

# **STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS IN SCHOOL**

**STUDIES SHOW THAT VIOLENCE IS A KEY FACTOR IN DENYING GIRLS THEIR RIGHT TO EDUCATION. ADDRESSING GENDER VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS IS ESSENTIAL FOR MAKING PROGRESS TOWARDS GLOBAL GOALS ON EDUCATION.**



# VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

- Violence or the fear of violence is an important reason for girls not attending school. Besides being in itself an infringement of girls' rights, violence is also denying girls their right to education.
- ActionAid has carried out an initial study of the violence that girls encounter in and around schools and on the way to school, in 12 countries in Africa and Asia. It indicates that much violence against girls goes unreported and the scale of the problem has been underestimated.
- Violence against girls is a serious obstacle to the attainment of internationally agreed education goals including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN 2000).
- Violence against girls takes many forms including rape, sexual harassment, intimidation, teasing and threats. It affects all girls, regardless of age, race, class, caste or location. Poverty, war and long journeys to school put girls at additional risk.
- The causes are rooted in male-dominated cultures which belittle or condone violence against girls and women. Violence is used as a tool for imposing male power. Girls themselves often regard violence as inevitable and feel powerless to complain.
- The HIV/AIDS epidemic is compounding the problem. Rape now carries the additional danger of HIV infection. Girls are the first to be taken out of school as families are affected by HIV/AIDS.
- ActionAid is demanding action from governments and the international community to protect girls from violence and increase the number of girls attending school.
- ActionAid's 12 demands to governments cover legislation and law enforcement, monitoring and data gathering, confidential complaint systems, abolition of school fees and changes to teacher training and the school curriculum.
- ActionAid calls on the international community to implement existing international frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (UN 1979) and to recognise the importance of violence and other barriers to girls' education by making these the subject of new targets in the MDGs.

**“VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS... IS NOT LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC AGE GROUP. EVERY GIRL IS AT RISK OF BEING VIOLATED.”**

Violence is a major barrier to education for millions of girls across the globe. The prevalence of violence against girls affects both their rights to education and their rights in education, and is the focus of a new ActionAid International advocacy initiative.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including Goal 2 (universal primary education) and Goal 3 (gender equality), make no explicit mention of violence against girls as a critical structural barrier to education (UN 2000). The issue has also been neglected by major education initiatives such as the Global Campaign for Education, of which ActionAid is a member.

This briefing paper is divided into two parts. Part 1 presents ActionAid’s initial findings and definition of the problem. Part 2 lists the key actions that ActionAid feels must be taken nationally and internationally to address the problem.

# PART 1

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

### **What is the impact of violence against girls?**

ActionAid's initial research has found that violence against girls takes place in schools, on the way to school and around schools and that the violence itself takes many forms. It includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, intimidation, teasing and the threat of violence.

In Uganda, in a group of 203 respondents, 65% said that "the main form of gender violence for girls is sexual violence".

In South Africa, Human Rights Watch found that "South African girls face the threat of multiple forms of violence at school. This includes rape, sexual abuse, and sexualised touching or emotional abuse in the form of threats of violence. Girls also encounter constant highly sexualised verbal degradation in the school environment."

The impact of the violence is immeasurable and includes loss of self-esteem, depression, anger, risk of suicide, unwanted pregnancy, HIV infection and fear of victimisation. Combinations of these factors cause many girls to drop out of school.

### **Who is affected?**

ActionAid found that violence affects all girls regardless of age, race, class, caste or location.

"Violence against girls... is not limited to a specific age group. According to project officers working in the area of education and child protection... every girl is at risk of being violated." (Kenya)

However, in all countries the problem peaks in adolescent girls. For example, in Pakistan the peak age for sexual violence against girls was between twelve and eighteen.

The studies also show how poverty, war and conflict expose girls to sexual violence and exploitation, as well as other abuses.

