

Ending School-Related Gender-Based Violence

A Series of
Thematic Briefs



Brief 4: Establishing safe and confidential reporting mechanisms



Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence

The Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) was created in 2014 to respond to SRGBV by raising awareness and finding solutions to ensure schools are safe, gender-sensitive and inclusive environments, where boys and girls can learn to unleash their full potential. The Group has expanded to more than 100 members representing 50 organizations, including humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, and regional and national offices.

www.ungei.org/what-we-do/school-related-gender-based-violence

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following members for reviewing, providing feedback and information for the case studies: Relebohile Moletsane (University of Kwazulu-Natal), Helen Cahill (University of Melbourne), Jenny Parkes (Institute of Education-UCL), Catherine Jere (University of East Anglia), madeleine kennedy-macfoy (Education International), Patricia Tibbetts (Save the Children US), Catherine Kennedy (Save the Children UK), Abigail Tuchili (MoE, Zambia), Dr. Patricia Watson (National Dept of Basic Education, South Africa), Tizie Maphalala (UNICEF), Laetitia Bazzi (UNICEF), Remmy Shawa (UNESCO), Elizabeth Randolph (RTI), Anne Spear (University of Maryland), Katharina Anton-Exelberg and Hassan Mulusi (Raising Voices Uganda), Joanna Herat (UNESCO), Nora Fyles (UNGEI).

The briefs were written by Sally Beadle (UNESCO) and Sujata Bordoloi (UNGEI) with editorial support from Fiona McDowell and Sarah Winfield. The publications were designed by Daniel Pomlett.

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Published in 2019 by:

United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI)
3 United Nations Plaza
New York
NY 10017
USA

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Introduction

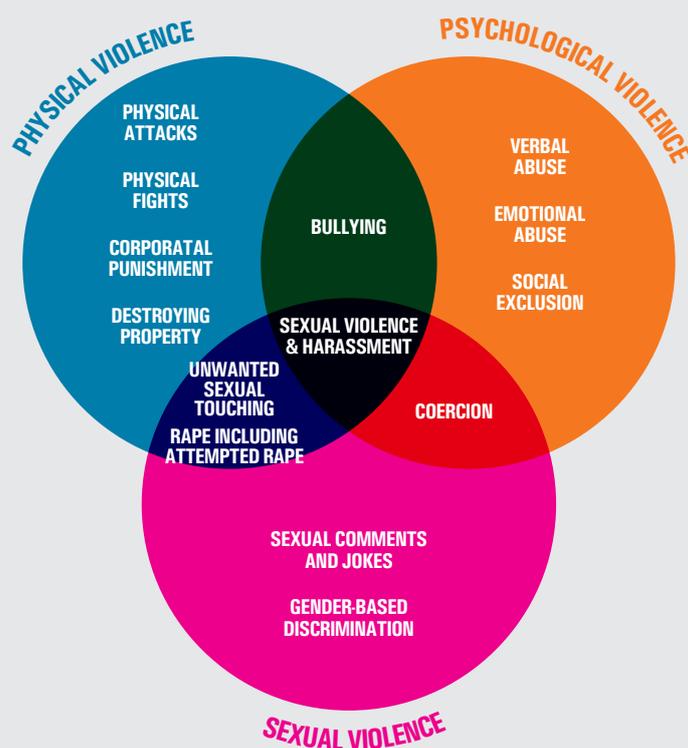
School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) refers to acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics.¹

Discriminatory gender norms are one of the key driving factors for many forms of violence, including violence in schools. This means that it is essential to apply a gender lens when developing violence prevention and response approaches. School-related gender-based violence violates children's rights and is a significant barrier for girls' and boys' access to and participation in education.²

There has been increasing recognition of SRGBV as a pressing issue requiring global attention if the Sustainable Goals 4, (Education), 5 (Gender equality) and 16.2 (Violence against children) are to be met. Much work remains to be done requiring accelerated and multi-dimensional prevention and response efforts.

