

Effective Responses for Gender Based Violence: Gender Based Violence in Schools

Irish Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violenceⁱ

LEARNING BRIEF NO.2

Learning Brief on Gender Based Violence in Schools

This Learning Brief is based on experience which emerged at a Gender Based Violence Learning Day: Effective Responses to GBV organised by the Irish Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence, June 2009ⁱⁱ, and in particular on inputs provided by Mairead Dunne, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex. The paper specifically refers to schools in developing country contexts.

1. Introduction

The recognition of the widespread nature of gender based violence in school settings is becoming an area of concern, not least because of its infringement on the rights of the child but also its impact on achieving the development goals related to equal access to education for boys and girls. However, the MDG for example, focuses on quantitative targets (only described in terms of sex disaggregated data) but fails to identify and address some of the obstacles presented by the gendered school environment that girls must overcome to achieve gender equality in education. In many developing country contexts parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school lest they risk violence, exploitation or defilement on

their way to school or within the environment of the school. The experience or threat of gender based violence results in poor performance, irregular attendance, dropout, truancy and low self esteem. Other factors such as early marriage, the risk of sexual harassment, pregnancy, HIV and AIDS infection, or other sexually transmitted infections, and demands for transactional sex have detrimental effects on the achievement of equality in education.

On the other hand, the school is a critical centre of learning, and is often the only opportunity girls and boys get for formal learning. Such a forum plays a key role in establishing society's behavioural norms, not least in relation to gender roles and issues of equality. The school is an active site where individuals learn who they are in relation to such issues as gender and to their own ability. School is an important space where many social processes and experiences take place, most of which may be positive but much of which can also be negative. How school settings might facilitate or reinforce gender equality is often not explored.

There has been limited work carried out in relation to gender based violence in schools in developing countries. In school as elsewhere, gender based violence is symptomatic of a deep rooted gender inequality that is present in most societies. Therefore, when seeking a response we need to not only tackle the GBV but also work more holistically to transform schools into places where gender equality is both realised and learnt.

ⁱ The GBV Consortium understands Gender-based Violence to be any act or threat of harm inflicted on a person because of their gender and is any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Gender based violence encompasses sexual violence, domestic violence, sex trafficking, harmful practices, forced / early marriage, forced prostitution, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation.

ⁱⁱ Speakers at the event included Heidi Lehmann, International Rescue Committee; Kanwal Ahluwalia, Womankind UK; Tina Musuya, CEDOVIP, Kampala; Julius Kiseembo, Community Worker, Kampala, Mairead Dunne, Centre for International Education, University of Sussex. Workshop input from Olive Ring of the National Youth Council of Ireland also informed this briefing paper.

This paper explores some of the issues that development and humanitarian interventions (e.g. school feeding programmes) need to consider when supporting education programmes. The paper is to be seen as work in progress and as GBV cannot be solely addressed by schools but also needs the support and action by communities, it should be read in conjunction with the other Learning Briefs developed by the Consortium on effective responses to GBV: *Developing a Community Based Approach, Engaging Men to End Gender Based Violence and Monitoring and Evaluation*.

2. The school as a gendered institution

a) A 'Gender Regime' permeates the co-educational school

The daily routine of a school is structured by formal and informal rules and ways of behaviour. A 'gender regime' is manifest as part of this routine. Ways of relating and the type of interaction between boys and girls, and between teachers and male and female students, are part of this gender regime and serve to normalise certain types of behaviour. This regime under which boys and girls interact is so 'naturalised' in schools that people don't see a need to intervene when this interaction may have negative effects.

Some examples include the following:

- The gender regime determines the physical space that boys and girls have e.g. who gets to speak, roles that girls and boys play, how they contribute to the school, who cleans the classroom,. These gender roles produce a gender hierarchy, which more often than not is one where the male hierarchy dominates.
- Boys tend to have more physical space such as in sport than girls.
- Peer pressure to tease, hassle, intimidate, exclude, and in some cases perpetrate physical violence, can become a part of the school environment.
- While many schools may not have formal roles for fathers and mothers there is an implicit message around responsibility, accountability and who is blamed if there are problems with the students. In some countries mothers are the main point of contact with schools while in others it may not be culturally acceptable for a mother to meet with a male teacher.