"Girls became pregnant because there was no food and money during the war here in Bundibugyo. Our parents would tell us that

we are the ones to feed the family so we would go to soldiers in the camp and get money to buy food." (Uganda)

Girls are also very vulnerable when they have to walk long distances to school, particularly in rural and poor urban areas. In Pakistan, girls in secondary school become more vulnerable because secondary schools are few and situated far from villages. In rural areas of India, girls who have to walk long distances to school are at risk of kidnap and trafficking.

### **How does the problem manifest itself and where is it found?**

Violence against girls manifests its effects in low enrolment of girls in schools, poor performance at school, high dropout rates, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, increasing rates of HIV/AIDS in the 15-24 year old age group and psychological trauma.

Violence against girls is not restricted to the classroom or the schoolyard. It happens in many school-related places.

"Boys tend to 'colonise' areas in schools where they act out more violent play, and girls in the know avoid those places for their own safety." (Nigeria). Girls are particularly vulnerable on their journeys to and from school. ActionAid Kenya reported attacks on these journeys.

ActionAid found that violence against girls is only one manifestation of a wider 'culture of violence' in schools where, for example, weapons, drugs and alcohol are found. In Vietnam this culture of violence includes humiliating punishments.

A schoolgirl committed suicide because her father refused to go to a parents' meeting. This young girl wrote in her suicide note that she knew that she would be punished "by standing... in front of thousands of eyes of other pupils. That is too shameful." (Vietnam)

In Uganda, one female student gave testimony about how a male teacher abused his powers

## “GIRLS GO TO MEN BECAUSE THEY NEED TO BUY LUNCH AND SANITARY TOWELS.”

GIRL INTERVIEWED BY ACTIONAID KENYA

“I was sexually abused by a male teacher in my school. He would come to the school and ask me to buy him lunch and sanitary towels. He would come to the school and ask me to buy him lunch and sanitary towels. He would come to the school and ask me to buy him lunch and sanitary towels.”

and exploited female students sexually. “[A male teacher made female students] wash his feet, take water to the bathroom for him, but sometimes he would be naked and ask you to help him as a man.” (Focus group discussion, Kawempe, Kampala, Uganda).

In India incidents other than rape are dismissed under the inappropriate term ‘eve-teasing’, a term used to mean ‘verbal harassment’. Some girls in metropolitan cities have figured out how to either ignore sexually explicit comments made by their peers or fight back... But in smaller towns and even in larger cities, there must be thousands of girls who feel defeated by the constant assault on them by men just because they are girls. (India)

Eve-teasing degrades a girl or woman without affecting her physically and is considered by men as something ‘light in nature’ and ‘fun’, whereas for females it is a violation (Mirsky 2003:18).

### **The causes of violence against girls in the context of education**

ActionAid’s country studies show that the causes of violence against girls are many and complex. They relate to deeply embedded structural inequalities and dominant ideologies that perpetuate beliefs and attitudes that discriminate against girls and women.

Violence against girls has its roots in patriarchy and unequal power relations that still exist worldwide. Therefore the problem must be seen within this broader framework. It is a symptom and a result of the larger problem of gender inequality that has to be tackled in all spheres.

In India, as in many other parts of the world, the ‘patrifocal structure’ legitimises “men over women – sons over daughters, fathers over mothers, husbands over wives and so on”. In practice, this structure means that girls must be kept out of the public sphere, their behaviour and movements must be controlled, they must marry and procreate – whilst boys supported by family resources are free to be educated, work and move as they please

in the outside world. Aspects of tradition and culture also ensure male domination and that girls are socialised to believe that they are inferior to men. Violence is therefore used as a tool to enforce and perpetuate the status quo.

Gender stereotypes perpetuate ideas and beliefs about the position and worth of girls in society. In some contexts parents are reluctant to send their girls to school because they do not see the value in educating girls. Other reasons for not sending girls to school include fear of violence and exposure to “risks of socially unapproved sexual behaviour” (Nigeria).

