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To cite this article: Anita Reilly (2014) Adolescent girls' experiences of violence in school in Sierra Leone and the challenges to sustainable change, *Gender & Development*, 22:1, 13-29, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2014.902239](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.902239)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.902239>



Published online: 19 Mar 2014.



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Adolescent girls' experiences of violence in school in Sierra Leone and the challenges to sustainable change

Anita Reilly

Gender based violence in or around schools continues to be a serious and pressing problem in Sierra Leone that necessitates greater attention. At the core of such violence is gender inequality that is pervasive in Sierra Leone society. School related gender-based violence is part of a complex, multi-faceted social issue. As microcosms of wider society, schools are spaces where entrenched gender roles and power dynamics are played out. This article explores what is working to reduce gender-based violence in junior secondary schools in Sierra Leone, focusing in particular on Plan UK's Building Skills for Life project. The project focuses on supporting the empowerment of adolescent girls through a life cycle approach, focusing on four core areas: the attainment of a quality basic education, freedom from violence, economic empowerment and the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights. While recognising that gender-based violence is an issue for both girls and boys in schools, it focuses on the factors that make adolescent girls particularly susceptible to violence and looks at the on-going challenges to reducing gender-based violence in schools and the wider community.

En Sierra Leona, la violencia basada en el género en o cerca de las escuelas, continúa siendo un problema serio y apremiante que requiere mayor atención. El fondo de dicha violencia se encuentra en la desigualdad de género generalizada que existe en la sociedad sierraleonesa. La violencia de género en la escuela constituye un aspecto de un tema social complejo y multifacético. Tratándose de un microcosmos de la sociedad más amplia, las escuelas son espacios en donde se manifiestan los arraigados roles de género y las dinámicas de poder. El presente artículo examina las diversas alternativas que han demostrado resultados favorables, en aras de reducir la violencia de género en las escuelas secundarias de Sierra Leona. Para ello, se centra en el proyecto «Construyendo habilidades para la vida», impulsado por Plan del Reino Unido. El proyecto, cuyo objetivo es brindar apoyo a las adolescentes para que se empoderen a través de un enfoque de ciclo de vida, se enfoca en cuatro áreas principales: lograr una educación básica de calidad, vivir libre de violencia, obtener el empoderamiento económico y disfrutar de la salud sexual y reproductiva, con los derechos que ello conlleva. Si bien se acepta que la violencia de género es un tema

que debe ser tratado en la escuela tanto por los hombres como por las mujeres, dicho programa apunta a los factores que hacen que las adolescentes sean especialmente susceptibles a la violencia, examinando los retos que actualmente deben enfrentar acciones encaminadas a reducir la violencia de género en las escuelas y en la comunidad más amplia.

La violence basée sur le genre au sein ou autour des écoles reste un problème grave et urgent en Sierra Leone et qui demande une attention accrue. Au cœur de cette violence on trouve l'inégalité entre les sexes qui est omniprésente dans la société sierra-léonaise. La violence basée sur le genre en milieu scolaire s'inscrit dans une problématique sociale complexe et aux facettes multiples. En tant que microcosmes de la société dans son ensemble, les écoles sont des espaces dans lesquels les rôles de genre et la dynamique de pouvoir ancrés se manifestent. Cet article traite des initiatives qui donnent de bons résultats pour réduire la violence basée sur le genre dans les collèges de Sierra Leone, en se concentrant tout particulièrement sur le projet de Plan UK Building Skills for Life. Ce projet se concentre sur le soutien apporté à l'autonomisation des adolescentes à travers une approche axée sur le cycle de vie et en se concentrant sur quatre domaines essentiels : une éducation de base de qualité ; la vie sans violence ; l'autonomisation économique et la jouissance des droits et de la santé sexuels et génésiques. Tout en reconnaissant que la violence basée sur le genre est une question à résoudre pour les filles ainsi que les garçons à l'école, il se concentre sur les facteurs qui rendent les adolescentes tout particulièrement susceptibles de subir des actes de violence et il examine les défis en cours pour la réduction de la violence basée sur le genre dans les écoles et au sein de la communauté dans son ensemble.

Keywords: Sierra Leone; violence; education gender; secondary education

Introduction

Addressing violence against women and girls is a central development goal in its own right, but it is also integral to the achievement of other development goals such as access to quality education for all. While the Millennium Development Goals and EFA (Education for All) goals have helped galvanise attention on gender parity and access to education, there is now an urgent need to take a closer look at students' experiences and opportunities to learn, once in classrooms. A quality education is concerned with the curriculum, learning opportunities and outcomes, teaching and teachers, as well as the conditions for learning often referred to in terms of a child-friendly environment. Integral to schools being child-friendly is that they are safe spaces, conducive to learning, and violence free.

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is any violence that occurs in school, or on the way to school, on the basis of a person's sex. The causes of gender-based violence are entrenched in socio-cultural and gender norms, themselves deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between men and women. This article looks specifically at how gender-based violence affects adolescent girls' access and their completion of junior secondary education in Sierra Leone.

Currently in Sierra Leone, there is near gender parity in primary school enrolment, but gender disparity rises at the point of transition to junior secondary school (JSS). 72.53 per cent of girls who complete primary school enrolled in JSS compared to 75.9 per cent of boys, and girls drop out throughout JSS at a higher rate than boys (Plan Sierra Leone 2011). While many inter-related supply and demand issues contribute to pulling and pushing girls out of school, of major concern are the different forms of violence that girls are subjected to both in, and on the way to, school.

Violence and abuse are common in schools in Sierra Leone and can take the form of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Corporal punishment is widely used and the majority of boys and girls have been caned or whipped and consider it a normal part of school life (Plan Sierra Leone 2011). Furthermore, subtle psychological and symbolic violence pervades classrooms and is perpetuated by the prevailing gender norms discussed (Concern *et al.* 2010). Finally, sexual abuse and exploitation and the prevalence of transactional sex is a serious and pressing issue in JSSs.

Girls revealed that student-teacher sexual relationships are common. Over one-quarter, 27 per cent of girls agree that girls are sometimes forced to have sex, and blind voting in focus group discussion (FGDs) also show a high level of violence and abuse. (Plan Sierra Leone 2011)

Adolescent girls are particularly susceptible to sexual violence in schools. The perception that a girl has attained adulthood is associated with her physical development rather than her age in Sierra Leone, and so, once a girl has visibly passed through puberty, she is considered to have attained adulthood, even if she is still in her early teenage years (Yale Law School *et al.* 2013). The fact that JSSs are often located long distances from girls' homes, means girls must often travel long distances or stay with extended family, increasing their susceptibility to abuse and exploitation.

Country context

Since the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone in 2002, efforts have been made to ensure an adequate legal and policy framework is in place to prevent violence and exploitation; human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child have been ratified.

Additional Acts such as the Child Rights Act (2007) have been issued, which stipulates the rights of the child to dignity, respect and education and also provided for the establishment of FSUs (Family support units), to deal with victims of violence and abuse. Additionally, the teacher code of conduct was issued in 2009, which sets out standards of professional behaviour for teachers. At the chiefdom level, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) were established to handle cases of abuse in communities.

While these national initiatives are vital, there still exists an array of challenges surrounding their implementation at the district and community level, partly due to the weak capacity of implementing agencies, as well as low reporting levels from the community due to social and cultural barriers (Yale Law School *et al.* 2013).

Sierra Leone is predominantly a patriarchal society, with unequal power relations between men and women. A root cause of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone is gender inequality and the societal norms and attitudes that promulgate the idea of women as being of less value than men. The gender norms that dictate men and women's roles, identities and social position in Sierra Leone, tend to place men as household heads, and women in passive, subservient roles in the domestic sphere. The majority of women are financially dependent, lack access to employment, have little decision making powers, have limited access to the judiciary system and men tend to dominate traditional and modern political structures (UNFPA 2005).

