

# Gender violence in schools in the developing world

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## Overview

Until the mid-1990s, gender violence was not a recognised problem in schools in the developing world. Nor indeed were gender issues more broadly recognised until 1990, when the international community, at its World Conference on Education For All in Thailand, realised that it could not meet its commitment to achieving universal primary education without addressing the urgent issue of why globally there were more girls out of school than boys. This brought the topic of girls' education to the fore, to be replaced later by a discourse around gender in education. Barriers to girls' participation were perceived at that time as largely external to the school and as originating in adverse economic conditions and socio-cultural practices such as poverty, early marriage of girls, preference for sons, and girls' household labour. There was little appreciation of in-school factors that might deter a child from entering, or continuing in, school. About midway through the decade, however, concern over the poor, and sometimes declining, quality of education led to a shift towards examining conditions within the school that might undermine participation, especially of girls.

Alongside the growing concern over girls' under-representation in education in the early 1990s was a move towards understanding education as a human right rather than as an economic and/or social investment. The issue of the sexual abuse of girls in schools emerged within this combined set of concerns. This was first covered by a brief report on sexual harassment in schools and universities in a number of African countries (African Rights, 1994). The issue was also raised in a study of girls' academic under-achievement in Zimbabwe (Gordon, 1995) and in a World Bank report on girls' education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Odaja and Heneveld, 1995). An early intervention to protect schoolgirls from sexual exploitation in Tanzanian schools also included some research into the problem (Mgalla *et al.*, 1998). Little more, however, was known about the scale or nature of the problem until a number of small-scale studies exploring the sexual abuse of girls in schools in Africa were carried out: Human Rights Watch (2001) in South Africa; Rossetti (2001) in Botswana; and Leach and Machakanja (2000) and Shumba (2001) in Zimbabwe.

Additional impetus to study gender violence in schools came during the 1990s as part of the response to the AIDS pandemic, which, as it tightened its grip on Africa, revealed the all too apparent gendered dimension of this disease. Statistics indicating that girls in the 15–25 age group are the most vulnerable to HIV infection ([www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)) has focused attention towards the

school, both as a site for teaching about HIV prevention and, contradictorily, as a site of sexual violence (Mirembe and Davies, 2001).

Over the last few years, knowledge of this issue within both the academic and development communities has expanded, at least in Sub-Saharan Africa, although research is still very limited and usually small scale (see chapter 4 of the UN *World Report on Violence against Children*, Pinheiro, 2006, and Leach and Mitchell, 2006). Nevertheless, we now have a better understanding of which groups of children are most at risk, why gender violence exists, and how it might be addressed. In particular, we have come to understand that girls are not always passive victims of violence, that the circumstances surrounding sexual abuse of schoolchildren are not always clear-cut, and that girls are sometimes the perpetrators of gender violence and boys sometimes the victims.

## Defining the problem

Only among the less developed regions in Sub-Saharan Africa has violence in schools been consistently framed in overtly gendered or sexual terms. This may be in part due to the AIDS epidemic, as indicated above, and also to more relaxed social attitudes towards sex outside marriage. Funding of research studies on girls' education by international development agencies anxious to close the gender gap may also have contributed to framing the problem in gender terms.

This is in sharp contrast to Asia and Latin America, where violence in schools is rarely perceived as being rooted in unequal gender relations and sexual harassment is largely seen as confined to universities (Mirsky, 2003). In Asia, the little research that exists has focused on corporal punishment and has ignored its gender dimension (e.g., Kim *et al.*, 2000; UNICEF, 2001). In Latin America and the Caribbean, the problem has tended to be seen as gang violence often linked to the trafficking of guns and drugs (Chevannes, 2004; Abramov and Rua, 2005).

This article takes the view that, regardless of terminology and conceptualisation, violence always has a gendered dimension. However, much confusion exists as to how to label it. In the African research, over time, the focus has shifted from examining the well-defined but narrow area of (sexual) abuse of girls in schools to encompassing school-based gender violence more generally; this includes the gendered dimensions of all forms of peer- and teacher-instigated violence, including corporal punishment (Mirsky, 2003; Dunne *et al.*, 2006).



