

# School-related gender-based violence is preventing the achievement of quality education for all

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*This policy paper argues that school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a global concern preventing children, especially girls, exercising their right to a safe, inclusive and quality education. The paper calls for a systematic and harmonized approach to identify, monitor and understand SRGBV, as well as strong policy interventions to develop targeted solutions to address the problem effectively.*

*The paper is being jointly released by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR), UNESCO and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York City (March 2015).*



## Introduction

Evidence indicates that school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide<sup>1</sup>. It is one of the worst manifestations of gender discrimination and violates a wide range of children's rights. Education is critical in empowering and transforming the lives of young people, especially girls, yet widespread gender-based violence in and around schools seriously undermines the achievement of quality, inclusive and equitable education for all children.

The 2006 UN World Report on Violence Against Children (Pinheiro, 2006) identified violence against children – including in school settings – as a global phenomenon. Yet almost a decade later we still do not know the full scale and impact of gender-based violence in schools. Much research on violence against children in schools has neglected to explore the role of gender, yet most forms of school violence are deeply rooted in unequal gender relations, gendered social norms and discriminatory practices.

Moreover, while the increasing recognition of SRGBV is a positive trend, rarely has this been translated into effective policies that demonstrate a reduction in prevalence (Parkes, 2015). If we are to “build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all” – a proposed post-2015 target in education—we need better information and more evidence on SRGBV. We need to understand the nature and extent of the problem worldwide. We need to know why it happens and with what consequences. We need robust data to develop strategies and evaluate their success in reducing SRGBV.

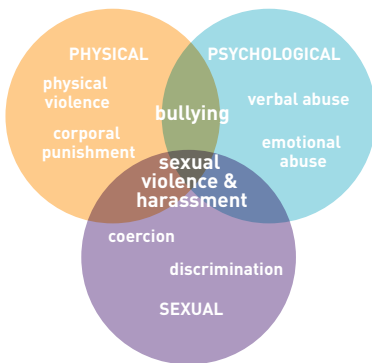
This paper highlights some of the available evidence on school-related gender-based violence and presents new analysis of data from international and regional learning assessments.

It highlights the enormous gaps in our ability to track SRGBV and respond to it effectively. While more extensive data are urgently required, we cannot afford to stand still. This paper also draws on lessons learned from successful interventions to document what works to address SRGBV, and makes policy recommendations for global and national stakeholders.



Highlighting SRGBV at this juncture is critical to set a better course for education and gender equality within the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals framework. With improved research and monitoring, sustained political attention, commitment and leadership, and better multisector collaboration, a timely opportunity exists to help ensure that schools are free from gender-based violence in the years to come.

## School-related gender-based violence is complex and multifaceted



School-related gender-based violence is defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. It also refers to the differences between girls' and boys' experiences of and vulnerabilities to violence. SRGBV includes explicit threats or acts of physical violence, bullying, verbal or sexual harassment, non-consensual touching, sexual coercion and assault, and rape. Corporal punishment and discipline in schools often manifest in gendered and discriminatory ways. Other implicit acts of SRGBV stem from everyday school practices that reinforce stereotyping and gender inequality, and encourage violent or unsafe environments.

Both girls and boys can be victims or perpetrators of SRGBV, but to what extent and which forms differ. Evidence suggests girls are at greater risk of sexual violence, harassment and exploitation, while boys are more likely to experience frequent and severe physical violence. Boys are more commonly perpetrators of physical bullying, while girls are often more likely to use verbal or psychological forms of violence (Pinheiro, 2006).

Yet these distinctions are not clear-cut. Girls also commit violent acts and boys also experience sexual abuse at school. Different forms of gender-based violence in schools overlap and reinforce each other. Their rates vary enormously between and within countries. Bullying and violence based on real or perceived sexual orientation is increasingly an area of concern (UNESCO, 2012a).

SRGBV can take place in buildings, on the grounds and around the entrances of schools. Hotspots for violence include toilets, classrooms and corridors, and in some contexts, staff accommodation. Girls' lodging in formal or ad-hoc boarding facilities may also be at risk of sexual violence or harassment. The physical isolation of facilities and their inadequate supervision exacerbate the problem. Outside of school, millions of children are vulnerable to physical, sexual and verbal abuse travelling to or from school. Unprecedented access to information and communication technologies (ICT) has extended intimidation, bullying and sexual harassment well beyond the school grounds.

## Gender inequality and social norms underpin violence in schools

Violence in schools reflects underlying social norms regarding authority and expected gender roles. Societal expectations can normalize negative aspects of male and female behaviour. Dominant conceptions about manhood may condone boys acting out expressions of aggression, violence, sexual power and homophobia. Conversely, expectations of girls can include deference to men and boys, submissiveness and passivity. Witnessing or experiencing violence in the home teaches children violence is 'normal' and increases the risk of them bullying or perpetrating sexual violence in their own lives. Gender norms often dictate that boys settle disputes with physical violence, and some may enact the gender-based violence observed in their own homes or communities against female students.

Schools do not exist in social isolation from their communities. Gender inequalities and violence at home, within the community or played out in cyberspace impact schoolchildren, and may be replicated or intensified in schools. Schools represent a critical space for learning, including children's understanding of gender roles. Unchecked gender discrimination and power imbalances in schools encourage attitudes and practices that subjugate schoolchildren, uphold unequal gender norms and allow the toleration and continuation of gender-based violence. Poorly enforced legislation, inadequate child protection policies and weak or non-existent reporting mechanisms all increase children's vulnerability to SRGBV, often allowing perpetrators to act with impunity.