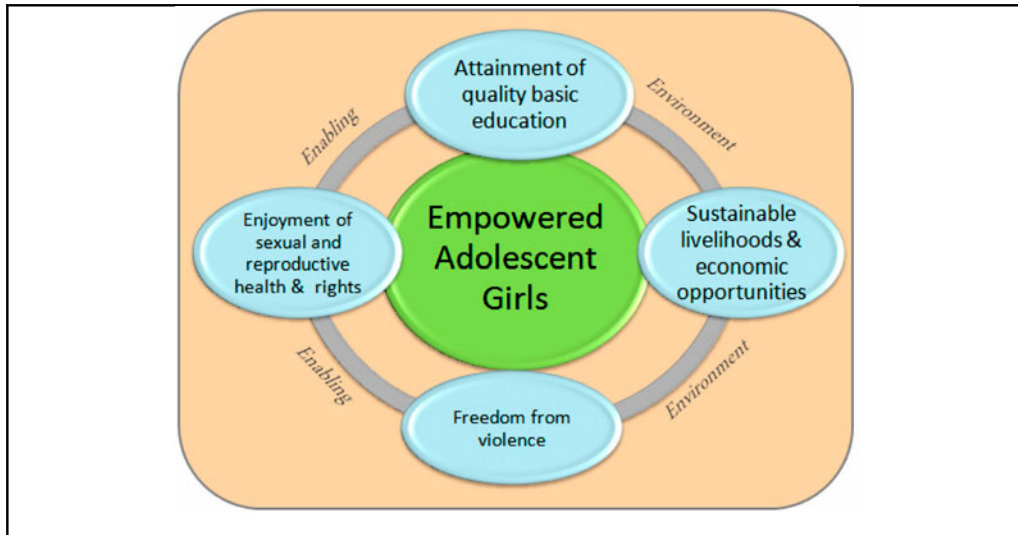
SRGBV cannot be separated from these wider societal power imbalances and inequalities. Teachers and school staff are products of this society and schools transmit wider societal values and attitudes in relation to girls and women. As such, schools are spaces in which power dynamics are played out, and many forms of violence continue, as this is what school staff and students have been socialised to see as normal within home and community spheres.

The Building Skills for Life Project

Plan UK implements *The Building Skills for Life* project across nine countries: Cambodia, El Salvador, Kenya, Mali, Malawi, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. The project focuses on supporting the empowerment of adolescent girls through a life-cycle approach, focusing on four core areas: the attainment of a quality basic education, freedom from violence, economic empowerment, and the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights. This article explores some of the experiences of this project, and draws on information taken from a baseline study undertaken for the project in 2011.

In Sierra Leone, the baseline study for the project found that violence in schools negatively affects girls' (and boys') access to, and completion of JSS.

Figure 1. Building Skills for Life Programme



Violence is the second most important among the factors mentioned in the FGDs by adolescent girls and boys as a factor that keeps boys and girls out of school. Common among these forms of violence are; corporal punishment, sexual harassment, working on teachers' farms, fetching water for teachers, and sex for grades. (Plan Sierra Leone 2011)¹

In Sierra Leone, the *Building Skills for Life* project specifically focuses on girls' transition to, and completion of, quality junior secondary education in 21 schools in the Bombali district. The findings of the baseline report highlighted that to achieve this overall aim, the issue of SRGBV needs to be addressed.

The project works closely with communities through awareness raising with boys and girls, parents, school leaders and traditional leaders, and also aims to build the capacity of school governance bodies such as school management committees to prevent and respond to violence in schools. Integral to quality education is that schools are safe spaces conducive to learning, and violence free. Interventions to reduce SRGBV are carried out at the community, school and district level - the table below outlines some of the key related activities.

