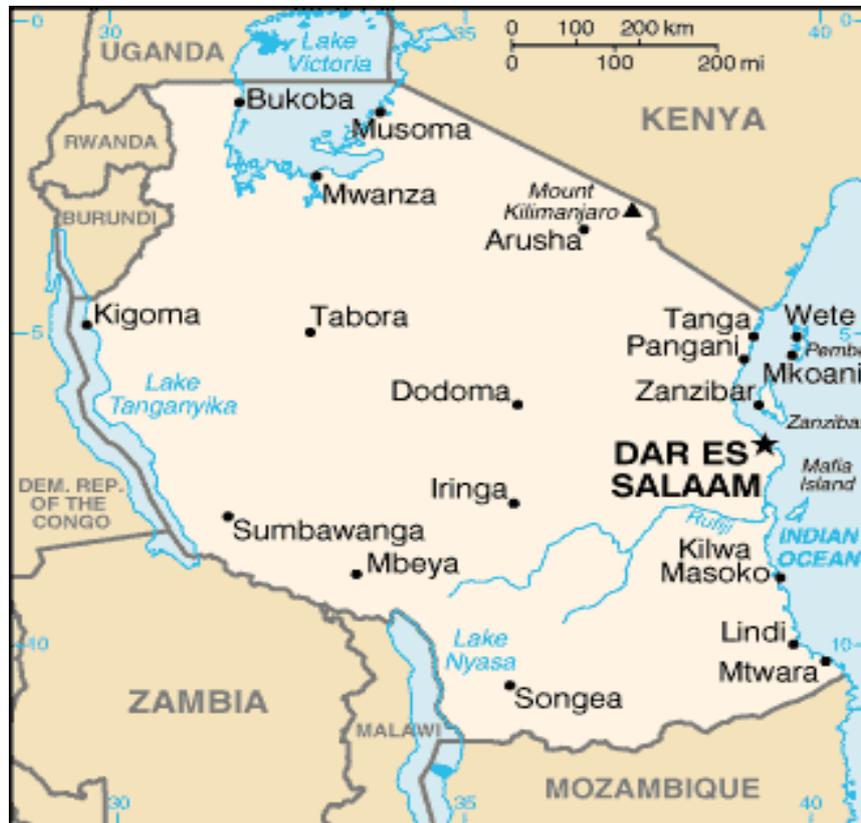# The Right of Girls to be Free of School-based Gender Violence: Tanzania as a case in point

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1. Introduction

Sexual Abuse of children "occurs when children are forced or persuaded into sexual acts or situations by others" (Craig 2001:1). According to Craig, child abuse was systematically identified in the late 1960s by the paediatrician Henry Kempe. Better understanding has followed in recent years, not only about the increase in incidents of abuse but also about our increasing awareness of it.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. Taking up UNICEF's declaration that "Children have rights as human beings and they also need special care and protection", the Convention called for universal recognition of set minimum human rights entitlements which should be respected by all governments. The Convention is against all forms of cruelty, degrading treatment or punishment of children, including gender-based violence, mainly characterized by sexual abuse.

1.1 Rationale and significance of this paper

Ten years of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000) have delivered mixed results. A positive achievement in education is generally characterised as one of MDG success stories, reducing the number of out-of-school children in many countries at both primary and secondary school levels. But more work is needed, especially in developing countries and in particular those affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, given the increasing number of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), who are mostly the result of AIDS, particularly in sub-Saharan countries.

In this paper, I want to shift the focus from addressing barriers to girls' participation in education arising from external cultural, social and economic factors to addressing and appreciating the existence of in-school factors that might deter children, especially girls, from entering or continuing in education. Gender-based violence, and especially sexual violence, within school premises has made a significant contribution to the increased rate of HIV infection among girls between the ages of 15-24 who are still at the compulsory school-going age: "Surveys have shown throughout sub-Saharan Africa that young women (15-24) are 2 times more likely to be living with HIV/AIDS than young men" (UNICEF).

It is only by managing this impact of HIV/AIDS on children, young people, and within the education system itself, that the potential to decrease vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and reduce the risk of further infection can be fulfilled, especially among schoolgirls, particularly those who are classed as OVC. Education for girls is a key to HIV/AIDS prevention, yet violence within the education system prevents its effective delivery.

2. Why is violence against girls common in primary and secondary schools?

In many parts of the world, especially in less developed countries, your gender determines your future and also denies you your rights. Girls as they grow up are far more likely to suffer from abuse and violence than boys. Gender-based violence is common and is generally caused by the power relationships between men and women and the relative powerlessness of women in patriarchal societies.