These gender roles within the school are reinforced by boys and girls themselves both of whom are protecting their space, but in a very gender stereotyped way. There are few if any alternatives put forward that suggest that gender roles could be otherwise.

b) Teachers perpetuate gender inequalities.

- Within the school, staff, as well as pupils, interact in gendered ways. For example, discipline is mainly male led, and boys are most often the subject of corporal punishment. Most principals are males while in many countries the idea of female leadership is difficult for some teachers.
- Teachers do not see gender as an issue, instead they have internalised local norms and rarely question them. As a result, they do not intervene on gender, harassment nor abuse issues in the classroom.
- Teacher training colleges should address these issues, and this may mean that development interventions will need to intervene at this level, as well as in schools.
- Transactional sex for 'good exam results' is replicated both between teachers and pupils in schools, and between students and teachers in training colleges. In some situations this becomes normalised - 'the way that things are'. Yet, the girls are blamed for becoming pregnant and damaging family honour. Many schools will not accept their re-entrance to school as mothers, yet the punishment on the perpetrator is minimal, if at all.

- Impunity for teachers is a serious issue where teachers are often just transferred to other schools, even where reports of GBV have been made by survivors or families.

These various issues point to the need to explore how institutions such as schools and training colleges reproduce and embed particular forms of gender relations and hierarchies. It is often from these unquestioned gender hierarchies (that allow unquestioned assumptions around control and power) that the seeds of gender related violence are sown. Moreover, even though laws and policies may exist to promote gender equality, in practice local norms predominate. For example, it may be difficult to replace an abusive teacher, or to get school-aged mothers reinstated in schools.

3. Relationships between the school and the community

Internationally, there is an increasing emphasis on decentralisation of responsibility for education and school management with a greater role being promoted for community involvement in the running of schools. Efforts are being made to reduce the distances to and from schools and to make travel to school safer to ensure parents do not object to their daughters going to school.

Such initiatives open spaces for transformation and change, but there are also challenges. For example, gender differences between girls and boys in the domestic sphere are replicated in schools, as are the expected roles of fathers and mothers. A community may hold retrogressive ideas about gender roles, and on the value of girls going to school. Even when teachers show leadership, for example, wanting to re-admit a single mother of school-going age to school, a community (or teachers) may be opposed.

The relationship between community members and schools in developing countries is often rife with power dimensions that transcend gender issues. In many contexts, many community members will not challenge a teacher or question their behaviour and are not supported or listened to when they do e.g. in relation to corporal punishment.

4. What can be done at school level? Issues for consideration

Wherever there are institutions, there are risks of abuse. This is the first issue that needs to be recognised in any response that is being undertaken in a school context. The onus is therefore on development and humanitarian agencies - and their partners - to take all possible measures to ensure that it does not happen.

As a starting point, it is imperative that organisations conduct an analysis to determine gender and gender based violence dynamics as they pertain to the institution they are working with. It is worth noting that every context is unique and gender dynamics will vary so should not be 'assumed'.

In order to proceed with implementation at school and college level, there are two fundamental elements that need to be put in place:

The first is to establish systems that safeguard children (protection). These include codes of behaviour for teachers, training for teachers and importantly, ensuring there are clearly established opportunities for children and others to complain to external or independent persons and that allegations are followed up. These actions should be underpinned by the promotion of the safety and well being of children through awareness raising and interventions with children, teachers and parents.

Protection of children should be a minimum requirement for working in schools and should aim to strengthen and build on existing systems where possible.

The second strand is to tackle the institution (school, teachers, school management and policy) as a whole to strengthen equality. This is a longer term and more holistic approach and is needed to bring about a sustainable change in attitude and practice. This kind of approach is developed through some key questions:

- Where are the entry points where gender equality can be promoted (and where gender inequality is most evident)?
- Clarify who are the main targets of the interventions – the powerless, powerful?
- How best to engage, and at what levels e.g. policy/advocacy/practical? Is the focus to be on the school, on teacher training colleges?

It will also be necessary to adopt multiple routes, and to connect with other institutions that interact with the school such as state institutions, the community, households. Involving communities can pay big dividends, especially given their increased role in decentralisation of school management.

References

Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence website www.gbv.ie

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The Irish Joint Consortium on GBV comprises Irish Human Rights, humanitarian and development organisations together with Irish Aid and the Irish Defence Forces working together to tackle gender based violence. For more information on the Consortium please go to www.gbv.ie

The current members include:

