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Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Education Sector

Why is addressing GBVH important to the education sector?

Every child has the right to a safe, formal, quality education. Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) is a serious and systemic issue in the education sector, with long-term impacts on students' learning, health, wellbeing and pathway to employment. It occurs in all settings, including schools, universities, technical and vocational education (TVET) colleges, and through online education.

GBVH is rooted in the very same gender inequality and discrimination that cause gender gaps in learning. While GBVH in the education sector can affect anyone, for girls, it heightens the risk of unwanted pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, child marriage and malnutrition. Boys can also suffer from harmful gender norms; social conceptions of masculinity, for example, can fuel child labour, gang violence or disengagement from school. The education sector is, thus, uniquely placed to shape young people's understanding of gender roles and to address violence.

This sector brief focuses on GBVH perpetrated against children and adults in the education sector, also commonly known as school-related GBV. It underlines the need to integrate GBVH issues into wider considerations of violence against children.

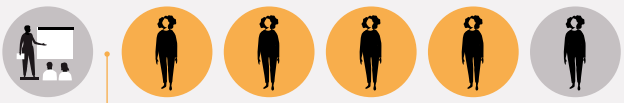
Between students

Peer violence and bullying are the most prevalent forms of violence in education settings. Globally, boys are more likely to experience physical violence from their peers, while girls are more likely to experience emotional abuse or sexual violence. These risks are also prevalent in adult learning, where there may be similar interactions and power asymmetries. Research shows that certain forms of violence are also closely connected. In South Africa, for example, children who experience peer violence are more likely to perpetrate dating violence (in the case of boys) and experience it (in the case of girls).

Student-on-student bullying based on perceived sexual orientation or gender identity is also widespread. Research in Chile, Mexico and Peru found that more than 60 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual students had experienced homophobic bullying.

Between teachers and students

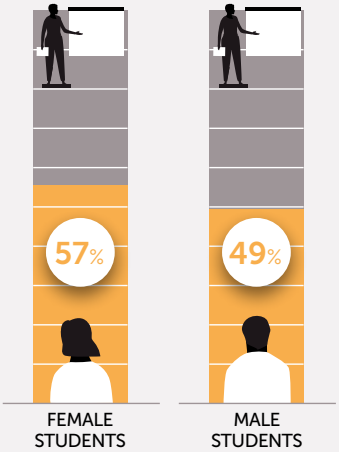
Teachers and school administrators are in a position to exploit power imbalances to perpetrate GBVH against students, sometimes in exchange for grades, scholarships or other benefits, or under threat of punishment. Boys are more often subject to physical punishment, whereas girls are more likely to experience sexual violence or harassment. Thirty-nine per cent of school principles (two in five) surveyed in 14 African countries said teacher–pupil sexual harassment had occurred in their primary schools.



IN ETHIOPIA, **4 IN 5 FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS** REPORTED EXPERIENCING SEXUAL HARASSMENT, MOSTLY FROM OTHER STUDENTS.

Source: Mamaru et al. (2015) survey of 385 female students.

Student experiences of feeling unsafe on TVET campuses in Malawi



7 PER CENT OF FEMALE STUDENTS HAD BEEN PRESSURED FOR SEX BY AN INSTRUCTOR IN RETURN FOR GOOD GRADES OR BEING ABLE TO REMAIN IN COLLEGE. No disciplinary action was taken in any of the cases and the perpetrators remained employed by the colleges. None of the colleges had formal written policies, reporting mechanisms or referral services in place.

Source: UNESCO (2017) situational analysis of 60 students in three TVET colleges in Malawi.

Among teachers and staff

Teachers and other educational staff can also experience GBVH at work from students, colleagues and parents. Research in secondary schools in Swaziland found that teachers often experience sexual harassment from students. The harassment is mostly verbal, but sometimes involves students sending pornographic pictures to teachers, or attempts to kiss or hug them. Younger, newly qualified women are particularly at risk of GBVH and this can make it challenging for schools to retain female teachers.

