UNGEI eDiscussion #4: Safety and security in and around schools: an integral component of access to education for girls

Moderator: Prof. Bagele Chilisa

Start: 28 August 2007

In the week since we initiated the 4th eDiscussion on ‘Safety and security in and around the schools’, we have had several responses to our first set of questions: What makes a safe and secure school environment for girls? Are schools and their surrounding safe for girls? What are the factors that make schools and their surrounding unsafe for girls?

There is a general consensus from the respondents that schools and their surroundings are unsafe for girls. Communities with high crime rates, for instance, pose a security threat to girls. Some respondents pointed out that gender roles that require girls to be at home all the time while boys can go out and explore the world, make girls feel unsafe in newer environments like the school setting. Societal preferences, especially in some developing countries, where families with limited resources opt to enroll boys in schools rather than girls, also create a feeling among girls that schools are not meant for them, making them develop poor self image and lack confidence.

On school safety, one respondent listed the following as factors leading to the sexual abuse and harassment of girls in school: ‘manifestations of abuse tolerated by girls, preferential use of customary norms over legal frameworks, conflict between child rights and traditional obligations, social stigma towards victims of abuse, abusive teachers and students, lack of advocacy to reduce abuse, the lack of coordination between different actors such as school, hospital and police’ and lack of training of girls in ‘self defence skills’.

Some respondents were of the view that some school infrastructure makes schools unsafe for girls. Let us explore further the security of school infrastructure. What are the general conditions of school infrastructure, such as classrooms, hostels in boarding schools, sanitation, school grounds and how do these conditions make schools unsafe for girls?

We welcome any more reactions you may have to the response thus far or taking the discussion further to specific school infrastructure that makes school unsafe for girls.

Thank you for your interest and for a lively discussion!

Prof. Bagele Chilisa
University of Botswana
A study conducted in Mozambique several schools by Save the Children and others showed the following results: in Maputo city and the provinces of Maputo, Gaza, Inhambane, Sofala and Nampula at least 8 per cent of female students had suffered physical and sexual abuse in the school and 35 per cent had experienced sexual harassment involving verbal persuasion. In 37 per cent of cases the perpetrator of the abuse was a teacher. In 85 per cent of cases girls reported that schools had no knowledge of the abuse. Case studies of safe schools efforts by Save the Children in Malawi and Uganda and a follow up on action after the Mozambique report on school-based sexual abuse show how increased community participation can make schools safe and enabling learning environments for girls and boys. Factors that lead to the sexual abuse and harassment of girls in school were: manifestations of abuse tolerated by girls, preferential use of customary norms over legal frameworks, conflict between child rights and traditional obligations as women and girls, social stigma towards victims of abuse, abusive teachers and students, lack of advocacy to reduce abuse and lastly the lack of coordination between different actors such as school, hospital and police.

Tanja van de Linde
Africa Area Education Advisor
Save the Children USA

My grandparents used to tell me stories about their experience living in the rural villages in the grand old days.

I was told and got the feeling that: "In an open and friendly culture when people are used to sharing and caring for each other, people don't need thick doors and walls to protect their properties and they don't need to be constantly on watch/guard for real bad or dirty crimes."

"Whereas, in a pathological and mean culture, even if there are thick doors and walls, the villains, bullies and brutes might still try to break the law occasioning/inflicting harm on others."

So, if the girls go to schools in regions of relatively high crime rates, they should be educated about the bad out there in the wild world, be proactive and learn the defensive measures such as learning self-defense or have trusted adults accompany them to schools. Neighbourhood watch could be set up to help each other. The government could install systems of reward & punishment, reinforcing good behaviour and discouraging bad behaviour or punishing the bad. Basically to solve the problems, it's important to educate the people, and to eventually turn the bad into good.

Sincerely,

MTP Fong
Independent researcher
Canada
Many thanks for your letter. Before I commence I will like to tell you that we have just opened an adult literacy center in the Southwest province of Cameroon. We are hereby asking for affiliation with organisations that cater for girls’ education. A safe school for girls will be one where girls are not marginalised. You know physical stigma you get from family member is more painful. We are a religious organisation and we have the Bible perspective. Another point is we should not do anything that will make girls vulnerable. Hope to read from you.

Pius Ngoeh

I think women today need to get one step further than man. Because in this era of globalization, we need to stop gender discrimination. That's why woman need education too. Some women who can't enroll their study until finish need some other education, maybe not formal education but just some kind of course. At least women can do something. Anyway, girls are obviously weaker than men, so women need something that makes them feel secure and safe. I think government is the first who have to do something to make the situation safe for the girls at school. And other infrastructure which can make women feels good at school. And women should think twice too about sex before marriage, married under 17, even drugs.

Jeany Tabitha

For me, what makes girls unsafe in school somewhat the reason that girls are not good enough than boys in school. I mean, girls are always cleaning houses, or cooking in home, while the boys go out there looking for money. For developing countries, economical case is still the biggest problem. And it is based on some pattern like, if the parents poor, they couldn't afford money for their children to attend school, and it go along until the children become adult, and maybe they will not let their children attend school because they are also poor like their parents used to be.

And it sounds sad, because somehow, girls can do a lot more better things like boys do. Just because of the amount of money, and poorness, they can't pursuit their dream and personality in the open. World changes, right? I'm afraid they can't take advantage on the changes to improve their self and being a minority in social area, just because they don't have money or people said that girls are not good enough. My idea is that, giving them the chance to have the scholarships to attend school, giving them the more ways to make their dreams come true. At least give them a tool to make them be themselves and survived in work, or maybe make something that is useful to them... it's more than we think.

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