This series of **thematic briefs** is targeted at policy makers and practitioners. It aims to summarize the latest learning and evidence synthesized from two regional workshops on how best to prevent and address SRGBV held in West and Central Africa and East and Southern Africa. Other briefs in this series include: 1. Applying a whole school approach to prevent school-related gender-based violence; 2. Engaging teachers to create safe and gender-responsive learning environments; 3. Shifting harmful gender norms through curricular approaches; 5. Investing in data and evidence to inform the response to SRGBV; and 6. Integrating SRGBV into national policies and education sector plans.

Figure 1: Violence in schools takes many forms, many of which are rooted in gender norms and inequality

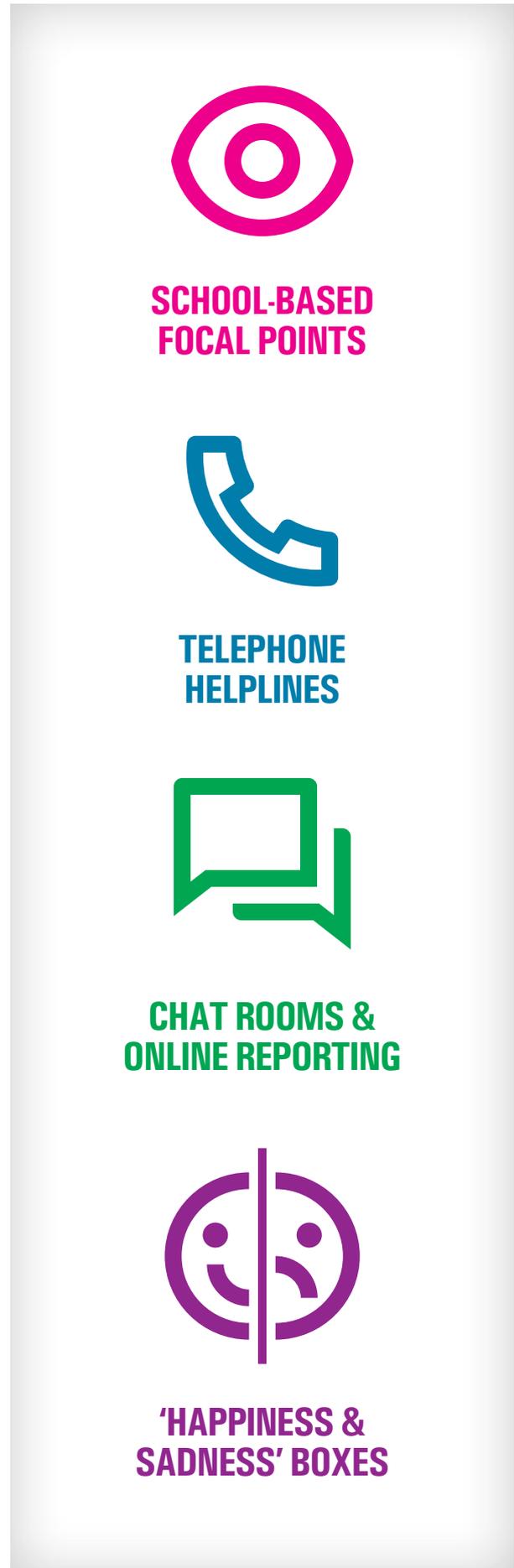


Why strong reporting mechanisms in schools?

Reporting systems enable victims/witnesses and their advocates to report crimes or violations. Safe, easily-accessible, confidential reporting mechanisms are important in terms of addressing SRGBV so that in the event of an incident, victims and witnesses can safely report violence and abuse, and know that there will be services to support them, if they wish (see figure 3). Such mechanisms are critical for holding perpetrators of SRGBV to account for their actions and ensuring that the perpetrator can do no more harm to students or the community. They are also essential for ensuring that those experiencing violence can be provided with the support and services they may require.