Violence against girls needs to be understood in the context of broader practices of sexual violence and youth cultures. Attitudinal research in the UK, France and India suggests that a growing number of younger people believe that sexual violence is permissible (Mirsky 2003: 5). And research in South Africa points to the culture of sexual violence particularly amongst the youth. In response to a question about how young people define sexual violence a surprisingly high proportion of both girls and boys said that forcing sex with someone you know was never sexual violence: “There are some girls who love rough guys. They say that he loves me and that is why he beats me. He does not want to see me with anybody else. It is now a fashion to be beaten up,” explains a young girl from Soweto (CIETafrica 2000: 52).

In Ethiopia about 93% of male student respondents in one research study confirmed that they know violence against females is a criminal act and punishable by law. However, about 33% of them believed that it is right for male students to get whatever they want, either by charm or by force, and about 21% admitted to behaving this way themselves.

Girls and boys in a Zimbabwean secondary school revealed ambivalent attitudes to abuse and aggression. For example girls “regarded attempts by male teachers to touch and fondle them as clearly wrong and their use of insulting or sexually

**“(IT HAPPENS) IN SCHOOL TOILETS, IN EMPTY CLASSROOMS AND HALLWAYS, IN HOSTEL ROOMS AND DORMITORIES, AND IN OTHER ‘NO GO’ AREAS ON SCHOOL GROUNDS.”**

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, SOUTH AFRICA

explicit language as forms of abuse. However they were less certain about a teacher’s attempt to form what they might perceive as a ‘serious relationship’, in part because they believed it might lead to marriage.” (Mirsky 2003: 22).

**Prevalence and why the problem is so difficult to track**

ActionAid believes the prevalence of violence against girls to be high, but like other forms of violence against women, its true scale is hard to measure. The first major problem lies in societal perceptions and understandings of what constitutes violence and violation. This is reflected in the near absence, in many countries, of laws and policies that specifically deal with violence against girls. A related problem is the law on age of marriage and age of consent for girls. In many countries these are lower for girls than for boys. Acts of sexual violence against young girls are often excused on the grounds that the man wanted to marry the girl (Tanzania; Zimbabwe).

UN agencies and other international organisations track patterns of enrolment of girls and boys in primary and secondary schools but neglect to track rates of violence against girls. In order to act in the interests of girls, a better grasp of the extent and depth of the problem is needed. This calls for global systems to be set up to collect sex-disaggregated data that focuses on the forms and prevalence of sexual violence experienced by girls. However, collecting data is problematic.

Violence against girls is an under-reported crime for complex social and cultural reasons. This too is linked to the lack of understanding of violence and violations against girls and women, or what constitutes violent behaviour. In many societies sexual violence against girls is a norm. “Girls seemed to accept violence inflicted on them through schools and on the way to schools as an extension of what they face with their families, therefore nothing to complain about.” (Pakistan). Parents’ attitudes towards girls can mean that they do not believe their daughters when they make allegations. So again cases go unreported.

“Rarely do the victims or parent/guardian of the victims take up issues due to fear and powerlessness.” (Tanzania).

In Vietnam, parents who beat their children for a poor exam result say to teachers: “We know nothing about teaching children. We entrust [our child to] you. You can beat him/her dead.”

Incidents may also go unreported because of the attitudes of teachers, who may see boys’ intimidating behaviour towards girls as just being part of “normal male teenage culture.” Teachers can also be unwilling to report on their colleagues’ sexual misconduct. For whatever reasons – economic or cultural – not all teachers, parents and girls disapprove of teachers or older men having sexual relations with schoolgirls (HRW 2001; Mirsky 2003).

Establishing global patterns and making comparative studies is difficult because definitions and methodologies differ from country to country (Mirsky 2003). Data collection needs to be linked with other issues e.g. how HIV/AIDS affects girls’ chances of an education.

The ActionAid country and global studies show that violence against girls is a largely un- addressed problem

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are not directly focused on the structural barriers to girls’ education, yet it is clear that the MDGs cannot be achieved unless these structural barriers are addressed.

