AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF THE ABUSE OF GIRLS IN BASIC SCHOOLS IN GHANA

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DEO	District Education Officer
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationists
G & C	Guidance and Counselling
GES	Ghana Education Service
JSS	Junior Secondary School (Ghana)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
SMC	School Management Committee
WAJU	Women and Juvenile Unit (Ghana Police)

Executive Summary

Context

This report presents the findings of an extension to an earlier research study carried out into the abuse of girls in junior secondary schools in Zimbabwe (Leach and Machakanja 2000). This earlier study found that girls were subjected on a routine basis to aggressive sexual advances from older male pupils and male teachers within the school and from 'sugar daddies' in the vicinity of the school, who prey on girls for sex in exchange for money or gifts. Other forms of abuse directed at both female and male pupils were verbal abuse (often with demeaning sexual connotations when directed at girls) and excessive corporal punishment, administered by female as well as male teachers.

Findings

This extension had the combined aim of taking the Zimbabwe research further as well as attempting to bridge the gap between research and action in addressing this serious human rights issue. This was achieved through three distinct components: firstly, information gathering and dissemination of studies on the abuse of girls and related topics through both print and electronic modes; secondly, further school-based research to assess the prevalence of abuse in two other African contexts (Ghana and Malawi) with a slightly younger age group (most girls were in the 11-14 age group); and thirdly, the trialling of a range of small scale strategic interventions to counter the types of abuse uncovered by the research.

The introductory chapter in this report (Chapter 1) presents the context, rationale and methodology of the study. Chapter 2 summarises the process of information gathering and dissemination of work relevant to the study of the abuse of girls. This dissemination was carried out in collaboration with id21, the DFID funded development research reporting service. It involved setting up a dedicated web page on 'Gender violence in schools' (www.id21.org/gender_violence/index.html), which featured summaries of studies of school-based abuse of girls and related studies (for example, gender violence in adolescent relationships; HIV/AIDS among adolescents) as well as accounts of innovative and effective interventions from different parts of the world aimed at eliminating gender violence. This id21 initiative has served to raise awareness of the issue of gender violence generally, while at the same time broadening the scope of the study beyond sub-Saharan Africa, beyond an exclusive focus on girls and beyond the setting of formal education.

This component of the study highlighted the limited research into abuse and violence in a school setting, the lack of school-based initiatives to counter the problem, and the need for imaginative and participatory methodologies to tackle it. Eliminating the abuse of girls requires changing the sexual behaviour of both pupils and teachers, which cannot be done using the traditional didactic methods which most teachers rely on. Some of the items which featured on the id21 web page provide evidence that the use of various media is particularly effective in changing attitudes and behaviour among young people, e.g. drama, film, video, radio, art, comic strip, poetry and storytelling. These items also suggest that eliminating gender violence needs the involvement of boys and men (including in an educational context male pupils and male teachers), who must be encouraged to engage in an analysis of power in gender

relations in both the private and public arenas, to reflect on changing their own behaviour, and to offer themselves as positive role models and mentors for others. At the same time, it is clear that mobilising men to work towards gender equity will only be successful if men see benefits to themselves as well as to women.

The second component of the study (further research into the abuse of girls in Ghana and Malawi) is covered by the first part of Chapters 3 and 4, where the findings from the field work component in three schools in each country are presented. These are remarkably similar to the findings of the earlier study in Zimbabwe, while contributing some new insights, e.g. into boys' problems, into the impact of teacher abuse on the quality of the learning environment, the extent to which abusive behaviour feeds on poverty and ignorance (in terms of the available procedures for seeking redress) and the ambivalent attitude of some parents, teachers and girls themselves towards teachers having sexual liaisons with schoolgirls.

As in Zimbabwe, schools in Ghana and Malawi are a breeding ground for potentially damaging gendered practices, the influence of which will stay with pupils into adult life. Sexual aggression goes largely unpunished, dominant male behaviour by both pupils and teachers is not questioned, and pupils are strongly encouraged to conform to the gender roles and norms of interaction which they observe around them. This sends messages to boys and girls about what can be tolerated and therefore 'normalises' abusive behaviour. The majority of pupils featured in this study are in the post-puberty age group (11-14), a stage of development when young people are most impressionable to peer influence. In these schools, there is strong peer pressure for boys to secure girlfriends, which not infrequently leads to coercive methods and physical assault. Girls too are subject to peer pressure in terms of making themselves attractive to boys, developing their femininity, and in some cases acquiring the 'grown up' status that comes with having a boyfriend or sugar daddy. It was difficult to gauge the extent to which girls in these schools were coerced into sexual relationships, or chose to enter them freely. There is no doubt however that poverty pushes many girls, in the absence of other means of supporting themselves, into relationships that they may not have considered otherwise, where they are dependent on men and hence vulnerable to exploitation. Indeed, there was a widespread belief among girls themselves that monetary gain is the main motivation for girls entering such relationships. Transactional sex, as a means for girls to pay school fees and living expenses, appears to be common.

The Ghana and Malawi studies revealed several cases of teachers having affairs with girls in their school and of the school and district education authorities taking very little, if any, action to deal with them. The negative impact of predatory male behaviour on the enrolment, attendance and achievement of girls was obvious. The case of one school in Ghana, where the head teacher's sexual misconduct over many years was an 'open secret' in the community provides an interesting insight into how difficult it is for communities and school staff to take action. Lack of information, fear of recrimination and the indifference and/or obfuscation of officials are all deterrents. In other instances, it is the apparent collusion of the parents in the affair (as in a case featured in the Malawi study), usually in the hope that the teacher will marry the girl, which prevents the authorities from taking action. Overall, however, high levels of apathy combined with lack of information and a reluctance to take girls who make

allegations seriously, mean that little is done unless the case is a high profile item in the national media.