Ministries of education and schools need to establish appropriate reporting mechanisms and have an agreed protocol for dealing with reports of SRGBV. Links with local support networks as well as formal services are essential.

Figure 3: Examples of reporting mechanisms



What have we learned about effective reporting systems?

Involve a range of people, including students, in the design of reporting mechanisms and procedures

Reporting mechanisms should be designed in close consultation with students, school staff and relevant community stakeholders. Students may identify barriers to reporting that adults would not, so consulting them in the development and trial of reporting mechanisms is a way of ensuring that what is designed makes young people feel comfortable utilizing them. In the design of the RapidPro reporting mechanism in Senegal, a range of stakeholders were consulted including students and teachers (see example 1). Involving students in the design, also helps ensure that they are familiar with the process and know what to expect in terms of the response.

Consider accessibility to all students

Reporting mechanisms must be accessible to all students and consider the particular barriers that students with special needs, or those from minority groups or highly stigmatized groups – such as children who identify as LGBTIQ+ – may face in reporting violence.³

Protect confidentiality of victims and witnesses

A major barrier to students coming forward with cases is their fear of facing negative repercussions. A study of countries in Southern Africa found that victims of sexual violence tend to experience hostility and animosity after reporting sexual violence, and often leave school for prolonged periods, change schools, or drop out of schools entirely. On the other hand, the students and teachers responsible for the violence receive little in the way of repercussions for their actions.⁴ A 2018 study in Ethiopia found that sexual violence is rarely reported as students do not think their concerns will be taken seriously or are afraid of repercussions.⁵ These examples are testament to the need for confidential and non-judgmental and safe mechanisms for reporting. Protecting people who report violence is central to ensuring their safety and will make reporting mechanisms more likely to be used.

Link reporting mechanisms to a strong system of support and referral

Research shows that another reason students rarely report violence or abuse is because experience tells them that no action will be taken.^{6,7} There is a need to ensure that there are protocols in place to guide an appropriate response. In Senegal, the Ministry of Education and UNICEF have worked together to establish a framework for the detection and management of risk situations affecting a student (see example 2) which provides clear and practical steps that school staff are responsible for taking when they receive a report of violence. Research from RTI found that clear guidelines outlining reporting protocols and pathways,

can act as a highly protective factor for young people, reducing the prevalence and increasing the accountability of those responsible for violence perpetration.⁸

Ensure school staff are familiar with reporting protocols and referral pathways

In some countries, guidelines or teacher codes of conduct are being developed. However, these need to include clear reporting protocols and referral pathways. Effective implementation of guidelines requires training for teachers in recognizing students who need support, providing an appropriate response and understanding their responsibilities as duty bearers under national policy and legislation. It is also useful if school staff are familiar with focal points at referral services.

Strengthen reporting and communication between the education sector and child protection systems

Coordination between different sectors, including health, child protection and social services, is central to ensure that cases are referred appropriately.⁹ In some schools, efforts are made to establish a link between guidance and counselling staff, external social workers and other officials for referral when appropriate.¹⁰ Evidence from Zimbabwe and Tanzania found that clear, safe, and supportive reporting mechanisms (such as suggestion boxes, girls clubs, or community protection committees) linked to community protection systems also strengthen students' confidence and lead to better reporting and resolution of child abuse.^{11,12}



Foster a sense of accountability in school staff

It is important to establish a sense of accountability in school staff to provide appropriate follow up of cases. In less serious cases, this may mean simply checking in with the student to ensure they are okay or referring to a school counsellor or teacher focal point. In more serious cases, this may mean formally reporting the case. Reporting of suspected abuse of children can be either on a voluntary basis or mandatory by law. Mandatory reporting of violence and abuse is a fraught issue; incentives to do so and sanctions for not doing so need to be carefully thought through, while keeping the interests and protection of the child as a central concern.¹³

Partner with efforts to change norms around violence and help-seeking

Perceptions of violence will influence whether it is identified and reported. In research from

countries in East and Southern Africa region, girls cite 'not viewing the abuse as a problem' and fearing that they will get into trouble or be abandoned as key reasons for failing to report following an incident of sexual abuse.^{14,15,16,17} Given that violence is often perceived as a 'normal' part of school life, and thus under-reported, efforts to strengthen reporting mechanisms need to be partnered with efforts to change deeply ingrained social and cultural norms that normalize, condone or justify violence, and encourage reporting and help-seeking (see Brief 3).

Link reporting mechanisms to data collection systems

Consider how the reporting mechanisms are linked to data and monitoring systems in order to collect data to inform overall prevention and response interventions. In Senegal, the RapidPro tool not only ensures that cases are responded to but provides real-time data on incidents (see example 1).



Example 1

RapidPro: A confidential reporting tool linking schools with services

Senegal

In Senegal there was growing concerns about under-reporting of cases of violence and abuse against children (including within school). This was partly linked to an issue of the general population being unaware of services and/or unable to navigate the service system. In an effort to establish a safe and confidential reporting system, RapidPro – an open source SMS-based platform – was identified. RapidPro functions not only as a tool to strengthen reporting and referral, but it also facilitates case management and produces real time data. The tool was designed using a participatory process, engaging a range of stakeholders, including potential future users. While this process takes time, it fosters strong commitment and ownership and recognizes communities as an essential part of the care network.

A cohort of ‘informants’ have been selected and trained from an existing network of trusted community members and service providers who are already in regular contact with children. These ‘informants’ are able to send an SMS to a free number (staffed 24/7), registering a case. The system then collects information on the case, such as the age

and sex of the victim and type of violation. A report is sent to a specialized service staffed by trained social workers who manage the response. To date, over 700 informants have been established, including teachers, women’s group representatives, police, security personnel and service providers.

Measures have been put in place to protect the confidentiality of both victims and informants, adhering to national data protection laws. Only the welfare service in charge of case management and UNICEF have access to the data collected.

In the first ten months of the initiative 1,192 cases had been reported, with an increase in child protection case referrals of 44% compared to the previous six months.

While not yet formally evaluated, RapidPro has proven to be useful for people, simple to use, accessible, cost-effective and easy to put in place. In addition, the tool systematically produces reliable data in real time, on cases reported and handled without increasing workload of child protection professionals. In addition, the initiative has raised awareness of child protection issues and strengthened relationships between service providers¹⁸. An evaluation is planned for 2020.



Example 2

Guidelines for the detection and management of risk situations affecting a student

Senegal

The Ministry of National Education in Senegal has led the development of guidelines (or a manual) through a consultative process involving educational authorities at national and provincial levels and teaching staff.¹⁹ Published in 2019, the manual provides a frame of reference for action and practical guidance for anyone working in the education sector to detect and manage internally, or in liaison with other institutions, situations of distress or danger to a student occurring in schools and their vicinity. The aim is to ensure that each staff member in the school plays his or her role and that any student at risk can be detected, supported with basic initial care, referred for specialized care to social services, health services and/or judicial services, according to the needs and gravity of the incident.