At home and in the community

There are also GBVH risks beyond the physical limits of a school or educational setting. Students and staff can experience harassment and violence on their way to and from school, through online abuse, as part of work placements, on public transport and by local authorities. They can also experience domestic violence at home or in their intimate relationships, which has a harmful effect on their ability to learn or teach.

What are the benefits of addressing GBVH?

Addressing GBVH in the education sector can have the following benefits:

- Improves student and staff wellbeing and prevents the physical, mental, sexual and reproductive harm caused by GBVH.
- Improves students' learning outcomes and attendance and, thus, their pathway to employment. Research from Ghana, Botswana and South Africa, for instance, shows that school violence reduces academic performance by as much as 8 per cent.
- Improves children's transition to adulthood, as GBVH is associated with poor behavioural, social and health outcomes and an intergenerational cycle of violence.
- Boosts economic growth by increasing children's educational and economic opportunities while reducing health and social costs. The global costs of physical, psychological and sexual violence against children every year are estimated to be as high as $7 trillion (as of 2014), or 8 per cent of global gross domestic product.
- Increases the ability of educational institutions to recruit and retain teachers and other staff and to enrol and retain students.
- Increases investor confidence when companies incorporate actions to prevent and respond to GBVH in educational investments.

What are the risk factors?

Risk factors that increase the potential for GBVH in the education sector include:

- Power asymmetries that can be exploited for personal advantage (such as scholarships or grades).
- Unsupervised access to children under 18 (physically and online) and adults, including those more at risk of experiencing GBVH, such as people with disabilities.
- Inadequate pre-employment checks of teachers and school staff for suitability and ability to work with children and young people.
- Reassignment of teachers in the system though they have been found to engage in GBVH against children.
- A lack of clear child safeguarding policies and codes of conduct in educational settings.
- Poorly designed and supervised spaces, where students and staff are or feel unsafe.
- Boarding and residential accommodation, where students and staff are away from families and social networks.
- Traditionally male-dominated courses or TVET apprenticeships where there are gendered stereotypes about the sexual availability of female students.
- High levels of poverty and inequality, where employment and educational opportunities are scarce and highly sought after.
- Widespread community violence due to conflict or high levels of crime, especially when targeted at female pupils, teachers and school staff.
- Pervasive corruption among local authorities, especially where they have decision-making power (on scholarships, grants, recruitment or licences, for example) and are known for inaction on reports of GBVH.
- School closures associated with COVID-19, which have raised the risk of GBVH at home, online and in communities. A global survey of more than 25,000 children and their caregivers in 2020 found that violence at home had more than doubled from 8 per cent to 17 per cent during school closures.

Risks vary according to students' age, gender and other factors, such as disability, socioeconomic status or membership of a minority group. GBVH risks also vary according to country-level or local factors, such as how women are treated in society, the legal and regulatory framework, or the lack of preventative and response measures (see accompanying note on Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector for further guidance).

What can investors and companies do?