## SRGBV is a global phenomenon

We do not have evidence of the full extent of SRGBV worldwide. But available data on violence against children, including bullying and physical violence, allow us to build a partial, albeit fragmented, picture of the pervasive nature of gender-based violence in schools.

Recent estimates from Plan International, based on the number of children affected by verbal bullying, a common form of violence in schools, show 246 million boys and girls suffering school-related violence every year (Plan International, 2013). In France, 40% of students report being victims of cyberbullying (Blaya, 2013). In Zambia, 61% of schoolchildren reported being bullied in the previous month (Fleming and Jacobsen, 2010). And millions more suffer physical violence at school under the guise of discipline: over one-half of all children worldwide live in countries where they have no legal protection from corporal punishment (UNESCO, 2014b).

Yet much of the scale and scope of gender-based violence in schools remains hidden. There is a lack of global comparable data on the various forms of SRGBV. Evidence across and within countries is uneven and incomplete. Wider studies on school violence have tended to focus on physical violence and bullying and do not always apply a gender perspective. Serious obstacles for documenting violence exist in many countries, and social taboos and fear of repercussions limit the safe spaces available for children to acknowledge and report experiences of school-related gender-based violence.

### *Sexual violence is harming the lives of schoolchildren worldwide*

'The teacher can send a girl to leave her exercise books in the office and the teacher follows her to make a proposal for sex, and because she fears to answer no, she says I will answer tomorrow. She then stops coming to school because of fear ... The girls are afraid to tell their parents, because they feel shy when they have been proposed, so they prefer staying at home ... if the girl comes to school then the teacher can become angry and threaten that she will fail ... if the girl accepts the teacher then she can become pregnant and drop out.' – Margaret, Grade 7 student in Malawi

Source: Moleni (2008)

Sexual violence is a highly destructive form of SRGBV, manifested as verbal and psychological harassment, sexual assault, rape, coercion, exploitation and discrimination in and around schools. Sexual violence in schools is a global concern, yet the lack of comparable data limits our knowledge of the extent of the problem and the development of effective policy solutions and prevention programmes.

Much of what we do know about sexual violence experienced by schoolchildren comes from wider research on violence against women and girls. A recent review by UNICEF reveals that sexual violence is not uncommon in the lives of many girls. Data from 40 low and middle income countries shows that up to 10% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 reported incidences of forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts in the previous year (UNICEF, 2014).

Nationally representative surveys and small-scale studies present a partial, but disturbing, picture. Much of the research to date has taken place in sub-Saharan Africa, driven by early concerns related to girls' low participation in education, and the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Older male students may take advantage of their position of power at school to abuse female students. In Cameroon, 30% of sexual violence experienced by schoolgirls was committed by male students (Devers et al., 2012). And, while teachers have a key role to play in addressing SRGBV, some are also perpetrators of sexual abuse and exploitation, often acting with impunity. A 2010 survey by the Ministry of National Education in Côte d'Ivoire found that 47% of teachers reported having elicited sexual relations with students (Dedy, 2010). In South Africa, a recent national survey found that 8% of secondary girls had experienced severe sexual assault or rape in the previous year while at school (Burton and Leoschut, 2013).

The SACMEQ III survey from 2007 provides comparable data on sexual harassment in primary schools across 15 education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, the only regional or international learning assessment to do so. Of 229 schools surveyed, an average of 41% of school principals acknowledged sexual harassment between pupils in their schools. In six countries, including Kenya, Uganda and Zambia, over 40% of school principals reported

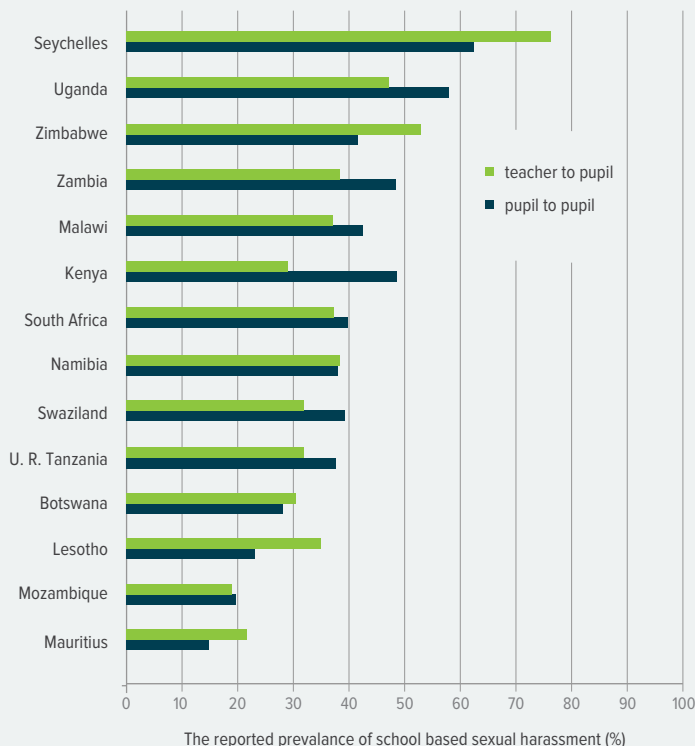
that pupil-pupil sexual harassment had occurred either 'sometimes' or 'often.' Teachers were also reported to be perpetrators, with an average of 39% of school principals stating that teacher-pupil harassment had occurred in their schools. This varied greatly between education systems: from around a fifth of surveyed schools in Mauritius and Mozambique to over three-quarters in the Seychelles (Figure 1).