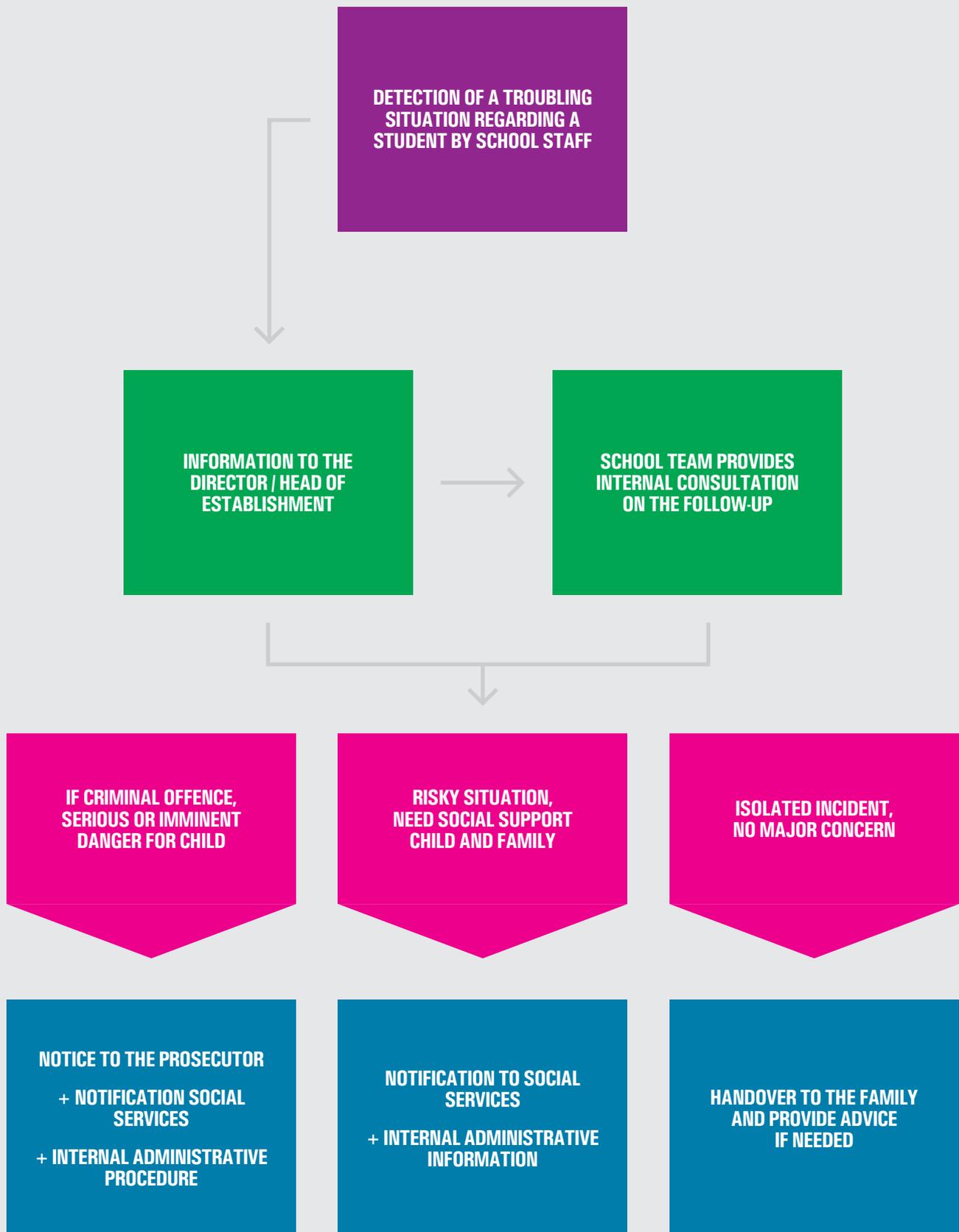
The school is viewed as frontline in identifying children in distress and central to reporting incidences of violence perpetrated both within and outside schools. Teachers are in daily

contact with students, and are in the best position to identify, in their early stages, signals of distress or danger to a student. Making sure teachers are capable of early detection and reporting situations of abuse or violence is key to protecting children and safeguarding their fundamental rights. The guidelines recognize that students, particularly girls, are subject to sexual harassment from peers in schools, which has far-reaching consequences for their well-being, for instance, HIV transmission, early and unwanted pregnancy, school drop-out and long-term psychological trauma. It acknowledges that teachers play a crucial role in detecting and thus appropriately responding to SRGBV.

