

Are our schools safe for girls?

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“School pregnancy alarming in Mbeya,” read a news story headline in the November 3, 2006 edition of a Tanzanian daily newspaper. The article said that the region reported 61 pregnancies among primary school girls in the first six months of this year.

With a total 1,028 cases of truancy also reported, most among girls, some of whom may also be pregnant. What then are the consequences of girls facing sexual advances in school?

Reflect for a minute on your own school experience. Did you feel safe in school? What impact did this have on your learning and your desire to attend school?

Civil society organisations, including women's groups, have for years pointed out that sexual harassment, rape and intimidation of girls in schools poses a crisis. ActionAid launched a report that puts this issue at the heart of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Tanzania and most other countries in the world have signed on to the MDGs, No. 2 of which says that all children must enrol for and complete primary education and No. 3 of which states that countries must promote gender equity and empower women.

ActionAid sees these two goals intimately linked, noting that countries will satisfactorily deliver education to girls only if they ensure that schools are safe.

Tanzania has been praised for boosting primary school enrolment and ensuring parity. In primary school there are as many girls as there are boys. But what happens once they are in school?

Does the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) ensure teaching that is “academically sound, child-friendly, and gender-sensitive,” as stated in the policy? What does gender-sensitive teach-

Hard Questions

By Veena Gokhale

ing and a safe school environment for girls mean in practice?

Research shows that resistance to taking girls to school is diminishing the world over. But one explanation for reluctance by parents to take their daughters to school is lack of safety.

Parents fear that the poor and vulnerable girls will be enticed with money and promises of marriage or will be harassed on way to school – even be subjected to rape.

Psychological harassment is also common. Girls are subjected to sexual comments, jokes, insults, gestures, phone calls, letters, unwanted touching and intimidation. Sadly, girls are often encouraged to remain silent when this happens. If they complain, they may be ignored or be told that it is they that provoked the unbecoming behaviour.

Some male teachers indulge in such behaviour and so there is often no one to turn to for help. All this signals to children and everyone else that sexual violence is ‘normal’ and should be tolerated.

But the violence can leave permanent emotional scars. Imagine having a girl sitting in a classroom trying to solve a maths problem only moments after the teacher has just demanded sex from her or a classmate has just grabbed her breasts in the corridor. Will it be surprising if her performance at school drops?

As disturbing as violence itself is the response to it. The Mbeya newspaper article has the Regional Commissioner saying that no measures were taken against the men responsible for the pregnancies because they bribed the village and ward

officers and only nine of the 61 cases were taken to court.

This situation is unacceptable because it demeans girls, women and our collective humanity.

The solution lies with parents, teachers, government officials, CSOs, community members and leaders and children – both male and female. The starting point is admitting, openly, that there is a big problem that must be discussed.

Gender issues, including gender violence, should be made part of our school curricula.

This means developing resource materials on topics like the appropriate roles for men and women in society; how those roles are changing and what will ensure human dignity for both sexes.

Teachers must be taught how to use these materials. We should also confront regressive attitudes among teachers about gender violence and kindle a sense of responsibility in them by asking them to reflect hard on their real role in a student's life.

Thinking about how to make schools safe would mean improving student-teacher relations, promoting a friendly, open atmosphere and encouraging values such as mutual respect.

Additionally, people taking sexual advantage of girls or subjecting them to psychological violence must be taken to task. No one can get away with gender violence, which would encourage girls to speak out.

Gradually, the environment in our schools would change from oppressive to equitable.

The government is now working on PEDP Phase 2. It is an opportunity for those concerned to place the issue of safe schools at the heart of the policy. Will they pick up the ball?

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