get a girl pregnant as long as he marries her. After the Safe Schools Program's involvement, nearly 90 percent of girls disagreed.

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