



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

Message sent 15 October 2007

http://www.ungei.org/listserve/index_1534.html

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Moderator: Prof. Bagele Chilisa

Thank you for your active participation in UNGEI's fourth eDiscussion on 'Safety and Security in and around Schools: An integral component of access to education for girls', which has come to an end. Please find below the final submissions to our latest set of questions and a summary of the entire discussion.

In our first set of questions, we discussed abuses in the schools that make them unsafe for girls. In the second set, we discussed the school's physical infrastructure and how it can be improved to make schools safe for girls. In the third set of questions, we discussed the risks of early and unwanted pregnancy, rape, coerced sex with peers and elderly men, and what needs to be done to address these risks. Finally, in the last set of questions, we explored the traditionally embedded sexual messages in traditional ceremonies and societal structures that allow men to pursue younger girls for sex and the roles that the family, community, school, government and other stakeholders should play to protect girls against the myriads of abuses, assaults and sexual harassment.

There was a general consensus from all respondents that schools and their surroundings are unsafe for girls, and that communities with high crime rates pose a security threat to girls. A Girls' Education Movement project from UNICEF Botswana, Telling Their Story, 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. Respondents also pointed out that gender roles that require girls to be at home while boys 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, thus leading to poor self-image, lack of confidence and poor self-esteem.

Other factors mentioned that make schools unsafe were "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-defense skills. It was also noted that the family played an important socialization role and often socialized boys to be aggressive towards girls and girls to be timid and tolerant to the aggression by boys. Early and unwanted pregnancy by elderly men and early and forced marriages to elderly men posed health risks as well as emotional and psychological damage to the girls. Pregnancy and early marriage for underage girls exposed them to the risk of contracting HIV, death at labor and developing Vesico Virginal Fistula. The Botswana AIDS Impact Survey in 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. Research also revealed that for every 100 girls in school aged 14 to 19 years, 3 fell pregnant before they finished school.

Respondents noted that sexual messages spread through traditional practices and structures perpetuated the tendency for elderly men to pursue younger girls. It was noted that in some cultures, impotent men are advised by traditional medicine experts to pursue virgin girls with the hope of reawakening their sexual dysfunction. Once married, the sexual relations between these younger girls and the elderly men are bound by the terms of



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marriage, in most cases dictated by some religious rites. In such cases, it becomes difficult to intervene, as communities where these practices occur may not regard these unequal sexual relationships as abuse of young girls.

Recommendations were made about the physical infrastructure of the school, the role of families, communities and community leaders, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing the security and safety of girls in the schools. On the physical **infrastructure of the schools**, respondents expressed the need for institutional infrastructure that satisfies international standards. It was recommended that schools should have a regular repair and maintenance/health and safety schedule; use wireless surveillance cameras and school security guards to patrol the school grounds. The involvement of students, teachers and the community were seen as a cost-effective strategy to create a safe and secure school environment for girls. An example was given where a local youth club cut the grass around the school to prevent lurking men from harassing girls going to school.

On **gender-based violence**, respondents recommended the setting up of organizations that dealt with rape, forced sex, sexual harassment of under aged girls and the enactment and enforcement of law that protect underage girls from sexual harassment and gender-based violence, formulation and enforcement of school policies that require equal treatment of girls and boys and equal sanctions to boys and girls affected by pregnancy.

It was also recommended that professional NGOs and associations of teachers, lawyers, physicians, should carry out **research** that documents the myriads of abuses that girls suffer. The research findings should be communicated back to community leaders, amongst them religious leaders, who should then work with the NGOs to monitor male offenders.

Respondents also recommended that the agenda on the safety and security of girls in and around the school should be kept alive by including it as a major agenda item for post-secondary education at the upcoming ADEA Biennale and participating in European Union Presidency, January to June 2008, on the theme of the Girl Child.

Thank you all for showing a lot of enthusiasm in the topic and for the lively discussion. This summary of the discussion will feed into the UNGEI panel at the "Women Deliver" conference that will be held from 18-20 October 2007 in London.

Prof. Bagele Chilisa
University of Botswana

Hi All,

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



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school and government and other stakeholders play to protect girls against the myriads abuses, assaults and sexual harassment.