A mid-term evaluation undertaken in 2013 of the Building Skills for Life project across the nine countries found that the majority of girls felt safe in school, with the exception of Sierra Leone, where only 65 per cent of girls and 71 per cent of boys in the project schools said they felt safe (compared to over 80 per cent on average in the other countries). Based on these findings, it was decided to undertake a qualitative case study in Sierra Leone, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of what is working to reduce SRGBV in

Table 1: Interventions to reduce SRGBV-related activities

Awareness raising workshops and meetings which include a component on what constitutes GBV and the negative impacts, targeting: community leaders, school governance structures and district councils.
Awareness raising sessions and training with teachers and schools' authorities with community members and Teachers' Unions on the teacher code of conduct, with a focus on punctuality, attendance and sexual relations with pupils
The establishment of peace clubs, girls' rights clubs and literacy and debating clubs
Reproduction and distribution of teachers' code of conduct and Child Rights Act to teachers, parents and local authorities
School wall paintings promoting relevant aspects of teacher code of conduct
Capacity building training of Parent and Teacher Associations and school management committees' members on reporting and responding to violence against children in families, schools and communities
Training of guidance counsellors, teacher coordinators and Heads of Schools on gender-based violence issues, life skills and sexual and reproductive health
Training of primary and secondary teachers on alternative forms of discipline
Continuation of 'Learning Without Fear' Campaign at the community, district and national level

schools, what the on-going challenges are, and to identify ways of improving aspects of the work. Six communities were visited in 2013, with key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted with JSS girls, JSS boys, parents, members of school governance bodies, FSU staff and CWC volunteers, partner organisations, community and religious leaders, and key staff from the district education office. The following section is largely based on the qualitative findings of this case study.

Reflections on what is working, and continuing barriers to reducing SRGBV

This section explores three core areas where some positive changes have been observed in the *Building Skills for Life* project communities. It will look what is working to reduce physical violence, sexual violence and abuse, and increasing the reporting of violence in schools. It also explores the on-going challenges.

The reduction of physical violence

Corporal punishment is accepted under Sierra Leone law, but there is legislation that stipulates who can punish students and the severity, with six lashes being the maximum allowed. Corporal punishment is commonplace in schools and the majority

of students have experienced some form of flogging, with a 2010 Concern *et al.* study reporting that nine out of ten students in primary and secondary schools had experienced some form of violence.

One teacher flogs us everywhere – on our hand, or on our buttocks. He uses a stick which is more painful than the cane. (JSS girl)

Also commonplace is getting students to work on teachers' farms or do teachers' laundry:

Teachers can send you to do something for them – if you refuse they can give you a lower grade. Sometimes they send children to work on the farm, which is five miles away. (JSS girl)

Opinions on flogging among students themselves are mixed – while the majority of students agree that flogging is wrong, some say that it is acceptable in certain circumstances; for example if it helps children to learn.

There is good flogging and bad flogging. Good flogging is when you are beaten for spelling things wrong. This will help you learn. (JSS girl)

While some parents believe that the removal of violence from classrooms would help girls and boys learn (Plan 2011), acceptance of corporal punishment is generally high among teachers and community members, many claiming that it is necessary to control students. In the case study FGDs, some teachers and mothers complained that children's increased knowledge of their rights is making children disrespectful, and they stressed the need for corporal punishment to maintain discipline. A number of mothers claimed that flogging was an African way to discipline children and that it was a teacher's responsibility to enforce such means of discipline. Some teachers felt they would lose control and respect of their classes if they were not allowed to use the cane. In one JSS, teachers had briefly stopped using the cane but had reinstated it after the students:

...went wild, so we had to bring it (the cane) back. If they see it they do what they are told. (JSS teacher)

Students, teachers and principals also spoke of the inability of many teachers to manage large class sizes without the use of corporal punishment.

Teachers need more training – some have degrees but no teacher training. They have problems managing the classroom and need guidance, for example on classroom management. (JSS Principal)

Some teachers have more control and are able to engage the students more. Many are untrained and so they haven't learned the psychology of discipline. (JSS Principal)

What is working to change the situation?

In the case study, parents, students and school staff consistently stated that flogging, particularly 'serious' flogging, has reduced in schools, and there have been changes not only in how teachers discipline students, but also in the ways that they interact with children.

