

IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON GIRLS' EDUCATION – A THEMATIC APPROACH

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Introduction:

The Facts about Violence against girls in schools is not only a violation of girls' fundamental human rights but also poses a huge challenge to countries committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for all by 2015 as well as targets set in the national plans of action.

At the centre of our concern are the agency, judgment and action of girls in and around schools. While we seek to understand the social conditions and relations that constrain girls, we aim to understand the processes through which girls enhance their capabilities to safety and bodily integrity, and more broadly to claim rights, achieve education, and to work to transform unjust structures. Action Aid understands empowerment as developing girls' individual and collective agency, through: raising critical consciousness of rights and unjust structures and power relations that suppress rights and self-efficacy; developing capabilities (such as decision making, self esteem and negotiation skills) that enable girls to make decisions that shape their world and feel in control of their destiny; through building support, solidarity and networks. The conceptual framework for this project builds on Action Aid's work on education and women rights. At the centre of the project are girls themselves, and their everyday relationships with other girls and boys, with families, with teachers and with others in their communities. While much violence experienced by girls takes place within these relationships, schools, families and neighbourhoods are also important sites for teaching and learning about safety and empowerment. With a central focus on girls and interactions, we are concerned with the gendered power relations in which girls live their lives, where aspects of the local, national, regional and global political economy produce violence and limit their space for action within families, schools and communities. Finally we are concerned to document the types and levels of acts of violence experienced by girls, since this information can be valuable to signal change. By combining these approaches; we can begin to understand why and how change may be happening.

The few female teachers in most schools surveyed, means that girls may lack role models or women in school with whom they can confide. The School Management Committees (SMCs) also lack women members, and receive little training on gender and school management. The absence of pupils from SMCs may also reflect the national policy frameworks, which do not include specifications on involving girls and boys in decision making processes in schools.

Forms of Violence:

Girls experience multiple forms of violence. Those that happen most frequently are physical forms of violence, such as whipping and beating by boys. There are also sexual forms of violence, most often carried out by boys. A quarter of girls reported having experienced sexual harassment such as unwanted touching of breasts, and one in ten reported that they have been raped. Boys and girls experience high levels of physical punishment at school and home, with boys more frequently punished this way in school, and girls more at home. To a large extent such practices are taken for granted by pupils and parents. The majority of teachers disagree with corporal punishment, although it could be in compliance with the law rather than actual practice, since at least eight in ten children reported being whipped or caned in school or home. Teachers also reported lower levels of violence than girls and boys in school, perhaps for the same reasons. Only one school out of seventeen has a written policy or protocol on discipline or violence, and there are no effective alternative forms of behaviour management being

used in schools. In homes, the high rates of physical punishment against girls are linked to roles and responsibilities within families, particularly to the gendered division of labour, and indirectly to poverty, because of the high domestic labour burden. For example, girls are punished for being slow in fetching water.

Sexual violence takes place in schools, homes and communities. Although all seem to recognise these practices as violent, their frequency suggests that some boys and men see touching, grabbing, and sexual insults as acceptable or as a way of demonstrating manliness. There are still occasional incidents of boys or men forcefully taking possession of girls' bodies to claim ownership. In some of the communities, sexual relationships are strongly tabooed, while in others they are common even if not officially sanctioned. Female circumcision is still widely practised in the community, a traditional practice the girls criticise for the pain and distress caused during the procedure, and in later years with menstruation and first sexual activity. Girls out of school also face difficulties. Some of those who are married cited domestic violence, by husbands and marital family. They also pointed out lack of social support systems.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

The United Nations defines violence against women as:

"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

This violence can include:

Physical abuse: Slapping, choking, or punching her. Using hands or objects as weapons. Threatening her with a knife or gun. Committing murder.

Sexual abuse: Using threats, intimidation, or physical force to force her into unwanted sexual acts.

Emotional or verbal abuse: Making degrading comments about her body or behaviour. Forcing her to commit degrading acts. Confining her to the house. Destroying her possessions. Threatening to kill her or the children. Threatening to commit suicide.

Financial abuse: Stealing or controlling her money or valuables (of particular concern to older women). Forcing her to work. Denying her the right to work.

Spiritual abuse: Using her religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate, and control her.

Criminal harassment/stalking: Following her or watching her in a persistent, malicious, and unwanted manner. Invading her privacy in a way that threatens her personal safety.

WHAT CAUSES VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

The roots of violence are founded in the belief that the needs, feelings, or beliefs of one person or group are more correct or more important than those of another person or group. This fundamental inequality creates a rationale for humiliation, intimidation, control, abuse—even murder.

In our society, gender inequality is visible in many areas, including politics, religion, media, cultural norms, and the workplace. Both men and women receive many messages—both blatant and covert—that men are more important than women. In this context, it becomes easier for a man to believe that he has the right to be in charge and to control a woman, even if it takes violence. This is not only wrong, it's against the law. There is no evidence that alcohol or mental illness causes men to be violent against women. Men who assault their partners rarely assault their friends, neighbours, bosses, or strangers.

The study found out that girls are losing out on education in the later primary years. While the gender gap tends to be more marked in schools with pastoralist communities, in almost all the schools there are fewer girls than boys in the later years.