The guidelines emphasize the best interest of the child and make reporting of any form of violence or abuse obligatory. They help teachers identify signs of suffering or discomfort manifested by students by providing a list of the different signs of distress that can alert teachers. The guidelines provide practical steps that should be taken by staff members and, depending on the nature of the incident, specify whether teachers should notify social services, judicial services, health services or the family (see figure 4).



Figure 4: Examples of reporting mechanisms



Example 3

Namibia's National Safe Schools Framework

Namibia's National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) was developed jointly by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) and UNICEF to strengthen the provision of healthy, supportive and conducive teaching and learning to address the concerning levels of violence in Namibian schools.²⁰

The Framework identifies seven standards to help Namibian schools create conducive teaching and learning environments. The Framework provides key stakeholders with detailed practical guidance on how to carry out their responsibilities for creating and maintaining safe schools, including pointing out where laws govern the conduct of teachers (for example in mandatory reporting on child protection cases).

The sixth standard refers to effective prevention of and response to violence and self-harm. The Framework outlines the importance of well-defined reporting and referral procedures, including teacher codes of conduct. The Framework encourages students, parents, teachers and the school community to report any incidents or concerns. It emphasizes the importance of privacy and provides practical tips to teachers for approaching a student in need of support.

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration was critical to the development of the Framework. Consulting with a range of ministry representatives, students, school personnel and the wider community strengthened the sense of ownership, inclusivity, transparency, appropriateness and clarity of the Framework.

The government emphasizes that the successful implementation of the NSSF requires a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach. The education sector needing to work closely with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGECW), the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS) and the Ministry of Safety and Security (MoSS).



Challenges



Experience shows that the establishment of safe, effective and confidential mechanisms faces a range of practical and ethical challenges. Extreme caution needs to be taken to ensure that reporting mechanisms do not potentially expose victims to further harm or negative repercussions.



Violence often is perceived as a 'normal' part of school life – deeply ingrained social and cultural norms that condone or justify violence. This may mean that students and staff have difficulty recognizing physical and sexual abuse,²¹ let alone seeking help.



There are significant challenges to establishing safe and confidential reporting systems. These include questions around who to report to, methods to ensure confidentiality, and pros and cons of maintaining anonymity and the ability to provide support. This means that in many countries, systems for reporting are weak or non-existent.^{22,23}



Children are often reluctant to report violence against them. This may be because they fear negative repercussions, because their experience tells them that no action will be taken or because they are discouraged by parents or caregivers who may seek compensation or an informal settlement rather than go through official reporting channels.



Students face barriers when it comes to reporting violence perpetrated by teachers. In many cases, reporting bodies comprise only members of the school community, and students may face perceived or real barriers to their reports being dealt with appropriately.



In many settings, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected communities, referral services, including health, social services and child protection are often absent or inadequate.²⁴



Recommendations



Multi-stakeholder collaboration across education, child protection, law enforcement, young people and community is critical to create user-friendly and effective mechanisms.



A clear framework, owned by the ministry of education, gives structure and guidance to all schools and personnel. This also enables reporting and referral systems to be well-resourced, strengthened and working in collaboration with other government departments (see Brief 1).



Balance efforts to improve reporting with work to address the root causes and drivers of violence and shift harmful norms so that students and teachers recognize acts of violence and feel supported in reporting them (see Briefs 2 and 3).



Formulate and implement strong guidelines and/or school codes of conduct that provide clear responsibilities for reporting and referral, and enshrine students' right to a safe and quality education.



Use innovative and multiple reporting channels, including those that allow anonymity and do not require reporting face-to-face (e.g. using technology).



Use curriculum-based approaches to teach help-seeking skills, the ability to say no and distinguish acts of violence (see Brief 3).



Invest in research to strengthen the evidence base on what a good, functioning reporting system looks like, with a particular focus on low and middle-income countries.



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