I wish to add to the discussion, by examining the Islamic cultural practices of West African ethnic tribes on the above phenomena. Haven't come from that cultural zone and practice. My focus is on older men and sexual relations with the younger girls as follows:

- (a) First, older men engage in sexual relations with younger girls on the premise of what they consider a "legal route", by marrying these girls as child wives. The purpose is according to the practice and tradition, to rejuvenate their age, with the belief that they will become more sexually active and 'younger' and 'fresher'.
- (b) In addition, considering the measure of a man's wealth, by the number of children, especially in the rural areas, most of these older men by these girl-child marriages, aim at having more kids.
- (c) Older men, who are secretly 'impotent' frequently marry these younger girls with the hope of 'reawakening' their sexual dysfunction, especially on the advise of traditional medicine men or 'marabou', this is a major reason for the pursuit of younger girls for sex as child wives.
- (d) Older men, who are sexually active but have had the misfortune of not having children of their own, often would try sexual encounters with virgin young girls; wither as wives or rape victims. Often, the men succumb to the advice of some traditional medicine men or marabou.

NOTE: Because the sexual relations are binded by terms of marriage contracts according to Islamic rites [except in the case of rapes], it is not considered by the community as rape or sexual abuse as envisaged in the discourse of gender and sexual relations in the western perspective.

Hence, the only way these girls can be rescued from such un-equal sex relationship[which I consider sexual slavery and indignity of womanhood] is by female professional NGOs (as in the case of Northern Nigeria where I come from to) as Federation of Muslim Women Association of Lawyers, Physicians, Teachers etc, and other allied women professional organizations who are versatile in the Islamic family laws and jurisprudence to dialogue with the religious leaders [who often are the community leaders], by negotiating and explaining the hazards of such relationships, in order to control and possibly minimize and abolish such child marriages. Such associations can provide empirical data on the negative multiplier effect of unequal sexual relations that has caused harm to the girls and their families, by providing cases of Vesico Virginal Fistula, VVF, and commercial sex worker girls, who run away from home to cities to escape the forced marriage to these older men. Excerpts of the recorded voices of the women through collective interviews and video documentary can be related or presented to these community leaders during such dialogue open house discourses between the NGOs and the leaders, to sensitize and appeal to their involvement to action against the practices.

If the community leaders support the NGOs by monitoring such male offenders (as parents and older husbands to these girls), then what ever legal sanctions that are laid by the government at the local, state and local government against such sexual abuse on these young girls will be honored and put in practice.

In sum, base on my contributions of the above, I believe, only women with some professional success are going to assist in fighting against such abuses emanated on these young girls, as the voices of these women



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will be heard better, and taken more seriously by the male religious and community leaders as well as top government representatives. Cheers.

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In case you do not know this, the gender theme for the EU Slovenian presidency Jan-Jun 2008 is **The Girl Child**

With all good wishes

Raymond (LLOYD)

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The Parity Democrat

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In most countries, I found some culture that embedded a man to marry young girl, especially in their teenage. I don't know whether it was right, or wrong to blame the culture which already exists for several years, but sometimes it's quite demented.

I think we need to open their mind, that world always change. I mean, what will happen to the girls after they got married? They will need to be a mom, they will push themselves to take care of her baby (which I'm not sure they could have, after I knew in my biology class, underage married and pregnancy had a potential killing-life more than we could imagined).

And the roles? Well, more contribution to hear what really happened, what we can do for them, and tried to minimize some of coercion-act appeared on a movie these days, such as free-sex, drug-abuse, etc.

Charyza Wara

Dear Colleagues,

Traditionally family members convey the message to the young boys and girls about sex by stopping them to meet each other, discuss with each other. Normally parents tell the boys and girls to keep distance from each other. This kind of attitude creates curiosity among young men and women to go nearer to each other and do it practically. These young boys and girls use the ceremonies and other programs to meet with each and initiate sexual activities. In this regard, parents, community, and government play an important role by creating



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awareness among young people by sharing different experiences. They should tell the truth to the young boys and girls about the effects of sexual harassment.

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With great interest Education International has taken note of the discussion on this highly important topic.

It is obvious that the teaching community and the teachers unions are convinced that they have to contribute to the safety and security of all - learners and educators - in and around schools.

