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

Moderator: Prof. Bagele Chilisa

Many thanks for your continued participation in our discussion. We have had several responses to our latest questions: What are the health related risks of early and unwanted pregnancy, rape, coerced sex with peers and elderly men? What security measures 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?

In our first set of questions, we discussed abuses in the schools that make schools unsafe for girls. In the second round, we discussed the physical infrastructure in the schools and how it can be improved to make schools safe for girls. In our latest round, some respondents reiterated the need for institutional infrastructure that satisfy international standards on safe and secure schools, but also noted that these were not enough. Respondents expressed the need to address discrimination of pregnant girls in the school system. Research continues to show how pregnant girls who are allowed to continue schooling while they are pregnant suffer discrimination, ridicule and negative labeling from their classmates and at times teachers. One respondent noted that in some countries, boys responsible for the pregnancies are allowed to continue going to school while the pregnant girls are expelled.

It was noted that in addition to discrimination, pregnant girls suffered emotional and psychological damage. Families, schools and communities often blamed girls for the assaults and abuses instead of helping them. Recommendations included setting up organizations that deal with abuse of underage girls; enacting and enforcing laws that protect underage girls from sexual harassment and gender violence; equal sanctioning by schools to boys and girls affected by pregnancy, and including safety and security as a major agenda item for post secondary education at the upcoming ADEA Biennale.

Throughout the discussions held so far, respondents gave examples of how the involvement of students, teachers and the community are a cost-effective strategy to create a safe and secure school environment for girls. Based on feedback from the respondents, our final set of questions is: What are the traditionally embedded sexual messages in traditional ceremonies and societal structures that allow men to pursue younger girls for sex? What roles should the family, the community, the school and government and other stakeholders play to protect girls against the myriads abuses, assaults and sexual harassment.

In one week, we will start to consolidate the discussion and prepare a summary to be presented at the UNGEI panel, to be held at the Women Deliver Conference in London on 19 October.

Thank you for your interest and for a lively discussion.

Prof. Bagele Chilisa
University of Botswana
Dear colleagues,

The eDiscussion on safety and security in and around schools has been very interesting. FAWE and the national FAWE chapters have paid a lot of attention to this problem. As most of you will know the upcoming ADEA Biennale will have post primary education as the main item. One of the major constraints in participation of girls in post primary is the safety and security problem. This could be an item on the agenda of the ADEA meeting. Information from this eDiscussion and all the info available at FAWE could be used in preparation for this. But perhaps this has already been included in the agenda of the ADEA Biennale.

Regards

Marjan Kroon
Netherlands
Basic Education Expert

Dear all,

The discussion on “Safety and security in and around schools: an integral component of access to education for girls” has certainly one of the most important things to be considered as far as girls’ education is concerned.

It is important to note that safety and security of girls in an institutional environment not only depends on physical infrastructure but it depend by and large on the matters related to social conditions, economic situations, cultural practices and traditional values.

It is always important that there must be sufficient institutional infrastructure to provide every kind of facility so that girls can feel free and secure in a given environment and this should be upgraded to a universal standard within local settings.

On the other hand, things like social conditions, economic situation, cultural practices must be reformed tasted to the light of scientific logic and techniques all-together. Girl children around the world have been still victims of localised social customs, and deep rooted cultural practices that always very crudely acted against the will and well-being. Not only in Africa, but also a large part of Asian countries has been reeling under the kind of tormenting problems. Still girls have no access to any academic institutions because they are girls and thus they need not to go out for interactions with the outside world. Even if the girls get access there is no respite of harassment within the very closed settings of schools. Girls are even exploited by their male classmates also in which traditions practices have showed a very poor taste. While grooming in the family girls have been always been asked to respect the father, brother, uncle, male teacher, close friends and in the latter part of life the male colleague, male boss. In fact these groups of people are the biggest threat to the safety, security and dignity of girl child. But boys are not being advised and imbied such kind of things since the very infancy of their life. In the Western countries, the male office boss always lured to and forced to establish physical relations with the employees of the opposite sex, and it is now being a rational practice and the boss has always the power to
maintain the policy of ‘carrot or stick’ that goes against the principles of enlightenment, humane ethics and good cultural practices and now, in the eastern societies such practices followed the suit.