Studies from other regions, although fewer in number, also reveal the extent of sexual violence in schools. A study in the Netherlands found 27% of students had been sexually harassed by school personnel (Mncube and Harber, 2013). In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that one in three 16–18 year olds have experienced unwanted sexual touching in schools (EWAN, 2015). Girls from the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama regularly experience sexual harassment in schools and 'sexual blackmail' related to grades (UN Women/UNICEF/ÚNETE, 2014).

Small-scale studies in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan report sexualized behaviour by teachers towards girls. A 2011 study in Yemen found that 31%

**FIGURE 1**

The prevalence of sexual harassment varies greatly between SACMEQ countries  
*Percentage of school principals who report that sexual harassment occurs 'often' or 'sometimes' in their schools, by perpetrator and country, 2007*



Notes: Reported occurrence of sexual harassment, 'sometimes' or 'often', given by school principal, by perpetrator. Data for the United Republic of Tanzania are for the mainland only, excluding the semi-autonomous Zanzibar archipelago.

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report team calculations (2014) using data from SACMEQ III survey.

of schoolchildren were exposed to sexual harassment and abuse (Leach et al., 2014). A 2014 baseline survey for Plan's Promoting Equality and Safety in Schools (PEASS) programme conducted in five countries in Asia<sup>2</sup> highlights incidences of sexual violence against both boys and girls. In Indonesia, 12% of both boys and girls aged 12–17 reported experiencing sexual violence in the previous six months (ICRW, 2014).

Despite this growing evidence base, experiences of sexual violence, abuse, coercion and harassment at school often remain undocumented and shrouded in silence. Social taboos make researching these issues difficult in many countries. The prevalence of these forms of SRGBV not only remains under-reported but also under-researched.

Some large-scale health surveys and learning assessments regularly collect data on school bullying. The SACMEQ III survey from 2007 is currently the only learning assessment that provides comparable data on sexual harassment in schools. Yet this information is limited in reach because the data were not collected from pupils and, as such, were not disaggregated by gender. Furthermore, school principals' perceptions of the problem might provide an incomplete portrayal of lived realities.

Global comparable data, with clearly defined measures for girls' and boys' experiences of sexual violence and harassment in and around schools, are urgently needed. Moreover, researchers need to address methodological and ethical challenges of working with children on issues of violence and sexuality, keeping paramount children's safety and need for protection from repercussions.

### *Many boys and girls around the world experience bullying, often in different ways*

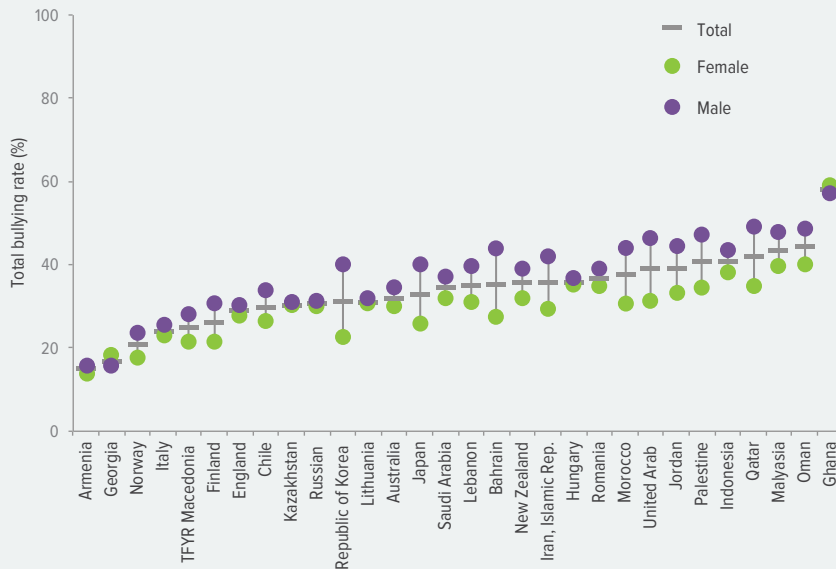
One of the most widely documented types of violence in schools is bullying (UNICEF, 2014). Students are bullied when they are repeatedly exposed to aggressive behaviour from their peers that intentionally inflict injury or discomfort. Bullying can include physical violence, verbal abuse or intent to cause psychological harm through humiliation or exclusion. The ways in which bullying is expressed or experienced are frequently gendered and reflect unequal power relations. Moreover, students may be targeted for bullying because of non-conformity to expected gender norms or their real or perceived gender identity. Bullying clearly undermines children's ability to participate in a safe environment conducive for learning.

International learning assessments provide some of the most striking evidence on the prevalence of school bullying worldwide (RTI International, 2013). The 2011 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) collected self-reported data on students' experiences of bullying using a standardized 'Bullied at School' scale across 63 education systems. New analysis of the 2011 TIMSS from 30 countries with data shows that large proportions of boys and girls experience physical and psychological acts of bullying at school. In all but two countries, over 20% of grade 8 students reported experiencing at least one form of bullying once or twice a month (**Figure 2**). In over half of the countries, more than one-third of grade 8 students reported experiencing bullying once or twice a month. Boys were more likely to report being bullied in almost every country. Gender differences in bullying victimization were particularly notable in the Republic of Korea and several Arab States. In Ghana, in contrast, girls and boys experienced similarly high levels of bullying: almost 60%.