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
Leadership and company culture	• Appoint senior focal points (at least one board member) with responsibility for safeguarding and overseeing the implementation of policies related to GBVH. All board members should be trained in safeguarding policies and procedures. • Ensure explicit zero-tolerance messaging from senior management. • Put in place monitoring systems for regular reporting on GBVH in educational investments. • Develop whole-school approaches to preventing GBVH, involving various stakeholders at school level, in the local community and in government. • Take further action through educational investments that aim to prevent violence at home and in future relationships (such as curricula that promote healthy relationships).	• **Uganda:** The Good School Toolkit aims to prevent violence by changing school culture. The approach involves the whole school and the wider community in a two-year process aimed at developing a collective vision for the school, creating a nurturing learning environment, implementing more progressive learning methodology and strengthening school governance. The toolkit includes sessions on gender roles, stereotypes and biases, though not explicitly on GBVH. Developed by Raising Voices, a Ugandan non-governmental organisation, the initiative has been rigorously evaluated and found to reduce several forms of violence, perpetrated by both teachers and peers. To date, it has been rolled out in 750 primary schools in Uganda.
Policies and procedures	• Ensure all organisations/institutions have a separate safeguarding policy that explicitly covers all types of abuse and violence against children and young people, including GBVH. This includes universities and TVET/skills-training colleges. • Include GBVH-related requirements in codes of conduct, policies and protocols for implementing organisations, targeted at students, staff and volunteers. • Widely publicise codes of conduct, ensuring all school staff are aware of them and that they are implemented effectively, with appropriate sanctions. • Develop clear guidelines for keeping and managing records on student safety and welfare, as well as safeguarding incidents and concerns. • Ensure there are clear procedures for how school staff work with students, including procedures on not being alone with children. • Put in place policies for grading, scholarship and admissions decisions (see Recruitment and Performance Assessment).	• **Global:** The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has a charter, code of conduct and minimum standards to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, exploitation and other forms of misconduct. The policies are aimed at grant agents who disperse GPE funding in more than 70 low-income countries. The code of conduct and minimum standards are publicly available on the GPE website and a key part of induction training for all governance officials. • **Bangladesh:** BRAC University has a policy of zero-tolerance on sexual harassment and has put in place a Code of Conduct on Sexual Harassment. The code defines what constitutes sexual harassment and outlines the measures in place to prevent it. All new students, faculty and staff have to sign it. Training and awareness sessions are provided during student and staff orientation. The university has also established a Complaints Committee, which includes the pro vice-chancellor, female faculty members and a student counsellor.

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 Grievance mechanisms and investigation procedures	• Develop confidential reporting, referral and support systems, with the option to report anonymously. • Ensure all reporting channels and investigation procedures are child friendly to encourage children and young people to come forward. • Support students and staff in accessing services for emotional support, counselling and medical treatment. • Ensure reporting procedures are aligned with local and national laws (for example, when is a head teacher, governing body or other responsible focal point legally required to report GBVH to the police?) and that all decisions are made with the best interests of the child in mind. • Set out strong and clear internal disciplinary procedures and support the process when, by law, it needs to be managed externally. • Be prepared to receive reports from survivors and witnesses and be ready to implement a survivor-centred approach in line with section 6.1 of the accompanying note Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector.	• **Lebanon:** As part of the No Lost Generation multi-donor education initiative, school counsellors have been trained to support children and caregivers at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. A standardised referral and case-management system has been put in place to provide specialised (psychological, legal and medical) support. In informal educational settings, implementing organisations have a social worker on site to refer children for further support. • **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):** The United States Agency for International Development's Communication for Change project introduced school oversight committees to review cases of GBVH, refer survivors for support and take disciplinary action if required. The committees helped develop a code of conduct for each school. Focal teachers (male and female) were recruited in schools to serve as first responders in cases of violence. The committees included students, parents, teachers and school management. A key requirement is that committee members ensure all information remains confidential.
 Recruitment and performance assessment	• Ensure all individuals that have contact with children have contracts and background checks (such as references from their most recent employers and police checks to ensure they are suited to working with children). • Clearly establish and communicate processes and criteria for the distribution of scholarships, bursaries and other benefits to remove opportunities for GBVH and child exploitation. Ensure, for instance, that decision-making does not rest with one individual.	• **Egypt:** As part of its investment with the Elsewedy Group in Egypt, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is providing technical support to the Elsewedy Technical Academy – STA to equip young people with the skills and qualifications they need in the Egyptian labour market. Funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, the project aims to increase female participation in high-quality dual education and training. The school specialises in traditionally male-dominated courses, such as information and communications technology, industrial electronics, logistics and mechanics. As part of the technical support provided, experts conducted a gender assessment to explore ways of improving training facilities, training provision, learning and outreach to cater for young women. Key recommendations included establishing a zero-tolerance policy on harassment, the appointment of a gender and diversity officer, the introduction of gender-disaggregated data collection and the enhancement of the STA Career Support System. The EBRD has also been helping the school to put in place human-resources policies and systems that promote equal opportunities for women and men.