The recent MDG Task Force report on achieving the gender and education MDGs failed to acknowledge the importance of addressing violence against girls. This remains the largest hidden obstacle to making progress on the gender equality MDG – which of all the MDGs is most urgent as a target date is set for 2005 (others are framed to 2015). Unless action is taken now on gender and education, the MDG framework will lose credibility altogether. To date, the main

**“THE PAINFUL MATATU (TAXI) RIDE.” TOUTS AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC WERE SAID TO HAVE HARASSED GIRLS BY PRESSING THEIR BODIES AGAINST GIRLS, ESPECIALLY IN THE OVERCROWDED BUSES.**

GIRLS TALKING TO ACTIONAID, KENYA

response to violence against girls in schools has been “initiated by NGOs, outside the formal school setting, in part because ministries of education have been reluctant to address the issue.” (UNESCO 2003: 20).

Many of the responses globally and locally have focused on similar areas of concern. Entry points include:

- curriculum development and extracurricular activities
- peer education and youth leadership
- teacher/education sector staff training programmes
- local and global advocacy
- policy development.

The following examples indicate some conceptual, practical and political challenges:

“Violence against girl children in general and schoolgirls in particular is not recorded in detail... The statistics of the courts are provided in accordance with the ‘crime’ regardless of the sex of the victim.” (Vietnam).

“In terms of existing strategies in both state and civil society organisations, there is much variation in emphasis and understandings” (India). The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that it is not clear where responsibility for the problem of violence against girls lies.

In Pakistan, government has intervened at primary school level by establishing separate schools for girls, with female teachers, “to overcome families’ reservations”. But there has been much less effort to establish single-sex schools at secondary level, where it could have a greater impact on the incidence of violence against girls.

A critical area of focus in many countries is to build better links between education and justice systems.

**HIV/AIDS and girls’ right to education**

Girls are removed from school when they are found to be HIV–positive. Girls are removed from school when poverty is exacerbated by HIV/AIDS in their families and they have to go out and seek work. Gender stereotypes about girls’ roles as carers mean that they are the first to be removed from school to care for sick relatives. In each case a girl’s right to education is denied.

According to UN figures, young African women aged 15-24 are three times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts (Lopez 2003). In the context of ActionAid’s work on girls’ education and violence, this statistic raises a number of critical questions: How are girls getting infected? Where are girls getting infected? By whom? This being also the age at which girls could and must be in schools, the answers might not be hard to find.

# PART 2

# ACTIONAID'S

# KEY DEMANDS

## **Governments, particularly those in the global South, should:**

- Publicly recognise that violence against girls in schools is a critical factor in affecting the attendance of girls in schools as well as their achievements.
- Enact, reinforce or amend domestic legislation in accordance with international standards to protect women from violence.
- Pass and implement laws setting the minimum ages of both marriage and consent for women and men at 18.
- Establish national data systems to collect sex disaggregated data that focuses on the form and prevalence of sexual violence against girls. These systems will enable comprehensive and regular monitoring of the problem within countries, to facilitate increased knowledge about prevalence patterns. This will enable governments to put in place laws and policies to fully address the problem.
- Abolish user fees in primary education and over time in secondary education. Exclusion from school is an act of violence against girls and contributes to the perpetuation of violence against girls and women in society. Girls are progressively excluded from school owing to rising costs through the system and removing costs is the single most effective way to increase enrolment of girls.
- Systematically address gender equality issues in pre-service and in-service training of teachers, ensuring that they see it as part of their core role to challenge stereotypes, actively oppose discrimination and guarantee equal treatment of girls and boys. Integrate gender awareness in teacher assessment/ appraisal processes.
- Establish confidential systems of complaint for girls. This might be through free phone lines or through identifying adult counsellors in every school – women who are ‘ombudswomen’ for girls, who are not tied to the teacher/head-teacher power structure and who have clear links outwards to the police and courts.
- Ensure the punishment of teachers who do abuse girls – having clear disciplinary systems that lead to sacking, the removal of professional status and prosecution in public courts of teachers found guilty of abusing girls.
- Prioritise the provision of separate toilet facilities for girls within capital investment programmes for schools.
- Promote consultation processes with local community leaders, School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations (and training these groups on the issues and tools that can help them plan a response, e.g. route mapping) to ensure the safety of girls on routes to and from school.
- Ensure that there are widely publicised and legally – enforced policies to prevent children from being removed from school for early marriage or any other reason. Also, make it illegal for schools to exclude a child owing to pregnancy and a responsibility of schools to provide continuing access to learning in the event that participation in regular school is difficult.
- Ensure that clear HIV/AIDS awareness and sex education are built into the school curriculum, with a strong focus on gender and power relations. Ensure this is backed up by production of quality teaching materials and active training processes for teachers and other resource people.