The main source of internationally comparable information for low and middle income countries is the WHO Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS). A study compiling GSHS datasets between 2003 and 2006 in 19 low and middle income countries found that 34% of students aged 11–13 reported being bullied in the previous month, with 8% reporting daily bullying. Levels of bullying vary considerably across countries: in China 28% of students reported being bullied, while in Zambia levels reached 61%. In 12 of the 19 countries, boys were more likely to report being bullied than girls (Fleming and Jacobsen, 2010).

**FIGURE 2**

Children, particularly boys, are subject to high levels of bullying in schools across a range of countries



Notes: TIMSS 2011, grade 8. Self-reported victimization by bullying include one or more of the following acts: (1) made fun of (2) left out of games, (3) others spread lies (4) others steal from me (5) hurt by other students (6) forced to do something by other students.

Source: GMR team calculations based on 2011 TIMSS data.

**BOX 1**

A 2012 US study of 20,406 high school students found a substantial overlap between school bullying and cyberbullying, especially among vulnerable groups of students. Girls were more likely than boys to report being victim to cyberbullying in combination with school bullying – 11% versus 8%. Among youth who self-identified as non-heterosexual, 23% reported being victims of both cyberbullying and school bullying compared with only 9% of youths who identified as heterosexual.

Source: Schneider et al (2012).

bullying. In all but 2 of the 15 Latin American countries surveyed – Brazil and Honduras – an equal or greater proportion of boys than of girls reported experiencing physical forms of bullying. In contrast, in Argentina, Honduras and Uruguay, girls' reporting of psychological bullying was 5 percentage points higher than that of boys' (Figure 3).

Yet the proportion of girls and boys who experience physical and psychological bullying is highly specific to country and context. In Colombia – where, overall, boys experienced the highest rates of bullying in the region – boys were also more likely to report psychological bullying than girls: 38% of boys compared with 31% of girls (Figure 3).

More extensive information is needed to understand school-related bullying and its links to other forms of SRGBV. While many surveys of the prevalence and risk factors associated with bullying in high income countries disaggregate data by gender, additional research is needed to understand

the conditions that encourage gender-based acts of bullying, particularly in developing countries. Further studies are also needed to identify and understand girls' and boys' experiences of indirect forms of bullying, such as the psychological bullying described above, which is less visible than physical forms of peer violence and as such, may be under-reported or overlooked by teachers or policymakers.

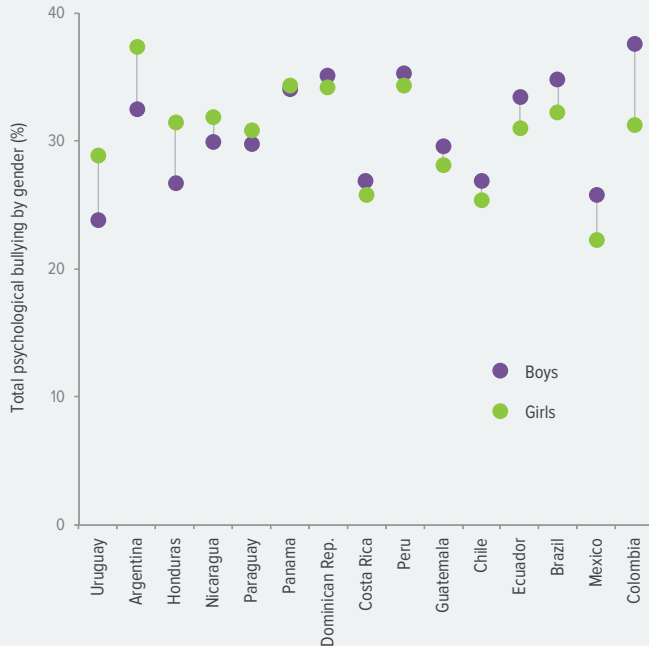
Girls and boys often experience bullying in different ways. Studies in Australia and the United States found boys to be more involved in physical and verbal bullying, both as perpetrators or victims, with girls more prone to psychological forms of bullying, such as social exclusion and spreading rumours (Skrzypiec, 2008; Wang et al., 2009). Some studies also indicate that girls are at greater risk of cyberbullying (Box 1).

Results from the 2013 Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) conducted with grade 6 students in 15 countries in Latin America show that while high percentages of both boys and girls are victims of physical forms of bullying, girls in some countries are more likely to also experience psychological

**FIGURE 3**

The prevalence of girls' and boys' experiences of psychological bullying differs across countries in Latin America

Percentage of students reporting psychological bullying, by gender and country



Notes: TERCE 2013, grade 6. Self-reported victimization by psychological bullying includes one or both of the following (1) made fun of (2) left out of games.

Source: GMR team calculations based on 2013 TERCE data.

## Corporal punishment and discipline underpin gender-based violence in schools

'I am thinking of leaving school because of beatings and they insult us and our parents. The teacher beat me with a stick and my hands had been injured' – Young girl, Egypt

Source: Plan UK's Girls Fund (2014)

Corporal punishment is a widely reported form of violence in schools in many parts of the world. It is estimated that over half of all children worldwide live in countries where they are not legally protected from corporal punishment in schools, of which 45% live in South Asia (UNESCO, 2014b). As of December 2014, 122 states have prohibited corporal punishment in schools; 76 have no such prohibitions (Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, 2014).