It is shocking, nonetheless, to learn that gender-based violence and offensive acts targeting girls occur in places considered safe, in both school environments and their family homes. A study by Mgalla et al (1998) has indicated that 6% of all girls in Tanzania are sexually harassed and experience sexual violence from their teachers and others within the school environments. A USAID report has suggested that few statistical studies exist to show the scale of the problem throughout sub-Saharan Africa but concludes that schools are not a safe place for girls in the region (2003).

This is a huge problem in the education sector, as such a state of affairs undermines the educational development of girls, denying them their basic human right to education and increasing the gender gap in formal educational development.

Research has indicated that various reasons contribute to gender-based violence in primary and secondary schools, especially acts of sexual violence. These unlawful acts have been part of the behaviour and attitudes of employees in school environments. They have existed for some time but things are now coming to light owing to awareness being raised about these issues, although research indicates that more work needs to be done, as there are few intervention strategies in place to curb the situations. As Mgala el at say: "It is thought that sexual exploitation of young girls is common within educational institutions in much of Africa, but data is scarce and interventions to address the issue still very few." (Mgala et al: 1998)

2.1 Academic underachievement

The first and very important reason contributing to girls being the target for sexual abuse from male staff is academic underachievement. Some male teachers use girls' weaknesses in the classroom as a weapon to threaten, humiliate and force them to do things even if it is against their will.

Facts are now being revealed: for example, Jo Evans, a victim of sexual abuse in the school environment at the age of ten wrote a book entitled An Invisible Child more than 30 years after she was subjected to sexual abuse by her Head Teacher. More will be said of her experience later.

2.2 Misuse of position and power

It has been proven that many people who work in schools, especially teachers, will routinely justify and rationalise their entitlement to see certain girls in potentially improper circumstances. They may choose to do so even for unclear reasons, or sometimes simply because they want to show their power and intimidate girls in order to fulfil their sexual desires.

2.3 Lack of understanding of the Children Act 1989 and Human Rights Act 1998

People working in the education sector have taken a long time to gain knowledge and understanding of the rights of children at all levels.

For example, a teacher might observe another teacher calling a girl to his office every day, giving excuses that the summonsed girl was not doing well in his subject and he would like to give her some extra tuition or punishment to reinforce self-discipline and encourage her to do better. This type of teacher should be challenged, taking into consideration the age of the girl as well as the secluded environment of the meeting.

2.4 Culture

In some cultures, especially in the past, girls were not allowed to talk and discuss anything about their teachers' behaviour. For example, when Jo Evans decided to speak up after being abused by the Head Teacher for two years, she chose to tell a friend. The friend ignored Jo's warning that she should not tell anyone, and told the whole story to her own mother, who, fortunately, was a friend of Jo's mother. She decided to talk to Jo and ask her to tell her mother herself, otherwise she would be the one to tell. Finally, Jo told her mother about the abuse, although she did not give the full story and a clear picture of all the incidents she had experienced because her abuser was a family friend of her parents and she did not want to jeopardise their relationship. In the end her father went to see the abusing Head Teacher, whose explanation was that he was just trying to punish Jo because she was not doing well in his maths class. Jo's parents were satisfied and the issue was never spoken of again, but Jo herself did not forget it.

2.5 Parent's attitude

Many parents dream of having intelligent children able to achieve well in school. They trust people in authority in the education system and are afraid of their child doing badly in school work or being seen as a bad girl. This inhibits the child's readiness to report abuse.

3. Why should we concentrate on girls?

The growing concern over girls' under-representation in education in the early 1990s reflected a move towards understanding education as a question of human rights rather than as simply an economic and/or social investment.

The international community, at its World Conference on Education For All, held in Thailand (5-9 March 1990), realised that it could not meet its target of achieving universal primary education without addressing the issue of why there were more girls out of school than boys.

In this conference, the discussion addressed barriers to girls' participation perceived as external to the school: economic conditions and social cultural practices such as poverty, early marriage of girls, preference given to boys, and girls' household labour. There was little appreciation of in-school factors that might deter a child from entering, or continuing in, schools.

Among students, violence is perpetrated more often by boys on girls. Although we have come to understand that girls are sometimes perpetrators of gender violence, and boys sometimes victims, the institutional culture of school, the codes, norms, rules and existing guidelines make girls the likely target of gender-based violence, which becomes a powerful deterrent to their continuing in education.