Physical violence over the girl child has been rampant now in the South Asian countries including India and Pakistan and some times girls have to be hospitalised to ensure good treatment of serious injury. Sometimes girls are locked into classroom for longer hours that certainly against any kind of laws of civilisation.

And this must be stopped immediately and all the good thinking people should stand up and protest against such heinous crime against the women without whom modern civilisation is meaningless and bound to be crippled.

SUBRATA BANERJEE
Social Development Consultant
Child & Gender Rights
Kolkata, Bengal, India

Addressing challenges in safety and security around schools as sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancies and early marriages are sensitive matters. From the previous discussion I have noted a tendency towards recommendations and solutions centered on physical recourses like security and school building facilities, and strengthening and maintenance of these.

My response is that these measures don’t target the core of the problem. Surely improvements on recourses can be made and security enhanced, but the insecurity that girls must feel, and their exposure to the risks surrounding them will still be there no matter how high fences one builds in school yards.

As first steps in the right direction I stand behind the points made above by Ms. Musundi and Dr Tamajong about the need to address discrimination of pregnant girls in the school systems. Making sure there are equal sanctions of boys and girls in matters of pregnancies would be a good starting point for African Governments in ensuring gender parity in education. Also, importance should be made to ease policies for re-entering girls in education after pregnancies, like Malawi’s Revised Readmission Policy Procedures as of November 2006.

Furthermore, in attacking the core issues we need to focus on why boys and men feel they have the right to sexually harass girls. Ethnographic studies from Malawi Violence Against Girls, a study done by Social Research Institute, University of Malawi and other African countries shows tendencies towards culturally embedded sexual messages in traditional ceremonies and societal structures allowing men to pursue young girls sexually. There is clearly lack off respect for the privacy of girls and children in general - possibly many boys also feel sexually harassed and pushed into sexual relations in order to prove their manhood.

In my view change has to be done on the ground level, where girls and boys, parents and teachers have to take lead. One example is from Dedza District in Malawi, where the local youth club identified girls not attending school in their rural surroundings. They took action and in conversation with the pupils in question they agreed to cut the grass around the school in order to prevent lurking men from harassing girls going to school Personal
conversation with FAWE Malawi. My point is, in engaging the children themselves one can find suitable and inexpensive solutions. At the same time this puts the problem on the community agenda which would be part of civic education. Involving the boys and parents in the matter could make them realize the issues girls face. At the same time girls needs a boost of self esteem, they need to know about their rights in order to stand up to fellow boys and parents.

What I urge for is a slow but important process of awareness and mutual respect. We should all be responsible of each others well being and take part in the process. The goal might be utopian but the process is just as important. All over the world girls (and boys) are subject to sexual exploitation and at the same time blamed for it, something needs to change in the way of thinking regarding these issues.

Thanks for bringing this to the discussion board!

Ms. Eirin Forsund  
UNICEF Intern  
Basic Education Section  
Lilongwe, Malawi

For me, the risks were not about the pregnancy. It was how the girl handles the situation that she had an unwanted pregnancy. An unwanted baby. She's not even adult yet, but pushed herself to carry these responsibilities like an adult did. So it was psychological problem and coercion that made the suffering even more painful.

After that, we could see those related problems, such as HIV, lose educational opportunity, and of course the girl couldn't say anything about who the 'father' was. Somehow I saw some 'pressure' in a girl’s eye that she couldn't help but cry. And I must say we need some organizations that care about this. Some law protection to underage and rape cases. So that girls have the ability to speak up whether they had some harassment and another pressure related to this cases.

iichaa iichaa  
<iichaa_reborn@yahoo.co.uk>