Many parents are unable to afford in-direct fees, uniform, books and sanitary pads for girls despite the policy of FPE. Girls and boys are needed to support their household with labour. But girls are more disadvantaged than boys because traditionally they are responsible for caring of families and undertaking household chores. Thus, most girls tend to miss school to attend to household chores and look after younger children. Pregnancy and marriage are also key reasons for girls being withdrawn from primary school. Marriage in these circumstances might be seen by parents as a way to protect girls from unwanted sex, as well as providing material support in the form of bride price. Without access to health services and reproductive health education, unwanted pregnancies are common. Socio-economic

hardship, therefore, clearly influences girls' and boys' access to schooling. Girls are out-performed by boys in national examinations and are unlikely to proceed to secondary education compared to boys. Possible reasons for the lower academic achievement include competing demands on their study time (such as household chores that make them late for school or unable to complete homework), the persistence of stereotypical beliefs that girls are less intelligent and unfriendly school/ classroom environment.

Mechanisms for girls to contest violence are weak. Their main sources of support are friends, family members and teachers. Teachers deal with problems through punishing offenders, but whipping and beating sometimes perpetuates violence. Teachers deal with some incidents by confronting the parents of offenders, with families working together to address problems. Police are occasionally called in, but neither the criminal justice system nor the health services were seen as effective or helpful by participants in the study.

At present, most of the violence against both girls and boys goes unreported. This may be because some actions may not be recognised as violent and so not reported, or the victims may feel that no action will be taken. There is lack of knowledge of laws and procedures, and inadequate systems of child protection. Even for cases of extreme violence, girls are usually not offered therapeutic support to deal with the emotional, and health consequences of physical abuse. In many schools themes of relationships, violence, and gender are not covered in the curriculum. Where they are covered, a large proportion of teachers thought they were not effective. These themes were occasionally discussed in science lessons and assembly, usually to provide factual information or to warn boys and girls from getting involved in sexual relationships.

A major challenge for Action Aid and partners is how to challenge the deeply held practices and traditions such as FGM, early marriage, teenage sexuality, without leading to hostility in communities, and therefore resistance to change. For instance, a group of parents felt that health services are unhelpful because they provide condoms. Nevertheless, the positive ways in which some parents and community members spoke about NGO support gives a good foundation on which these practices can be challenged. The communities greatly value the material support such as improved school facilities like fences, toilets, sanitary towels, and practical support in helping girls and communities deal with cases of violence, which NGOs have given.

Recommendations

Legislative and policy proposals

There is need to:

1. Examine the views of those who express gender-equitable viewpoints, exploring how the views and practices have changed over time and how the same can be disseminated within communities and beyond.
2. Strengthen lobbying and advocacy for stakeholders to improve school infrastructure such as toilet facilities, water and sanitary provision; Strengthen advocacy on recruitment and posting of female teachers in rural areas; and giving motivational packages for teachers in ASAL areas.
3. Strengthen advocacy and focus on localized implementation of policies promoting gender equality through dissemination and trainings.
4. Promote child participation in school governance at all levels including training and support of teachers, SMCs, children and parents alongside advocacy at national level.
5. Work with local organisations dealing with conflict to learn more about ethnic tensions and links with violence against girls.

Addressing violence against girls

- A sustainable and integrated rights-based approach enabling children, communities and schools to challenge violence is required. This will involve applying methods such as training, sensitisation and adult education to address FGM, alternative forms of discipline and gender mainstreaming. Specifically, there is need to:
- Work with girls and boys on how to manage relationships, sexuality and sexual and reproductive health.
- Promote alternative forms of discipline within a broader gender and rights framework by conducting a mapping exercise of existing and potential alternative discipline practices.
- Working with teachers, teacher unions and teacher training institutions. Working with the families.

- Challenge the practice of FGM through undertaking research on FGM (including examination of community dynamics and behavioural change mechanisms).
- Work to promote implementation of laws banning the practice of FGM.
- Share information with other stakeholders for the development of alternative sources of livelihoods for FGM practitioners.
- Enhance awareness raising work in communities, (including building networks among girls, community, police, health services and CBOs) to develop preventive and response mechanisms to FGM cases.

Addressing gender parities in education

- ❖ Work with schools, parents and communities on strategies to increase girls' enrolment and increase retention in Standard 6-8.
- ❖ Conduct further analysis of school level data to develop school profiles to identify the most gender-friendly and safe schools,
- ❖ schools that need to be challenged and supported to improve their practices
- ❖ School development plans that need improvement.
- ❖ Work with schools and DEO's office to improve school record systems.
- ❖ Build on existing training on violence and HIV/AIDS to incorporate gender mainstreaming.

Challenging violence

- Promotion of an effective integrated system to address violence in schools and communities need to be enhanced both at school and community levels. This should include:
- A thorough analysis of the different mechanisms (including traditional justice systems) for addressing violence, and the circumstances in which different forms are more effective for girls.
- Developing a system of communication and referral between different organisations/departments, and community, district and national levels.
- Ongoing support and providing gender sensitive training and VAGS training for referral organizations such as the police, schools and child protection units.
- Supporting schools to implement national guidelines on Gender in Education Policy.
- Working with schools and communities to ensure that girls are able to use the reporting mechanisms to protect themselves.
- Ensuring all teachers (especially those running girl clubs) are trained in gender responsive pedagogies and child rights.
- Ensuring all girls clubs are facilitated by female staff.
- With support of male teachers and head teachers, engaging boys in addressing issues of violence and equality, and creating opportunities for supporting boys to deal with violence.

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