Corporal punishment in schools has historically been discussed and researched in gender-neutral terms. However, punishment and discipline are often highly gendered in practice, and are pivotal in enforcing gender roles and expected behavior in schools (Humphreys, 2008). In some countries, boys are perceived as tough and undisciplined, and consequently more likely to be subject

to physical punishment, while girls are likely to be victims of psychological and verbal forms of punishment (Pinheiro, 2006). Male teachers use physical punishment to assert their authority, whereas female teachers may be more likely to use verbal chastisement – and girls are often punished for not being sufficiently submissive and 'ladylike' (Leach et al., 2014).

Accurate gender-disaggregated data are needed to monitor changes in school practices not only in relation to the prevalence of physical punishments, but to other forms of discipline that discriminate by gender.

## Understanding the context of SRGBV is essential to ensure that those most vulnerable are not overlooked

School-related gender-based violence cannot be seen in isolation from violence in wider society. It is driven by social norms and entrenched inequalities that underpin and often condone gender-based violence. It is amplified in communities in which poverty and conflict are pervasive. Emerging evidence suggests that SRGBV more severely affects children who come from groups already facing discrimination and marginalization. We need to map and understand SRGBV's precipitating factors to effectively tackle the barriers it throws up to quality education for all.

## BOX 2

### Policy reform has been a priority, but has not yet eliminated corporal punishment in India

In India, the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment in schools was a priority in the 2005 and the 2007 National Plan of Action for Children. Corporal punishment was prohibited in 2009, although it remained legal in some states, and schools were provided with teacher guidelines to encourage ‘positive engagement’ with children. There is little evidence, however, that these policy reforms have eliminated corporal punishment. One recent study carried out for Young Lives in Andhra Pradesh, where corporal punishment was banned, found that 82% of boys aged 7–8 and 72% of girls had experienced physical punishment in school in the past week.

Sources: Morrow and Singh (2014); Parkes (2015).

### Poverty can exacerbate vulnerability

Chronic poverty and unstable living conditions increase girls’ vulnerability to sexual violence. In South Africa, for example, inadequately resourced secondary schools located in poor, urban settings are often at the front line of dealing with sexual violence in and around school, reflective of the high rates of sexual assault of women and girls in the wider society (Bhana, 2014; Jewkes et al., 2009).

Analysis of SACMEQ III data shows a disproportionate number of primary schools in poorer communities reporting pupil–pupil sexual harassment in several of the surveyed countries. This gap was particularly wide in countries reporting higher levels of sexual harassment. In Kenya, where almost one-half of all school principals reported

pupil–pupil sexual harassment there was a 40 percentage point difference between schools serving children from the poorest or richest backgrounds (**Figure 4A**).

Relationships between poverty, violence and gender inequalities are far from straightforward, however. In the United Republic of Tanzania, 41% of school principals in the poorest schools reported teacher–pupil sexual harassment compared with 20% in the richest. Yet in several other countries, including Lesotho, Namibia and Mozambique, reports of teacher–pupil harassment were higher among the richest schools (**Figure 4B**).

It is vital to understand how location and prevailing socio-economic patterns impact the prevalence of SRGBV. The Stop Violence Against Girls in School baseline survey conducted in 2009 found that in Mozambique girls in towns were more likely to have experienced sexual violence in the previous year than girls in more remote, rural areas. The research suggested that migrant labour and urbanization placed girls at increased risk of sexual exploitation from older men, with schoolgirls exchanging sex for money and goods, including school materials (Parkes and Heslop, 2011). In Sierra Leone, girls who cannot pay for school-related expenses are often coerced into sexual relationships by male teachers (Reilly, 2014).

In Brazil, high levels of peer violence in communities have raised concerns about the effects of criminal gang violence spilling over into schools. Boys and young men in poorer neighbourhoods are more at risk both as perpetrators and victims of violence (Parkes, 2015). In Israel, more serious forms of school violence, including sexual assaults, are associated with poor neighbourhoods and higher levels of community crime (Benbenishty and Astor, 2008). A case study in Mongolia links the higher likelihood of teachers’ physical violence against boys with the increased likelihood of dropout from school, especially for boys from low income and migrant families already disadvantaged by economic pressures (Hepworth, 2013).