The international community through the United Nations, using the framework already agreed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), must bring back rights into the MDGs. Education for girls has special importance, both as a fundamental right in itself and as an enabling right which helps girls and women to secure and enjoy other basic rights. This would entail among other key actions:

- All governments must ratify and implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, and withdraw any reservations.
- Go back and implement fully the rights enshrined in CEDAW and other regional and international frameworks, including the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights and the Beijing Platform for Action, noting that violence against girls in schools is an indicator of a wider problem – violence against women and other gender disparities – all of which need to be eradicated.
- Take special measures to protect women and girls in situations of armed conflict, including through full and speedy implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
- Identify all structural barriers to girls' education, and infuse these into the MDGs. This should be followed up with clear set targets and measurable indicators for tackling these barriers by 2015.
- Ensure that violence against girls in schools is placed clearly on the agenda of the UN Heads of State Summit to review progress on the MDGs in September 2005. Unless this summit makes substantial progress on the gender equality in education MDG all the MDGs will lose their credibility – and one key action will be to respond to the agenda laid out in this paper, to prioritise gender violence in schools and take systematic action to oppose it.

### **Note 1: The ActionAid process**

The information shared in this briefing paper is the preliminary outcome of an ongoing ActionAid initiative which began in early 2004.

In the first phase ActionAid country offices conducted preliminary research in their own countries to establish the extent of the problem, its manifestations and its impact, and to examine the potential for carrying out advocacy on the problem. Initial research findings and ideas about the new initiative were shared at a workshop held in May 2004 in South Africa. ActionAid representatives came from Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda, India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Vietnam, Kenya, Pakistan, Tanzania and Ethiopia. The Teddy Bear Clinic, a South African NGO working in the field of child abuse, also participated in the workshop.

The country studies were complemented by a global desk study. All highlighted the similar experiences of girls across diverse contexts. They also revealed that there is a very limited response to the problem globally. Violence against girls in and around education remains hidden and silenced, just as much as the broader issue of violence against women remains hidden and silenced. The aim of this initiative and briefing paper is to break this silence and to inform and challenge policymakers, donors, other international NGOs and our partners to take stronger action on violence against girls.

### **Note 2: Violence against girls and the Millennium Development Goals**

ActionAid's concern about violence against girls in the context of education is informed by the organisation's commitments to girls' rights to, in and through education. While it is acknowledged that violence against girls is only a part of the broader problem of violence against women and girls, ActionAid deliberately chose to make the strategic link to education in order to use the opportunities offered by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

One of the major criticisms of the MDGs is that "they seek to solve critical problems with measurable targets without adequately addressing the root causes of these problems." (Barton 2004). Goal 3 of the MDGs, *promote gender equality and empower women*, has as its target elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education no later than 2015. Goal 2, *achieve universal primary education*, has as its target ensuring, that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (UN 2000). Clearly these two goals and their targets and indicators fall woefully short of the demands and commitments already made by governments in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights (1993), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). However, it is equally clear that even these limited MDG targets will not be achieved unless violence against girls in schools is addressed. ActionAid wants to use the space offered by the MDGs – on which the international community now appears focused – to direct attention towards structural barriers to gender equality, such as violence.

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