Now we sweep floors if we do something bad. Before they used to beat us with a cane, but now they get us to sweep or clean. (JSS girl)

The teachers are not flogging us anymore but advise us not to come late to school. In the past, they didn't care for students – didn't give them notes – now they are taking more of an interest in their learning. (JSS boy)

It is difficult to attribute such changes to one intervention across a multi-faceted project, particularly given the fact that there have been recent policy changes. However, project beneficiaries and community members mentioned the following three activities in relation to the reduction of corporal punishment: awareness raising and training on the teacher code of conduct, painting murals on school walls relating to the code of conduct, and finally, training teachers on alternative disciplines. Community members reported that even though the teacher code of conduct had been initiated by the government in 2009, there was very little awareness of it before the project among community members. Having related murals on school walls served to continuously reinforce the core messages of the training delivered.

The teacher training aimed to encourage positive pedagogy and sharing of learning and reflection on discipline techniques in schools. It covered issues such as alternative forms of disciplining, and appropriate and inappropriate punishments.

One teacher talked about the change in him, saying before he would have caned a child for being late, but now he would try and understand the reasons the student is late and advise him or her.

We were trained on how you can solve problems – to find the cause of the issue like a student being late, and find a solution. (JSS teacher)

Some of the alternative disciplines mentioned were sending students to fetch water, getting students to sweep the school, or getting students to work in the garden.

Other teachers said that instead of corporal punishment, now they give students additional reading and writing exercises, and if they continue to misbehave, they involve their parents.

Some students also expressed concern over some of the alternative punishments that teachers are adopting, for example being sent from class for chores, or standing outside in the sun. In such instances, students miss out on learning. In some cases boys and girls felt that being flogged was better, reasoning that:

...it is quicker and you do not miss class. (JSS boy)

It is important that teachers do not replace corporal punishment with other humiliating and degrading punishments, such as kneeling in uncomfortable positions, or standing in the hot sun with arms raised – all of which were examples reported by students. It is also important that teachers recognise verbal abuse or humiliation as psychological violence – which may be less visible, but are still nevertheless a form of violence:

Some teachers curse at us, and call us stupid. (JSS girl)

It is also important to recognise that changing teachers' attitudes to physical and psychological punishment is a complex process that cannot be remedied by a one-off training. Training needs to be on-going, and teachers need continuous support to change their teaching practices and manage their classroom effectively.

Sexual violence and abuse

Also less visible than corporal punishment is sexual violence and abuse, which is often shrouded in a culture of silence, making it difficult to glean a clear picture of the extent of abuse in schools. Such abuse and violence not only has extreme long-term negative effects on girls' emotional well-being, but in the short-term it can impact negatively on girls' learning and attendance, and can lead to drop out.

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of girls, is widespread in JSSs. It is happening in schools, on the way to and from schools, and in teachers' houses. While the main perpetrators are male teachers, older students or other men in the community, such as *boda-boda* (motor-cycle) drivers or older men often referred to as sugar daddies, are also culprits (Plan Sierra Leone 2011). The most commonly reported incidences of sexual abuse and exploitation are linked to teachers selling grades.

Some of our teachers harass us to give them sex for grades, and they will fail you when you do not give them, which is leading us to drop out of school (Plan Sierra Leone 2011).

This is also confirmed in a report authored by Concern and other organisations (2010), which reveals male teachers as the main perpetrators, who sexually exploit girls in exchange for better grades, gifts or money. Because poverty is inextricably linked to sexual exploitation, girls who cannot pay for school-related expenses, or who are at risk of failing exams are particularly vulnerable.

My mathematics teacher asked me to fall in love with him, but I found it difficult for me to do that. This became a problem between us. Any small mistake or bad thing I did I am almost always punished. This was one of the reasons I hate school and dropped out. (JSS girl)

Many girls stated that if a girl refused teachers' advances, teachers would retaliate by failing girls or humiliating them in class.

The acceptance of bribing is common in schools. Bribes are paid to teachers for higher grades or promotion to the next grade. In addition, as well as the direct costs of schooling, students are put under immense pressure to pay extra fees or hidden costs, with some girls reporting having to pay for extra classes for example (Plan UK 2013). The inability to pay such costs is linked with teachers coercing female pupils for sex for grades, money or gifts, and thus girls from the poorest households are particularly vulnerable (Plan UK 2013). In some instances, girls feel powerless to stop teachers or extricate themselves from the situation, and fear the consequences on their own education of saying no to teachers.