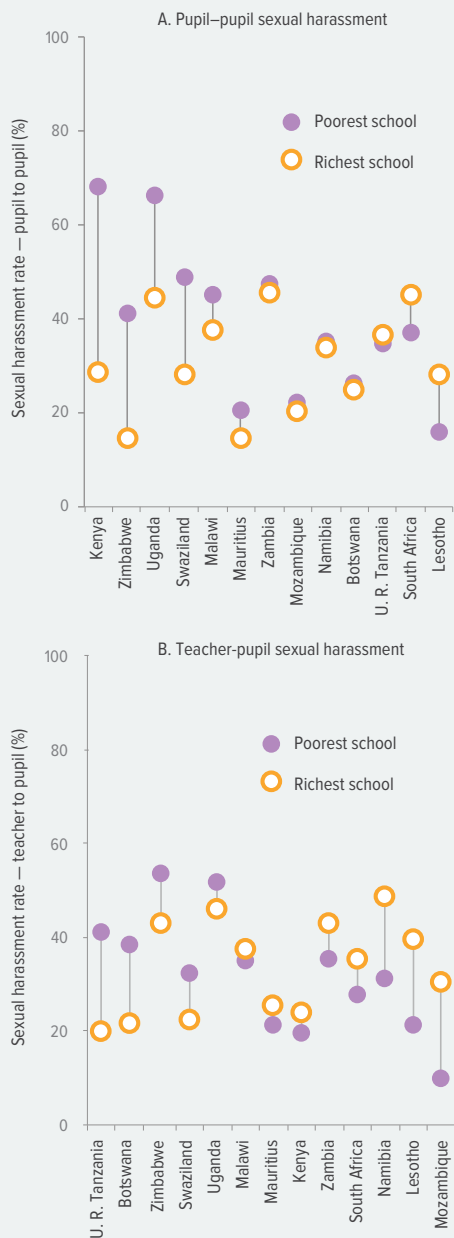
In high income countries, schools in poorer and deprived areas are likely to face greater challenges in dealing with bullying. TIMSS 2011 data shows that in Bahrain, 25% of grade 8 students in the poorest schools reported experiencing physical bullying in the previous month compared with 11% of those in the richest schools; in Australia, 15% of those in the poorest schools reported physical bullying compared with 8% in the richest ones.



**FIGURE 4**

Sexual harassment in the poorest and richest primary schools in Southern and Eastern Africa varies dramatically within and between countries

Percentage of school principals reporting pupil–pupil and teacher–pupil sexual harassment by an index of school wealth



Notes: Reported occurrence of sexual harassment as ‘sometimes’ or ‘often.’

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report team calculations (2014) using data from SACMEQ III survey.

### Gender-based violence is widespread in conflict-affected countries

The 2011 EFA Global Monitoring Report estimated that armed conflict prevents over 28 million children of primary school age from obtaining an education, by exposing them to widespread sexual violence and targeted attacks on schools. Direct attacks on schools – in particular those that target girls’ education – and elevated levels of sexual violence create an atmosphere of insecurity that leads to a decline in the number of girls able to attend school (GCPEA, 2014; Rivas, 2011). Parents living in conflict-affected areas may keep their daughters at home rather than expose them to risk as they journey to school. Fear for girls’ safety in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea have led to parents withdrawing their girls from school (UNESCO, 2014).

Girls in communities displaced by conflict are also particularly vulnerable to abuse. An early UNHCR/Save the Children UK report (2002) uncovered the widespread sexual exploitation of Liberian girls by teachers in refugee camps in Guinea (Kirk and Winthrop, 2005).

Moreover, the direct and indirect effects of widespread sexual violence can continue long after conflicts end. Many countries that have emerged from violent conflict, including Liberia (Box 3), continue to report elevated levels of rape and sexual violence, suggesting that practices which emerge during periods of conflict can become socially ingrained in gender relations. In the Central African Republic, a 2008 study by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF found that 42% of boys enrolled in secondary schools in the capital Bangui said that they can committed violent sexual assaults within or near their school (Antonowicz, 2010).

### Marginalized groups are at increased risk of SRGBV

Children’s vulnerability to SRGBV increases if they live with a disability, express a sexual preference different from the mainstream, or are part of an already disadvantaged group. Poverty, gender inequalities and disability interact to place girls at particular risk. One survey of 3706 primary schoolchildren aged 11–14 in Uganda found that 24% of disabled girls reported experiencing sexual violence at school compared with 12% of non-disabled girls (Devries et al., 2014).

Children and adolescents find themselves victims of targeted acts of violence as a result of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Available research indicates

### BOX 3

The 14 year long civil war in Liberia has left a legacy of high levels of violent crime and gender-based violence. A 2012 study on SRGBV highlights how it affects boys and girls. Almost 20% of students reported that they had been abused by teachers or school staff. 18% of girls and 13% of boys reported having been asked by teachers for sex in return for receiving a higher grade. Boys' and girls' views on gender-based violence reflect societal attitudes, with almost 50% of boys and 30% of girls agreeing that sexual abuse and violence were a normal part of relationships. A culture of impunity exists in Liberia: only 38% of students who stated they were victims of gender-based violence also reported the incident.

Sources: IBIS et al. (2014) Postmus et al. (2014).

that lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) children may be particularly at risk of SRGBV. In the United States, the 2011 National School Climate survey reported that 82% of LGBT students aged 13–20 had been verbally harassed at school in the last year and 38% had been physically harassed; about two-thirds said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment (UNICEF, 2014). In Thailand, 56% of LGBT students had reported bullying in the past month (UNESCO, 2014a). Far less is known about the extent of gender-based violence faced by LGBT students in developing countries.

Children affected by HIV and AIDS are at increased risk of sexual violence and being targeted for bullying. A study of over 6,700 secondary school students in Zimbabwe found strong evidence that orphaned children, particularly those who had lost both parents, were more likely to experience forced sex than non-orphans (Pascoe et al., 2010). A baseline study of 3,401 children in communities with high HIV prevalence in South Africa found that those affected by HIV and AIDS in their families were significantly more likely to report experiencing multiple types of bullying than those from families not directly affected by HIV and AIDS (Boyes and Cluver, 2014).