## Manifestations of gender violence in schools

It is useful to distinguish between explicit and implicit forms of gender violence in schools. *Explicit* gender violence is overtly sexual in nature, and may involve aggressive or unsolicited sexual advances, other forms of sexual harassment such as touching, pinching, groping and verbal abuse, and acts of intimidation, assault, forced sex and rape. *Implicit* or symbolic gender violence covers actions that are less visibly and directly gendered, and emanate from everyday school practices that reinforce gender differentiation. These practices may in themselves be violent, as in the case of corporal punishment, or they may indirectly encourage violent acts.

Forms of gender violence are not fixed; they evolve to fit different times, circumstances and cultures. For example, in South Asia, a girl may have acid thrown on her for daring to snub a boy or for turning down an offer of marriage, or in Afghanistan for daring to be a teacher (Reuters, 2002), and in South Africa, jackrolling (gang rape) is a particularly horrific form of violence against young women. Some attacks are directed at schoolchildren and some take place on school premises. Gender also interacts in different settings with other social markers, such as class, race, caste, ethnicity and religion, to create complex patterns of discrimination. However, underlying context-specific manifestations of gender violence is a common cause: the relative powerlessness of women in patriarchal societies.

Few statistical studies exist to show the scale of the problem. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, studies from at least nine countries – seven of these countries feature in a USAID 2003

annotated bibliography of unsafe schools, the other two are from Benin (Wible, 2004) and Togo (Plan Togo, 2006) – reveal a consistent pattern of sexual abuse and/or harassment of girls by both male students and teachers. Both girls and boys repeatedly indicated that some teachers in their school abused their position of authority to demand sexual favours from girls, often in exchange for good grades, preferential treatment in class or money.<sup>1</sup> Despite the attention given to such cases of teachers' sexual misconduct, the evidence points to older students being the main source of violence against girls.

Some studies report extremely high levels of sexual harassment and abuse. One of these is by Rossetti (2001), whose survey of 560 students in Botswana found that 67% (including a very small number of male students) reported sexual harassment by teachers, and that 20% also reported having been asked by teachers for sex, of whom 42% had accepted, mostly because they feared reprisals from the teacher. Other studies report much lower figures; this includes Brown's (2002) survey of 466 primary and secondary students in Ghana, in which 13.5% of the girls and 4.2% of the boys (ratio of girls to boys in the survey was 1:3) said they had been a victim of sexual abuse at school. These differences may be due in part to the terminology used (sexual abuse being generally seen as more serious than sexual harassment). Nevertheless, despite the disparities, when taken together with official figures of reported cases, these studies confirm that sexual harassment and abuse is an endemic problem in schools in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. In Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, recent evidence, including reports submitted to the UN Study on Violence against Children (Pinheiro, 2006), suggests that here, too, this is a common phenomenon.



Schoolgirls in Tanzania



Adolescent girls from nomadic backgrounds at an education centre in Kenya

## Why does gender violence exist in schools?

Violence in schools cannot be divorced from violence in the home, the community and the workplace. This violence originates in the imbalance of power between males and females, in the gendered hierarchy and separation of tasks, and in socially accepted views of what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour. The school, alongside the home, is a prime site for the construction of gender identity and gender relations built on socially sanctioned inequalities. The structures and practices that fill the school day with explicit and implicit rules, norms and symbols serve to guide and regulate behaviour; in so doing, they reinforce the unequal gender relations already reproduced in the home and perpetuate notions of male superiority and dominance (Dunne *et al.*, 2006). Examples include teacher tolerance of male students' domination of classroom space at the expense of girls' participation in lessons; the celebration of masculine competitiveness; the allocation of more public and higher status tasks and responsibilities to male students and teachers, and private domestic-related ones to female students and teachers; the acceptance of bullying and verbal abuse as a natural part of growing up; and teachers' unofficial use of free student labour, especially that of girls. These taken-for-granted, routine practices of schooling all too often teach children that masculinity is associated with aggression, while femininity requires obedience, acquiescence and making oneself attractive to boys (Leach and Machakanja, 2000; Dunne *et al.*, 2006). In this way, male violence becomes accepted in adolescent relationships and thus perpetuated into adulthood.