In the context of the EFAIDS programme, EI and partners developed a toolkit geared towards 'building a gender friendly school environment'. This toolkit was launched at the EI Congress in July 2007 and will be used in the coming years by teachers unions in over 35 countries. It will be introduced at regional training sessions of EI affiliates and from there on the unions will introduce the toolkit in their union training programme. We trust that this will be a valuable contribution to the common cause.

I enclose the foreword and the executive summary to the toolkit:

The toolkit is available in English (and soon in French and Spanish as well) and can be downloaded via the EI website:

http://www.ei-ie.org/ef aids/en/documentation_ei.php

Also UNESCO has announced the launch of the toolkit.

Foreword:

In most countries, children and adolescents spend some 1000 hours in school annually. The school is a place of learning, reading, writing and arithmetic. But the school is also a learning institution with much broader duties, that go beyond the sphere of traditional learning. The school is an environment in which young people learn about social relationships, about norms, values and the "do's" and "don'ts". In other words, the school is the environment in which professionals work with young people in a responsible manner focusing on the transfer of knowledge, skills and behaviour.

The school is also the environment in which students learn about their gender identity, the relationships between girls and boys, boys and boys and girls and girls. It is a process of learning 'who am I in relation to the others', and the school plays an important role in this process.

The issue of gender identity is closely connected to gender equality and safety in schools and learning institutions. These matters are in turn related to the teaching profession and the quality of educators. It is obvious that teachers' unions and their members around the world are confronted with these questions on a day-to-day basis.



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It therefore requires that the unions involve their membership in discussions and develop policies on the issue of gender identity, equality and safety in learning institutions.

Education International (EI), its affiliates and its partners in the EFAIDS programme (education Development Centre (EDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) acknowledge the need to meet the needs of teachers' unions to address these issues in a responsible manner. To that end they developed and tested a toolkit. The kit's materials provide a forum for discussion about how gender roles can influence health and livelihood. It offers a vision for unions and schools.

The main focus of the kit is a set of tools to help educators and unions to conduct activities which promote gender safety, equity and equality and provide background information on actions already taken.

Like other initiatives taken by EI, its affiliates and partners, this toolkit is based upon the comprehensive approach including the five working areas: research, policy development, advocacy, training and publicity.

By putting this toolkit to use, EI and affiliates will contribute to crucial discussions on gender, identity, equity and safety and thus help to build an overall gender friendly school environment.

Executive summary

Building a Gender Friendly School Environment:

A Toolkit for Educators and Their Unions Education International, Education Development Center, and the World Health Organization have developed a toolkit to help educators' unions create a healthy, safe environment in learning institutions for learners of all ages. The goal is to challenge and change negative gender stereotyping and gender inequalities in all aspects of learning institutions and to promote equal opportunities for female and male learners to develop a healthy gender identity and complete a quality basic education. The kit will be used by union leaders and educators in the EFAIDS programme in 35 countries around the world. The toolkit starts by discussing how prevailing gender roles can negatively influence health and livelihood. It goes on to offer a vision for a learning institution that promotes gender safety, equity, and equality, and it provides background information on action already taken on these issues. The main focus of the kit is the tools to help educators and unions conduct activities in the five educator union priority working areas listed below:

- **Union Policy Development:** Focuses on developing a code of conduct for educators, which is a crucial part of maintaining a safe learning institution environment. This and other policy changes demonstrate the union's leadership and broad-based commitment to affect all educators and learners.
- **Research:** Enables educators and staff to study all aspects of the learning environment to determine where improvements need to be made to eliminate gender stereotypes and promote gender equality. Steps are suggested for using the results to create change in the learning institution through advocacy, policy development, training, and publicity.
- **Advocacy:** Provides information on engaging the government and learning institutions to affect change in policies and the learning institutions.



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- Training: Provides activities for learners and educators to increase their awareness of gender issues and the role of bystanders in unsafe interpersonal situations so that they can become more involved in creating healthy and safe learning institution environments. Also focuses on developing skills so that educators create change and affect learners.
- Publicity: Helps create a strategy to reach all union members and the larger community with key messages focused on gender issues and the union's work to promote gender safety and equality in learning institutions.

It is the integration of the five working areas as a coherent package that makes them most effective.

The tools will enable unions and educators to create change that leads to equal opportunities for female and male learners so that they can receive an education that allows them to reach their full potential.

Wouter Van der Schaaf

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Education International