Children from groups facing social stigma may experience frequent and more severe forms of violence at school. A Human Rights Watch report cites examples of discrimination and physical violence by school authorities in four Indian states against Dalit, Muslim and tribal children. Girls in particular risked being withdrawn from school due to parental concerns for their safety (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

## School-related gender-based violence is detrimental to children's education

Violence and abuse can have serious detrimental effects on children's health and well-being and their ability to learn to their full potential. SRGBV can negatively impact school participation, learning levels and completion rates, and raises barriers to gender equality in education and wider society. Combating gender-based violence in and around schools will help increase school attendance, enhance children's quality of education and improve learning outcomes. It is a vital component for the achievement of the post-2015 education targets.

Children who have been abused or bullied often experience low self-esteem and depression, which may lead to self-harm and risk-taking, and result in poor performance and disengagement from school. Sexual violence can have health consequences, including mental health problems, pregnancy and STIs such as HIV, all of which have a negative effect on education progress and well-being.

Bullying can increase absenteeism, as shown in studies in Brazil, Ghana and the United States (Abramovay and Rua, 2005; Dunne et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013). Bullying can also reduce school achievement for both boys and girls. Analysis of TIMSS 2011 data from 48 mainly developed countries shows that grade 4 students who reported being bullied weekly at school scored 32 points lower in mathematics compared with those who reported that they had almost never been bullied (Mullis et al., 2012). New analysis of the same dataset shows that girls and boys in grade 8 in many countries scored lower in mathematics if they had reported being bullied

compared with those who had not. In Jordan, Oman, Palestine and Romania, grade 8 boys who were bullied were the least likely to reach at least a Level 1 proficiency in mathematics; in Chile, Ghana and the Islamic Republic of Iran, girls subjected to bullying, on average, performed the poorest (**Figure 5**).

A few studies have recently linked cyberbullying to negative school experiences, such as lower academic performance and school attachment. A study in the United States found that students who reported lower grades in school were also more than twice as likely to report being victims of both cyberbullying and school bullying (Schneider et al., 2012).

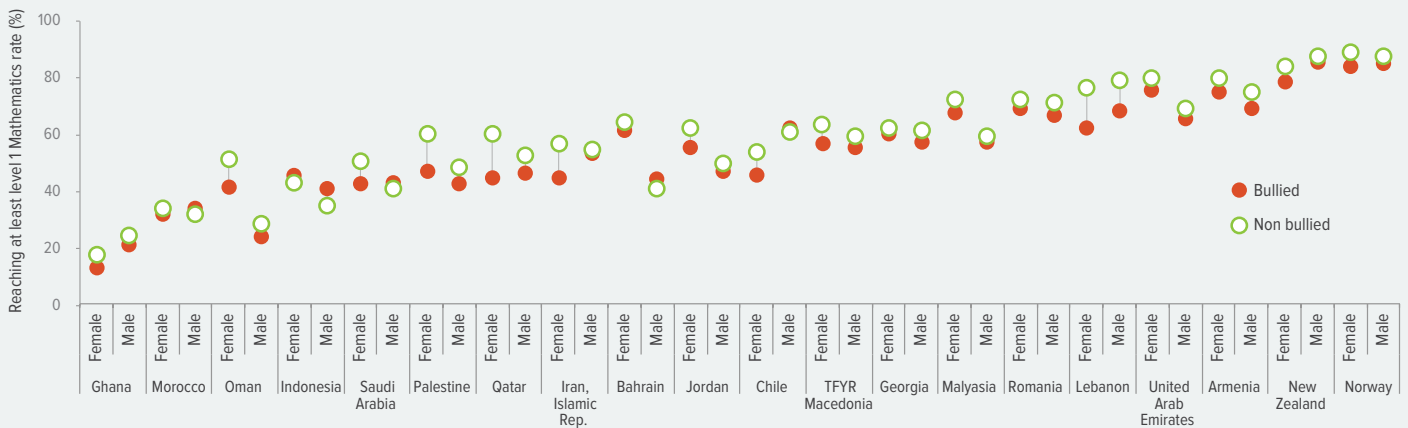
Corporal punishment and harsh treatment from teachers have been linked to students' early exit from schooling. A small study in Nepal found that 14% of school leavers attributed the reason to fear of the teacher. A study of Palestinian children in refugee camps in Lebanon found that 68% of boys and 58% of girls had left school because of harsh treatment by their teachers (Pereznieto et al., 2010).

Far less research has been carried out on sexual violence in schools. In a survey of gender-based violence in Malawi, 61% of girls who experienced gender-based violence said it affected their school performance (Bisika et al., 2009). Qualitative studies have shown that gender-based violence contributes to girls' poor performance and dropout (Dunne et al., 2005).

Girls subjected to SRGBV in the form of rape, forced or coerced sex can have early and unintended pregnancies and, as a consequence, an increased risk of their education being curtailed (Psaki, 2015). In Swaziland, according to a nationally representative study of 1,292 young women, 17% of girls aged 13–17 were pulled out of school because of pregnancy. One-tenth of the young women reported being raped, of which 20% of incidents took place in or on the way to school (Pereznieto et al., 2010).

**FIGURE 5**

Bullying affects boys' and girls' ability to achieve minimal numeracy skills  
Percentage of students reaching at least level 1 mathematics, by bullying and gender



Notes: TIMSS 2011, grade 8. Composite measure for self-reported victimization by bullying.

Source: GMR team calculations based on 2011 TIMSS data.

In some countries, there are policies that expel or exclude pregnant schoolgirls from school. Where girls do remain in school or return after childbirth, they face continued gender-based violence in the form of bullying and verbal abuse by classmates and teachers. Little support exists for pregnant girls or teen mothers at school (UNESCO, 2014a).