If a girl is in a relationship (with a teacher), she has already accepted, so it is too late. If she is not yet in a relationship, a girl might not report because he will fail her or threaten to flog her.

(JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

Attitudes towards sexual violence are very complex, and vary widely across different community members. While many, particularly girls, blame the teacher for the sexual exploitation and abuse, some parents, teachers and peers place the blame on the girl herself saying that she initiates the relationship in exchange for grades or gifts. One parent said that girls are forcing themselves on to teachers, who are in turn unable to control themselves. This notion of men being unable to resist the advances of girls was also reiterated by boys (Plan UK 2013). This blurs the line of consent, as also noted in a recent study by ActionAid (2013, 8):

The notion of free will and consent in sexual relationships is difficult to determine as gift or financial giving is common, in particular where girls are living in poverty.

It is often reluctantly accepted that relationships between girls and teachers will take place, with parents willing to 'turn a blind eye' as such relationships are perceived as one of the ways in which the most vulnerable girls can complete school (Plan UK 2013). The results of blind voting in focus groups with JSS girls revealed that many incidences of sexual abuse in schools go unreported (Plan Sierra Leone 2011).

While all girls are vulnerable to the outlined forms of violence in schools, there are certain inter-relating factors that make some girls more susceptible than others. Adolescent girls are vulnerable as puberty is not recognised as a distinct phase of life in Sierra Leone; once a girl starts menstruating, she is considered to have made the transition to womanhood, making her more susceptible to sexual abuse. Girls from poor households are particularly susceptible, and are more likely to enter relationships with teachers or older men to support their education, or contribute to household income. As outlined, parents may 'turn a blind eye' if they lack the means to support her education.

Those staying away from home, who are without the protective umbrella of their family, and who often have to fend for themselves by petty trading, are also vulnerable.

Some girls do not live with their parents and so they don't get money for things like books, uniforms and school fees. They have to get money from trading or from older men. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

What is working to change the situation?

Again parents, students and school staff reported that there is less sex for grades now in project schools, and that there has been a reduction in pregnancy rates in schools. A reason given for this change was that there was more general awareness of the dangers of early pregnancy, largely due to project interventions. Awareness-raising at the community level on issues pertaining to girls' rights and gender-based violence was mentioned by parents, students and teachers as contributing to the reduction of sex for grades, and girls said that they were more likely to speak out against a teacher due to awareness raising on the code of conduct and girls' rights.

... our training taught us how to say no to men and boys, If a boy or teacher persists, we can report it to our teacher now. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

The reduction in bribery for better grades was largely attributed to the training of teachers and principals on the code of conduct, and the murals that were painted on the walls.

In the past, teachers prepared results. Now the principal checks the grades. (JSS teacher, Plan UK 2013)

Bribing for promotion happened in the past. We are now aware of the consequences for teachers like losing their salary for one month....It may only happen a little now in private. (JSS Principal, Plan UK 2013)

After the first training, they [teachers], stopped taking money for tests and exams. After the second training, they stopped taking money for assignments....though this still sometimes happens. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

However, sexual exploitation does seem to be continuing in many of the schools, even if it is to a lesser degree. It is important to recognise that the practise of sex for grades may still continue in schools, but may have become less visible due to the raised awareness of community members and school staff, and the fear amongst teachers of losing their jobs.

Reporting violence and abuse

Linked to the continuation of sexual violence and exploitation in schools, is the lack of reporting and the culture of silence that surrounds gender-based violence. The major factors cited by JSS girls for non-reporting of SRGBV are: the lack of reporting mechanisms, the fear of the repercussions for her education, the fear of stigma, and the fear that the perpetrator would not be prosecuted (Plan UK 2013).