In the Ghana and Malawi schools, as in Zimbabwe, it was clear that the abuse of girls, whether by male teachers, teachers or sugar daddies, is part of a wider problem of school-based violence (of which the illegal and excessive use of corporal punishment and high levels of bullying are a part) as well as of violence in society more generally, much of it perpetrated by males. Excessive use of corporal and other forms of punishments also militate against a supportive learning environment, for boys as well as for girls. Although levels of bullying and corporal punishment appeared somewhat less in the relatively small Ghanaian schools than in those in Zimbabwe and in Malawi (where the schools are extremely large), all three educational systems were characterised by a reluctance to take action against teachers who engaged in sexual relations with girls in the school, or against boys who used intimidating and threatening behaviour against girls (or other boys). For the majority of teachers, this was not seen as a serious problem, but just 'how things are'. If is not difficult to see that in a context where schools take no action to discipline aggressive behaviour or sexual misconduct, where the majority of cases go unreported and prosecutions are rare, it can easily thrive.

There are implications of the existence of sexual violence within schools for the teaching of HIV/AIDS – teaching about safe sex and sex based on mutual consent and negotiation in a context of high risk sexual practice (multiple partners, intimidation and sometimes coercion) is unlikely to be successful. A school culture which encourages stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviour makes girls particularly vulnerable. The school as a location for high risk sexual practice militates against the school as an effective forum for teaching about and encouraging safe sex.

The third component of the study is covered in the second part of Chapters 3 and 4, and in Chapter 5, which provides an account of the dissemination and trialling of strategies in Zimbabwe. In all three countries, the researchers engaged in some small scale strategic interventions to address the problems of abusive behaviour towards girls uncovered by the research. In Ghana and Malawi, this was in the later stage of the study, after the interviews with pupils, teachers, parents and education officials had taken place, so that the strategies could be informed by the research findings.

In Zimbabwe, as documented in Chapter 5, dissemination involved a regional workshop at the start of the research period, which featured on prime time TV and served to raise awareness widely of the issue of teacher misconduct. The workshop generated a set of actions which were committed to by a wide range of stakeholders: teachers and school heads, principals and lecturers of teachers' colleges, regional and district education officials, and NGOs. Participatory work was carried out with pupils, teachers, head teachers and regional and district personnel.

Recommendations

Tackling the issue of abuse and gender violence in schools requires a holistic approach, involving all stakeholders, teachers, parents, pupils, government officials etc. Without this, there is the risk of one off interventions, without support systems to

protect children where cases of abuse are uncovered. Some of the main recommendations of the report are:

At the school level

- Initiatives to improve the school's response to abusive behaviour should be integrated into on-going efforts to strengthen Guidance and Counselling, life skills and HIV/AIDS education, especially through the teaching of negotiation and communication skills. A whole school approach is necessary involving all pupils and teachers, and where possible parents.

- Male and female pupils need to be encouraged to develop greater understanding and more constructive and consensual relationships, and to discuss gender roles and gender identity openly

- Schools need to become less authoritarian and more supportive of pupils, especially girls; creating a pupil friendly environment will facilitate effective learning, support pupils' personal development and protect their rights.

- Schools need to provide pupils with the necessary information and support so that they can report cases of abusive behaviour in reassuring circumstances and know that action will be taken by the appropriate authorities.

- Schools need to transform the teaching of Guidance and Counselling by using teachers trained in pupil centred and participatory methods. Peer educators may also be effective in promoting discussions around issues of sexuality, HIV/AIDS and the importance of negotiated sex.

- Teachers and head teachers need to be trained to raise awareness in their schools of the importance of taking action when receiving a serious complaint by a pupil, to provide counselling skills and to follow the appropriate procedures when reporting an allegation.

Teacher training

- Teachers are key to change in the school setting and to stamping out abusive behaviour. Teachers' colleges need to provide awareness raising among trainees, so that they understand fully their responsibilities in school and the consequences of engaging in inappropriate behaviour. There should be greater emphasis in the training curriculum on ethical conduct and it should deal explicitly with the issue of abuse.

- Trainees should be exposed to gender training, so that they are made aware of the ways in which teachers perpetuate negative stereotypes about female and male behaviour, often unconsciously; they should be able to treat boys and girls equally.

- Specialist Guidance and Counselling teachers should be trained in participatory methods.

Ministry of Education level

- Ministries need to ensure the effective enforcement of regulations about teacher misconduct.

- There needs to be wide dissemination of the Ministry's policy on sexual harassment and abuse, a review and strengthening of procedures, and prompt action taken to prosecute those accused of sexual relations with pupils.

- The Ministry should spearhead national campaigns on radio and TV and in the press, to make the public fully aware of the scale of the problem and of the correct procedures to follow in reporting a case.

- The Ministry should consider setting up a special unit to deal with cases of abuse.

- Clear guidelines should be provided to schools, school committees and PTAs, detailing the appropriate action to take in cases of abuse. Members of committees and PTAs should be provided with training in how to handle such cases.

District level

- Linkages between district education offices and school committees (and through them parents and communities) need to be strengthened, with improved coordination and communication.

- Prompt action needs to be taken by DEOs to suspend teachers and investigate cases thoroughly, referring them to the courts where necessary. DEOs need training in how to handle accusations of teacher misconduct.

Community level

- There needs to be awareness raising around issues of abuse, in particular teacher sexual misconduct.

- Communities, school committees and PTAs need information on the rules and regulations regarding teacher misconduct (not only on sexual abuse but also on corrupt management practices, absenteeism etc). Training should be provided so that they can monitor teacher performance and conduct and help the whole schooling process to be more transparent and accountable.