



Stream: Violence

Title: A critical analysis of gender violence and inequality in and around schools in South Africa in the age of Aids: Progress or retreat?

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South Africa stands out as having a strong commitment to gender equality in political, social and economic life. It is signatory to several regional and global treaties and policy frameworks targeting gender inequality in all spheres of life, as well as in education. These include global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as African agreements such as the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development and the AU Second Decade of Action of education. South Africa also has a strong policy framework for gender equality in education, with policies founded on commitments to equity and human rights in education.

While the country has made huge strides in enrolling girls in primary education specifically, but with high gender parity indexes at all levels, the sustained participation of girls in the education system, and in particular the poor quality of their educational experience, affecting access and participation, remains an area requiring investigation. One of the most pervasive reasons for the poor participation and low success of girls in the schooling system is gender inequality, and in particular, its manifestations in violence against girls and women, and the consequent developmental problems including health (most notably HIV infections and reproductive health. In addition, social problems such as socio-economic conditions in families and communities and the HIV epidemic, have a significant impact on girls' experiences of school. In 2001, the Human Rights Watch report, "Scared at School" reported high levels of sexual violence in South African schools. Almost ten years later, this paper explores the progress we have made in addressing the challenges raised in this and other reports.

The paper is divided into three sections: The first section of the paper considers the extensive research-base produced over the last decade in South Africa that documents gender violence and inequalities in and around schools. In particular, this section seeks to contextualize socially and historically the confounding discourses of gender based violence and the gendered face of HIV&AIDS in relation to South African girlhood, mapping the studies according to the various sectors, methods, foci and recommended strategies. These studies and reports, many inspired by and responsive to the call for legislation and programming to combat sexual violence in and around schools as long ago as 1997 in the Report of the Gender Equity Task Team, *Gender Equity in Education*, each in turn offer dramatic instances of the magnitude of the issues that confront girls, and significantly, key recommendations and strategies on what needs to happen. From the *Scared at School* study published by Human Rights Watch (2001), the *Violence against women: A national survey* study (Rasool et al, 2002), the South Africa Human Rights Commission report on violence in schools (SAHRC, 2008), the Centre for the Study



of Violence and Reconciliation, South Africa study *Waiting opportunities: Adolescent girls' experiences of gender based violence at schools* (Haffejee, 2006), to related studies which consider the impact of gender inequalities in relation to reproductive health, *Teenage pregnancy in South Africa with a specific focus on school-going learners* (Panday et al, 2009), Amnesty International's study on rural women living with HIV and including retrospective data on sexual violence in schools (Amnesty International, 2008), and the HSRC's *South African national HIV prevalence, incidence, behaviour and communication study, 2008: A turning tide for teenagers*, there is a consistent (and unrelenting) theme of gender inequality that is seriously disabling when it comes to girls' safety and security in schools and to their reproductive health more broadly in the context of their social and biological vulnerabilities in relation to HIV&AIDS.

Critically, should young women manage to complete matriculation and go on to university in South Africa, they are still not safe. As a new HEAIDS study, *HIV Prevalance and Related Factors: Higher Education Sector Study, 2009-2009*, reveals (HEAIDS, 2010), only 38 per cent of university student respondents agreed that female students were safe from sexual harassment. In the same study female students were found to be three more times likely than males to be HIV positive. Despite the richness of these studies and the various recommendations, and indeed, as we point out in the next section of the paper, what *is* happening by way of policies and interventions, the school environment for many girls remains hostile and life-threatening.

Set against this backdrop, the next section of the paper the paper reflects on interventions that currently aim to address the challenges brought about by these interrelationships, including policies and programmes by government, NGOs and institutions of higher education and schools themselves. The section looks beyond the strong and positive policy framework for gender equality in South African schools to examine the interventions currently in place to improve the experience of girls in schools. It explores the types of programmes that have been put in place to address, in particular, gender-based violence, and other social problems negatively affecting girls' experience of education. It examines the inter-relationships among gender inequality, HIV infection, sexual violence, and their effect on girls' access to and success in education. It maps some successful initiatives, but also highlights gaps in intervention, and approaches that may need improvement. It reflects on the political and social challenges of building gender equitable schools in a human rights-driven society with continued high levels of gender inequality.

From the above analysis, the third section of the paper identifies possibilities for effective and efficient partnerships for intervening against the negative impacts of GBV, HIV & AIDS and school access and success for girls. We attempt to address questions which include: Why does the country's highly lauded policy framework continue to fail girl children in terms of their access to and success in education? To what extent is the silencing of their voices in policy-making a contributing factor? Could institution-level policies and disciplinary measures to deal with GBV improve the situation?



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