Incidences of violence tend to go unreported. Parents fear to confront teachers even when the practice of violence affects the schooling of the children. (Plan Sierra Leone 2011)

The impunity for perpetrators is another important factor. Issues of bribery, corruption, and gender-based violence are often ignored, or reluctantly accepted as a part of school life by the community (Plan UK 2013). Many community members speak of cases of teachers who had impregnated girls in the school simply being transferred to another school (Plan UK 2013). This is similar to a study on SRGBV in West Africa which found that:

Education authorities and the teaching corps turning a blind eye to the incident in order to protect the reputation of their colleague, district, school or profession contributes to the trivialisation sexual abuse and exploitation. (UNICEF et al. 2010, 28)

In a patriarchal society, where men have the decision making power, women are second class citizens and a range of social factors deter women from reporting cases, such as the stigma associated with violence, and social power dynamics that are being played out in the school setting.

If you say no they will tell you - I am your teacher, you cannot say no. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

A girl might be afraid to report because she is shy or ashamed because of stigma. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

Even telling your friend ... if you are raped....you would be deeply ashamed. (JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

Not only do girls feel that they'll be stigmatised, but they also fear what it will mean for their family. Many girls said that it would have serious consequences for their families standing in the community, and that it could bring deep shame on a family. This was linked to the fear of girls being blamed themselves for cases of sexual abuse and exploitation – and a fear of not being believed.

Additionally, the tradition of 'compromise' (the practice of accepting goods or money to resolve a community problem) is mentioned by girls as a barrier to reporting sexual abuse; a lack of efficient supporting mechanisms, a lack of logistical and legal support for victims, weak capacity of FSUs, and delays in justice, subverts the process

of bringing perpetrators to justice, and increases the likelihood of cases being dealt with between families or within communities. In addition, government initiatives at the grassroots level, such as the CWCs at the village level, have weak capacity. CWC members report that they have no funds, and have had limited training.

Finally, female teachers are less likely to be perpetrators of GBV, and girls report that they would be more likely to go to a female teacher to report an incidence of abuse, as opposed to a male (Plan UK 2013). However, there is a dearth of female teachers in schools in Sierra Leone and this becomes more pronounced at the JSS level.

What is starting to change and why?

While many students say that they would still not report a case of abuse or violence for the reasons outlined, some girls did report that they would be more likely to report since the project. Some reported that by participating in school clubs, they had more confidence to talk about issues that affect them, such as teenage pregnancy and sexual harassment, and more confidence to talk about these issues with community members and with their male peers.

We need to talk to boys about the need for change – but in a polite, non-aggressive way.
(JSS girl, Plan UK 2013)

Girls who participated in school clubs reported that they would be more likely to confide in someone now if they experienced or witnessed sexual abuse. Some mentioned confiding in the guidance counsellors who were trained on gender-based violence and referral mechanisms as part of the project.

The ActionAid research (2013, 5) also found that girls in clubs 'have significantly more knowledge of laws, policies, mechanisms for reporting violence, and local organisation than those not in clubs and in Mozambique they are significantly more likely to report violence to someone'.

However, what is less clear, is what mechanisms are in place at the school and community level to protect a girl or boy who does report a case of abuse. This is discussed further in the next section.

Key reflections for future programmes

This final section outlines some of the key points for consideration for future programming based on the lessons learnt from the *Building Skills for Life* project thus far.

The importance of protecting girls within any programme

It is imperative that the safety of girls who participate in the programmes is of primary concern. Not only should programmes be assessed for risks from the outset, but it is also vital that the safety of girls is continuously monitored. If a girl does report a case of abuse in a school for example, not only should her safety be ensured, but follow up support should also be provided. It is imperative that boys and girls are aware of the existing laws and policies, as well as existing services available. It is imperative that community members and local leaders are aware of and involved in any initiative, as their support and action will be vital if perpetrators are to be brought to justice.

The importance of girls' participation

In order for sustainable change to occur, girls and women must be empowered themselves to resist and challenge violence, and need to recognise what constitutes violence against women and what mechanisms they can access to address it. While *Building Skills for Life* raises awareness on these issues, it also creates spaces for girls and boys to discuss these matters. Girls and boys interviewed value spaces such as the school clubs, where they can talk about issues that affect them, build supportive relationships with peers, and build their confidence to advocate on such issues in their communities. It is important that girls and boys knowledge of SRGBV goes beyond the superficial, and that they are able to think critically around issues such as the root causes of gender-based violence and the masculine constructs that serve to undermine the process of empowerment.