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
Training and awareness raising	• Provide mandatory inductions and periodic refresher training to all new staff, contractors and volunteers on relevant GBVH policies, including any child safeguarding and whistleblowing policies. • Provide targeted training to focal teachers and staff on how to respond to reports of GBVH in the education setting, as well as on how to identify signs that a child is experiencing violence at home and how to refer them to child protection services. • Engage experts to design awareness campaigns for children on what is unacceptable behaviour and how to report an incident. Teaching resources that could be adapted include the PANTS (Underwear Rule) for primary schools.	• **Global:** The online training provider, EduCare, certifies teachers to safeguarding standards. One private school group in East Africa uses its online courses to train their safeguarding leads and teachers on an annual basis. The easy-to-use training has received positive user feedback, with 98 per cent saying they would recommend the online learning service. Educare also offers specific courses for international schools to reflect their diverse student populations and unique challenges.
Work with contractors and suppliers	• Include an assessment of GBVH and safeguarding risks in procurement processes. • Conduct due diligence prior to contracting, including assessing implementing partners' track records and capacity on GBVH and working safely with children. • Ensure implementing partners have robust child safeguarding and GBVH policies and procedures in place, with specific expectations set out in contracts. • Ensure the design of the programme has taken child safeguarding and GBVH into account. • Monitor and address risks through regular programme monitoring.	• **Global:** The UK-funded Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Fund assesses and monitors safeguarding risks across its 41 projects in 17 countries. Prior to contracting, the GEC conducts a child-safeguarding due-diligence assessment, with an emphasis on the risks of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Each project is provided with a tailored analysis of its safeguarding policies, procedures and processes, and a safeguarding action plan is developed so it can meet the GEC's 14 minimum safeguarding standards. The project is given deadlines by which to meet the identified actions and is required to submit evidence by those dates. If a project has severe gaps, it may be placed on a performance improvement plan. Each project is given a risk rating based on the amount of contact between staff/contractors and beneficiaries at the beginning of the project. This 'exposure risk' is calculated, along with the project's compliance levels and the external risk of the operating context, so that the GEC Safeguarding Team can prioritise projects for follow-up and monitoring. The GEC's approach has been to strengthen capacity and accountability and to build trust. This has led to stronger reporting mechanisms, better case handling and changes to partners' global and local policies, practices and procedures to ensure that girls can access education in a safe way and that staff are protected from abuse.

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
Physical design	• Conduct safety audits of education facilities, grounds and access routes. Include the views of different groups of students (such as students with disabilities, girls and minorities). • Consider safety in the design and maintenance of education facilities, such as lighting, perimeter and access-point fencing, separate changing facilities and lockable toilets. • Provide safe transportation options to and from education facilities. • Ensure any student or staff accommodation is safe and secure. • Carefully assess the safety of any e-learning platforms, including security and confidentiality of user information (for example, password-protection, anonymous forum discussions) and learner support.	• **Timor-Leste:** UN Women and the National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) are working together on a Safe Campus initiative to address sexual violence in and around the university campus. It will include a safety audit of the UNTL campus, training sessions with university students and staff and technical assistance for the Safe Campus Technical Working Group.

Resources for addressing GBVH in education

Investing in the Pathways to Employment for Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Low and Middle-Income Countries, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2020. Guide for gender-smart investments that empower adolescent girls and young women to fully participate in education and economic opportunities, with a focus on improving safety and preventing GBV.

Preventing, Reporting and Responding to Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Education Institutions, World Bank, 2018. Guidance note with promising practices for tertiary education institutions on sexual assault and harassment, including how to develop policies, codes of conduct and complaints mechanisms and raise awareness.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Resource Guide: Education Sector Brief, World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and Global Women's Institute, 2015. A sector brief on key areas for integrating VAWG into education-sector projects at policy, institutional and community level.

Global Guidance on Addressing School-related Gender-based Violence, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN Women, 2016. Guidance and resources on preventing and responding to school-related gender-based violence.

Child Safeguarding Standards and How to Implement Them, Keeping Children Safe, 2014. Guide to assist organisations to meet their responsibilities for safeguarding children.

To find out more, please see Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector.

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