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

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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

Thank you for your continued responses to our second question on school infrastructure, and how its condition can make schools unsafe for girls.

In our previous discussion it was noted that sexual abuse and harassment of girls in school, abusive teachers and students make schools unsafe for girls. In Botswana, a Girls’ Education Movement project: Telling Their Story (UNICEF 2005) revealed how in one school, men from the village visited the girls’ hostels at night and subjected the girls to unwanted touching and at times rape. One respondent recommended regular repair and school maintenance, surveillance equipment and security guards to monitoring the safety and security of girls in the school.

Throughout the discussion, respondents have mentioned early and unwanted pregnancy as a security threat to the girls. These pregnancies, it was pointed out, are in most cases by older men, including teachers. These pregnancies have implications for the health of the girls. Unprotected sex exposes the girls to sexual transmitted infections, including HIV. In Botswana, for example, the Botswana AIDS Impact Survey (2004) revealed a 3.9 per cent HIV infection rate for adolescents 10 to 14 years of age, 6.6 per cent among those 15 to 19 years of age. These scenarios point to the health related risks that girls are susceptible to. Let us explore further the health safety and security of the girl in and around the school. **What are the health related risks of early and unwanted pregnancy, rape, coerced sex with peers and elderly men? What security measures, policies or procedures should be put in place for girls who are victims of rape, coerced sex, unwanted pregnancy and so on? What are some of the good health practices in schools to address rape, coerced sex and to prevent or address unplanned and unwanted pregnancy?**

We welcome any more reactions you may have to the response thus far or taking the discussion further to the health safety and security of the girl in and around the school.

Once again thank you for your interest and for a lively discussion!

Prof. Bagele Chilisa
University of Botswana
Professor Chilisa,

In response to the ediscussion on girls' safety around schools, I would like to begin by saying that it is commendable that UNGEI continues to highlight issues related to girls' education around the world.

In my view, the school environment particularly in sub-Saharan Africa still remains unsafe for girls. As research evidence has shown, girls in sub-Saharan Africa continue to drop out of school because of such factors as early and unexpected pregnancy. We know that in some cases girls have been impregnated by their teachers or peers as Webster's study (1999) of girls' secondary schooling in Kenya revealed. Yet more often than not, it is girls who bear the penalty by having to abandon their educational ambitions whilst those behind their pregnancy (whether it be teachers or peers) go scot-free.

If indeed African governments are committed to ensuring that education is universalized and that gender parity in education is achieved by 2015 in accordance to the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, then governments have to look far beyond merely increasing girls' educational access and now begin to take a closer look at the environment in which girls learn and implement policies that will ensure that girls are protected from sexual abuse of any kind.

It is also important that gender issues are mainstreamed in Africa's education systems as per the Dakar Framework and one way to do this is to sensitize teachers and other educators on the unique challenges that girls face in and out of school. Teachers must also be encouraged to change their attitudes towards girls and to be more supportive of them. It is of particular concern that the majority of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa (both male and female) continue to have a preference for teaching boys. The negative messages that girls receive in school not only set them up for failure academically but arguably make them vulnerable to sexual advances.

To ensure that girls perform well and persist in school, we must begin by making the school a safe and nurturing environment for girls.

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May I recommend the following actions be taken:

There should be Regular School (grounds) Inspections.

The schools should have a regular repairs and maintenance/health & safety schedule on hand to check:-

To see if there are any broken fences, doors, gates, bolts, locks, door chains, poor fixtures & lightings etc.) Fix and repair works should be carried out immediately in the dangerous spots/problem areas.

The checklist may include the following:
(1) Building structure (bricks & masonry)
(2) Drainage structures
(3) Exterior & walls: watch out for cracks & peels.
(4) Roofs: Are they all-weather proof? Strong enough to stand against the harmful effects of sun, wind, sandstorms, scorching heat, floods & natural disasters etc?
(5) Plumbing: Check for toilet problems (e.g. pipe deterioration, flushing & cleaning problems etc)
(6) Electrical: Check for circuit & voltage, wiring problems.
(7) Heating & Air Conditioning: Check the furnaces & air ducts/ventilation problems, chimney throats & smoke chambers etc.)
(8) Electrical concerns: Are there problems of any excessive current, overload rating, swollen capacitors etc.? (9) Asbestos: Are there any asbestos use? Environmental & safety problems?
(10) Fire Extinguishers: Are fire-fighting equipments in good working order installed on the school grounds?
(11) Gas: Check the furnace valves to lower the risks.
(12) And the schools should draw up a list of seasonal chores to keep the school safe healthy and secure.

If the schools can afford it, it is recommended that the schools use wireless security/surveillance cameras to ensure safety & security in and around classrooms & schools premises.

Depending on the school size, at least one or two school security guards should be hired to patrol the school grounds to ensure school safety & security.

As always, I enjoyed the e-discussions & learned much from the other participants. Many thanks.

Sincerely,

MTP Fong
Independent researcher
Richmond Hill
Ontario Canada
I must stress here that the discrimination that exist in the treatment of pregnant girls and the authors of the abuse makes it unsafe for girls in schools. I strongly suggest that teachers or male students who are involved in the pregnancy of the female students should be equally expelled from schools. Most of the time the girls are expelled while the perpetrators go around free.

As I mentioned earlier there should be a programme to enable human rights groups to visit the various campuses and give a talk to students on their rights. There is discrimination against girls even in textbooks. Most textbooks writers give very poor and negative images about girls and women as a whole. In order to give girls self confidence we must start with the learning materials that we use in schools.

Another aspect of insecurity in schools has to do with unexplained actions taken in schools by authorities: for example, some years back in Cameroon certain vaccinations were administered only to girls from 12 years and above without any explanation. It was later discovered that it was a contraceptive trial by a pharmaceutical company. No one knows the after effect of this on the girls. Certain associations of female medical doctors came out and campaigned against using our African girls as guinea pigs.\footnote{Note from the UNGEI: During the early 1990s, unfounded rumours that the polio vaccine was not safe, led several countries in West and Central Africa to interrupt polio vaccination. With immunization activities stalled in Nigeria, for instance, and polio campaigns of a sub-optimal quality, polio was able to creep back across the country and spread into the previously polio-free countries Cameroon, Chad, and through Niger, into Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, putting 15 million children at risk and necessitating a massive immunization campaign across west and central Africa.}

I encourage us to take this topic very serious. Decentralisation and governance has a lot to play in the security in our schools. We the educated mothers should take the forefront to educate our girls on their rights.

\textbf{Dr. Elizabeth Tamajong, PhD.}
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