In addition, it is also important to ensure that girls' voices and their realities are shared with policy makers and influencers at the district and national level. Meaningful government commitment to addressing issues on violence depends on their knowledge of the scale of the problem. Creating opportunities to share girls' experiences helps inform the development of policy and legal frameworks, and helps ensure their relevance to girls' lives. It is also important to emphasise that it is the responsibility of duty bearers, such as government authorities, to ensure women and girls human and legal rights are fulfilled.

The importance of engaging communities, particularly men and boys

To encourage reporting, to put in place effective reporting mechanisms, to eliminate the practice of compromise and to ensure that cases are being dealt with effectively, there needs to be a concerted community effort. SRGBV cannot be tackled without considering the community contexts in which social norms are constructed - behaviours are often first learnt in the home and community settings. Engaging communities around social norm change is fundamental to sustainable change. Building awareness and mobilising the community on issues around violence in

schools and holding participatory community meetings which draw on human rights principles are important steps in behaviour change. As noted in the Chase/DfiD Guidance Notes (2012, 11):

[Community mobilisation]...rests on the premise that effective violence prevention depends on community members leading efforts in their own community. The aim is to build a critical mass of individuals and groups who no longer tolerate violence against women and girls.

Communities should be encouraged to collectively deliberate on issues of concern related to SRGBV.

Furthermore, it is imperative that men and boys are engaged in such deliberations, and they must play an intrinsic role in the methodology of interventions. Discounting men and treating gender as intrinsically female, exacerbates the girls-as-victims discourse and can create polarised perceptions of man versus woman (Leach and Humphreys 2007). Not only is it important to change the attitude and behaviour of individual men, but it is also important to ensure men and boys enlist men as allies in work around SRGBV, and understand the reasons for any interventions (Chase/DfiD 2012).

The importance of change at the school level

While interventions such as girls' clubs aim to empower girls and open up discussions related to SRGBV, if there are not concomitant changes in the gendered practices in schools, girls may feel disenfranchised. Teachers and school staff are integral to positive change. The research shows that teachers are the main perpetrators of violence. Not only this, but they can reinforce entrenched gender norms through their classroom practices and pedagogy. It is thus essential that teachers are included from the outset in any intervention, rather than isolated or vilified, and that the capacity of teachers and school staff to create violent-free, child-friendly learning environments for all, is built.

Continuous professional development, particularly for untrained teachers, on subject knowledge, classroom management and positive disciplining is important. Teachers also need an understanding of how gender identities are constructed and should also be facilitated to reflect on their own gendered lives. As is evident in the *Building Skills for Life* project, training of teachers must be continuous if they are to change their teaching practise, and their attitude to types of punishment.

Finally, school regulations and procedures should be developed, in conjunction with parent teacher associations and school management committees, which aim to reduce SRGBV. Such regulations should include procedures to deal with violence in schools in accordance with national guidelines such as the teacher code of conduct. Reporting and referral mechanisms should be transparent and child-friendly reporting mechanisms need to be in place. The capacity of guidance counsellors needs to be built – by

decreasing their teaching load, providing continuous professional development and provision of a private space in which students can be counselled.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence is widespread in and around schools in Sierra Leone. For sustainable and meaningful change, all interventions must involve girls, men and boys, community members, teachers and school staff from the outset in their design and implementation. While there have been commendable efforts made at many levels to reduce gender-based violence in schools, there is still a gap between policy and legal frameworks, and implementation at the school level. Tackling SRGBV is a complex process which must involve challenging prevailing social norms, and changing attitudes and practices related to gender and violence. Interventions to reduce SRGBV need to consider the complex socio-cultural context as well as the differing relationships between social norms, poverty and violence. Increasing girls' access to schools is only the first step – what is vital is that the education they are receiving is a quality one, and central to this is that students don't experience any form of violence, both on the way to, and within schools.

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Note

- 1 The first factor reported was the cost of schooling.

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