3.1 Concerns surrounding HIV infection rates among adolescents, particularly school girls, who are the most vulnerable to infection

 Sexual violence on school premises is a potential factor contributing to the increasing rate of HIV infection among girls between the ages of 15 -25 years in Tanzania as well as in other sub-Saharan countries (www.unaids.org). We need to:

▸ Protect school girls from sexual exploitation and increase their educational participation;
▸ Provide them with psychological support, especially those who are OVC, and in particular those in that group who are orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS pandemic;
▸ Reduce sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs) among young people and teen pregnancies among young girls within the compulsory school-going age, and thus combat dropping out due to pregnancies.

3.2 What does violence mean to HIV/AIDS orphaned girls?

Children without the guidance and protection of their primary care givers are often more at risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination and other forms of abuse.

Reports from other regions show that a prevalence of HIV infection exposes sexually abused children to high risks of infection, STIs and HIV. There is nothing to support the widely held view that child sexual abuse is very rare in sub-Saharan Africa: rather, it has been suggested that a significant number of all children in high HIV-incidence countries in sub-Saharan Africa will experience penetrative sexual abuse by an HIV infected perpetrator before the age of 18 years.

3.3 Effects of gender violence on a child

Gender violence is likely to lead to:

• Increased rates of HIV infection and other STIs;
• Stigmatisation and loss of self-esteem;
• A sense of betrayal by and powerlessness against authority;
• Poor or diminished school performance through trauma, emotional or behavioural disorders, and risk to health;
• Irregular attendance and underachievement for girls;
• Teenage pregnancies and early marriage, a major reason for girls' dropping out of education.

The children most at risk are those who have not experienced adequate parenting in their early years of childhood. AIDS orphaned and other children made vulnerable by the HIV/AIDS pandemic are most likely to experience sexual abuse due to their vulnerability.

4. The scale of the problem in Tanzania and other developing countries

Before 1990, little was known about the scale or nature of the problem. However, about midway through the 1990s, increasing concerns over the poor and the declining quality of education led to examination of conditions within schools that might undermine student participation, especially that of girls.

Several studies in Africa, including Tanzania, have shown that a significant proportion of school girls and boys are sexually active. Small-scale studies exploring the sexual abuse of girls in schools were undertaken, such as "An early intervention to protect school girls from sexual exploitation in Tanzanian schools", one among the studies carried out by Mgalla et al.

Additional impetus came during the 1990s as part of the response to the AIDS pandemic, since statistics indicated that girls in the 15-25 years old group were the most vulnerable to HIV infection (www.unaids.org). Attention turned to the school, both as a site for teaching about HIV prevention and, contrariwise, as a site for sexual violence and harassment. Clear evidence emerged in Sub Saharan-Africa, including Tanzania, of a consistent pattern of sexual abuse and harassment of girls by both male students and teachers.

4.2 Objectives to improve the situation

Investing in the protection of school girls, and in particular of orphaned and vulnerable girls, is an investment in a future society free of gender violence. To reduce and prevent gender violence in schools, we need to:

▶ Raise awareness that gender-based violence in schools is a human rights concern: that girls are entitled to empowerment through education in a safe learning environment;
▶ Recognise the need for a governmental child protection policy that addresses sexual abuse in the school environment and provides adequate resources to promote gender-based programmes within schools;
▶ Recognise the need for the Ministry of Education to reinforce gender-based curriculum and teaching methods;
▶ Raise awareness that there is an urgent need for research to provide empirical data on child sexual abuse in Tanzania, especially with reference to gender violence in schools;
▶ Test the effectiveness and address the challenges and limitation of child protection policies and procedures regarding sexual abuse in schools in Tanzania, and in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa;
▶ Raise awareness that child protection is a shared responsibility: government representatives in the education sector, teachers and community at large should work together in a joint commitment to undertake early interventions to end sexual violence against girls, focusing on teachers as the key instruments for a change.

5. Child protection policies and practice in Tanzania regarding child sexual abuse

The challenging question at national level is: where are the strategies to protect children from abuse in Tanzania under the MKUKUTA programme. According to a local NGO called Mkombozi, Tanzania, (April 2008 –March 2010), the reality is that children in Tanzania have not been central to national or party political priorities. It has been suggested that when they need the protection of the state in times of crisis, children who have been abused or neglected are treated with lack of interest, negligence and outright violence at the very time when they most need the protection of civil servants such as social workers, teachers, police and government officials.

Tanzania ratified the UN Convention on the Right of the Children (CRC) in 1991, but a review of existing legislation related to children suggests that attempts at a process of child protection began in 1986. According to REPOA (Research on Poverty Alleviation), the Law Reform Commission of Tanzania has submitted papers to the government and several discussions have been held, producing

varying commitments to enact new legislation. However, current legislation affecting children remains haphazard and fragmented, and not necessarily in children's best interest.