This dominant version of gender relations promoted by the school is almost exclusively framed in terms of a compulsory heterosexuality (Mirembe and Davies, 2001). Males seeking to strengthen their status among their peers may interpret this as the need to show dominance over females. This encourages gratuitous

acts of sexual harassment, such as boys cornering and groping girls or shouting demeaning obscenities, and male teachers making sexist or derogatory comments to female students or teachers, or making physical contact with girls during lessons (Leach and Machakanja, 2000).

Despite the importance attached to discipline by school authorities in the developing world, acts of gender violence often go unreported and unpunished. Students may not report incidents out of fear of victimisation, punishment or ridicule, or because violence is seen as an inevitable and accepted part of school life (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Leach *et al.*, 2003; Dunne *et al.*, 2006). Even if they do, teachers often consider such incidents as not worthy of reprimand.

In many parts of the world, there are poor levels of accountability in the educational system and a lack of good management and professional commitment. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that teachers who exploit the advantage of their sex and their authority by having sexual relations with students are rarely expelled from the teaching profession, even in cases of pregnancy; at most, an offending teacher will be transferred to another school (Leach *et al.*, 2003; Dunne *et al.*, 2006). To complicate matters, not all parents, teachers and girls disapprove of teachers or older men having sexual liaisons with schoolgirls, whether for economic or cultural reasons (Leach *et al.*, 2003).

## Knowledge gaps

Despite the lack of research beyond Sub-Saharan Africa, it would be a mistake to assume that gender violence in schools is a problem specific to that region or that girls are always the victims. Evidence provided by the country reports submitted to the UN Global Study of Violence Against Children (Pinheiro, 2006) testifies to the fact that gender violence, including sexual abuse and rape, on school premises is a global phenomenon, even in countries in the Middle East and South Asia with strong religious and cultural traditions of gender segregation. It exists despite – or perhaps because of – communities' efforts to keep males and females separate.

Most of the available research documents the sexual abuse of girls but there is emerging evidence that male students, female teachers and those who are lesbian or gay may also be targets (Human Rights Watch and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2003). In particular, we cannot ignore the strong likelihood that the sexual abuse of boys, whether in heterosexual or homosexual encounters, occurs in school and that widespread homophobia exposes female, as well as male, students and teachers who do not project a socially acceptable heterosexual identity to violence. Boys are also more likely to be a target of sexual abuse in cultural settings where the molestation of girls is very risky, and where any accusation of impropriety towards a woman or girl can bring swift retribution from the community, sometimes even causing riots and deaths.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusions

This article has attempted to provide a brief overview of a range of issues surrounding gender violence in schools: how the problem has come to international attention, how it manifests itself in



different settings, who the perpetrators and the victims are, and why it appears to thrive in school environments. A link between the sexual misconduct of some teachers, peer violence among students and corporal punishment can be made: one form of violence feeds on another, and through acts of aggression from students and teachers (including corporal punishment), violence becomes a means of formal and informal control and regulation in schools. The tacit acceptance and normalisation of aggressive male behaviour provides the conditions for antagonistic gender relations and further violence (Dunne *et al.*, 2006). Sexual advances made by teachers to their students are particularly shocking because of the abuse of trust, but the negative impact such incidents have on victims and the dangerous role model they present to male students are also important considerations. A single case in a community may discourage parents from sending their daughters to school (Leach *et al.*, 2003).

To counteract gender violence in schools, changes are needed on all levels, involving legislation, policies, curriculum and leadership initiatives, teacher education and the professional development of head teachers. Development of a school ethos that respects every individual's right to education in a safe and supportive environment is also crucial. Education authorities need to take vigorous measures to stamp out all forms of violent behaviour, including excessive corporal punishment, and to actively promote constructive adolescent relationships. It is after all the school's mission to teach life skills as well as academic knowledge. We are failing our children if we cannot ensure that schools provide the safe haven that they are entitled to.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Sexual abuse of schoolchildren by male teachers is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it unique to Africa or the developing world. Media reports appear from time to time in many parts of the world, including the UK, where sexual relationships between teachers and their students have been illegal since 2000.
- 2 The *Daily Times* of Pakistan recently reported a Minister of State claiming that sexual abuse by clerics in Koranic schools was widespread ([www.dailytimes.co.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_9-12-04\\_pg1\\_6](http://www.dailytimes.co.pk/default.asp?page=story_9-12-04_pg1_6)).

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