There are concerns that the breakdown of traditional childcare systems, foreign influence, poverty, and the lowly social position of girls, as well as the increasing rate of AIDS, are significantly contributing to the rate of child sexual abuse. Schools are not immune from social forces from the outside world; it should not be surprising that increased poverty and unemployment, family disintegration, divorce, migration and AIDS contribute to violence in schools. Moreover, where HIV/AIDS prevalence is high, young girls are increasingly targeted because they are seen to be safer and free of the AIDS virus; the myth that sex with a virgin cures AIDS has led in Africa to the rape of innocent girls, including school girls.

6. What has been learned from this study?

This study has shown that new legislation on children has not been consistently well-implemented, and has been unable to convince broader constituencies to see the importance of gearing all efforts to support such legislation.

Although most governments, including the government of Tanzania, have made explicit commitments to meeting the goal of gender equity in education, and some are taking active steps on gender mainstreaming at the policy formulation and implementation stages, there is little evidence of specific national strategies and good practice to tackle gender-based violence in schools, which also remains under-researched. Also, there is little evidence that Ministries of Education have incorporated topics about violence in schools into their curricula.

National policies in Tanzania and sub-Saharan Africa to allow re-admittance of girls who have given birth while still students appear not to be working effectively. There is a need for government to reinforce this policy, which is one of the twelve areas listed in the Platform for Action at the Beijing Convention in 1995 and also listed as a way of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of universal education.

7. A Proposed Action Plan for a Child Protection Package

A school approach to end gender violence could be effective if it involves the management, teachers, pupils and the curriculum and has a clear consistent message. Teachers could be key instruments for change, but they have their own experience as gendered beings and in order for them to play an effective role in addressing gender-based violence, they need to understand and confront their own attitudes and experiences regarding gender and violence, including perpetration of abuse.

The teacher training curriculum will need to prepare teachers to do so, and to learn, document and share good practice, but it is everyone's responsibility to work with school leaders and teachers to create violence-free schools and girl-friendly education and create a global momentum for changes such as increased resources from international donors and governments to tackle gender-based violence in schools in Tanzania, Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing countries.

A satisfactory child protection package would recognise the special needs of girls. It would emphasise the stamping out of sexual harassment and abuse in schools, whether by teachers or peers, and promote safety for girls by ensuring that schools are secured, girls do not have to spend time alone with male teachers, lights are good in and around the schools with no dark corners to hide in, and schools are close to children's homes.

7.1 Challenges and Limitations

The school and education systems have always failed girls who are the victims of sexually abusive acts in school environments and there is not sufficient evidence to indicate that the Ministry of Education has developed policy to address gender-based violence. School authorities, local government and parents continue to deny both the scale of the problem and its implications for individual children's psychosocial and educational development. Legal redress involves a long and sometimes frustrating process.

A central problem in identifying the nature and scope of the problem is lack of information. Many incidents of gender violence are not reported: teachers may downplay or dismiss the suggestion that some teachers are having sex with their pupils or tolerate such behaviour as normal. Girls may not report incidents of abuse because they are so conditioned that they don't recognise them as violations of their human rights. To date there is no empirical evidence to document Tanzanian attitudes, practices and intervention measures regarding child sexual abuse and enable comparison to be made with international protection practices and policies.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Empirical approaches

Research is needed that focuses on school safety outcomes: understanding school gender-based violence in context and the basic social dynamics of students, teachers, and support staff on the playgrounds and in restrooms, during class transitions, at dance and athletic events and school holidays; addressing inadequate teacher training; and raising awareness of and understanding school variables, since these could also contribute to the increase or reduction in school violence.

To date, researchers do not have a full epidemiological picture of school safety behaviour. A new generation of study could map these behaviours or subgroups of behaviours occurring (or not) in the school environment and lead to understanding of the interrelationships between types of violence in schools.

8.2 Basic research

There is little basic research aimed at understanding public perceptions of the gender based-violence problem in schools, in terms of either severity or causes. Such research could help to raise awareness and understanding of many myths and stereotypes about gender-based violence in schools as well as of the social and cultural factors that contribute to and propagate child sexual abuse.

8.3 Definitions of child abuse

A clear understanding of both popular and professional definitions of child abuse needs to be established in Tanzania and in sub-Saharan Africa, since there are some suggestions that inconsistencies in the definitions of child abuse may be inhibiting the development of child protection initiatives in both areas.

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