Significant gaps in knowledge exist regarding the nature and extent of the impact of sexual forms of SRGBV on children’s participation in education. This neglected area of research needs to be addressed in order to identify mechanisms, policies and programmes to support girls – and boys – at risk of poor progress or dropout, as a result of sexual violence.

## Comprehensive approaches at all levels are needed to tackle SRGBV post-2015

This policy paper underscores the need for a coordinated, multilevel and multifaceted approach to tackle violence in schools, and one that recognizes the interrelated nature of different forms of violence both within and outside the school environment. While the literature to date points to some promising interventions, they have often been small and short term, proving difficult to sustain and scale up, especially in resource-poor settings. And while interventions are shown to improve awareness and attitudes to violence in schools, conclusive evidence of ways to reduce the prevalence of SRGBV is lacking. Effective solutions will need long-term and cost-effective strategies for the prevention of SRGBV, combined with mechanisms that respond to and provide protection for those affected, and that ensure accountability.

### Prevention

Sexuality and reproductive health education can help girls and boys develop the capacity for healthy and respectful relationships, and prevent unwanted and unsafe sex. Curricula that integrate discussions of gender issues, including gender-based violence, rights and power dynamics, can be particularly effective in empowering girls. The ‘Gender Equity Movement in Schools’ project in Mumbai, India, has developed an add-on curriculum that includes content on gender roles, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health for standards 6 and 7 children (Miske, 2013). Graduates demonstrated improved self-confidence, attitudes and gender awareness (Achyut et al., 2011).

Programmes promoting non-violence among men and boys, such as ReproSalud in Peru, demonstrate positive shifts in attitudes to violence and gender equality (OECD, 2012). In Brazil, India and the Balkans, Instituto Promundo and its partners have implemented promising programmes that use trained teacher and student facilitators to work with boys and young men from secondary schools to promote non-violence and reflect on gender norms. Engaging students and teachers in the process led to some programmes being institutionalized in school curricula (Barker et al., 2012).

Teachers who receive specialized training and supervision can help promote gender-sensitive and inclusive classrooms and develop positive forms of discipline in schools. Plan International, through its ‘Learn without Fear’ campaign launched in 2011, worked with teachers, parents and district education authorities in Viet Nam to develop positive forms of discipline in schools. Teachers who received training were more in favour of abolishing corporal punishment than teachers who were not trained (Devers et al., 2012).



Teacher unions and civil society organizations can play an important role in preventing SRGBV. A survey of teachers' trade unions affiliated to Education International found that over half of the 125 respondents from different regions were involved in initiatives to respond to SRGBV, including raising awareness, producing materials, and training (Education International, forthcoming 2015). Civil society organizations have played a pioneering role in addressing homophobic bullying in a range of countries. In Ireland, the non-government organization BeLONG To worked in partnership with government and teacher unions to train teachers and integrate the issue of homophobic bullying in the curriculum; in 2010, 3,500 teachers were trained (UNESCO, 2012b).

Campaigns, advocacy and lobbying can help efforts to prevent violence in schools by raising awareness and promoting better knowledge of children's rights to a safe education. Notable high profile campaigns have included the 'Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children' launched in 2001, and the Council of Europe's 'One in Five' campaign to protect children against sexual exploitation and abuse starting in 2010. The 'Don't Hit, Educate' campaign in Brazil uses discussion groups, music and theatre to raise community awareness. In 2014, Brazil became the 38th country to ban all forms of corporal punishment (Instituto Promundo, 2014).

## Response

'... sharing my knowledge about children's rights with my family, my friends and acquaintances, has made them change their attitudes gradually. Now not only me but also my girlfriends know that we have rights to invest in education and to speak up for our rights to study, to protect ourselves from violence and to participate in making our own decisions.'

– Linh, Viet Nam – Plan International-sponsored girl delegate to the 57th CSW

Anti-bullying interventions in developed countries have been effective in reducing and responding to school bullying. Whole-school approaches that combine teacher training, school rules and sanctions, classroom curricula, mediation training, individual counselling and materials for parents have been particularly successful (Limber et al., 2013). Similarly, holistic models of schooling promote favourable conditions for responding to school violence. An evaluation of UNICEF's Child Friendly School programme<sup>3</sup> found that students felt safer and supported in schools when child-centred teaching methods were adopted and there were high levels of parental and community engagement (UNICEF, 2009).

In developing countries, girls' clubs have had a positive impact on breaking the silence surrounding school-related gender-based violence. An evaluation of ActionAid's 'Stop Violence Against Girls in School' (SVAGS) project found that clubs run by trained female mentors enhanced girls' abilities and confidence to identify and challenge violence (Parkes and Heslop, 2013).

Safe and accessible reporting mechanisms can help protect the rights and welfare of children who have experienced violence at school. During the SVAGS project, the development of positive connections between schools, clubs and local communities opened more effective channels to report discrimination and violence. In Sierra Leone, the establishment of Family Support Units that link police, social workers and health personnel with schools and communities provides mechanisms for students and their families to report violations and receive support, although their capacity needs strengthening (Reilly, 2014).

## Accountability

A variety of strategies can be employed to improve accountability. Critical to addressing SRGBV is the development of codes of conduct for teachers and students that prohibit all forms of violence and provide effective procedures for reporting, monitoring and working with victims and perpetrators.

In Malawi, the Safe Schools Program, initiated in 2005, lobbied for revisions to the Teachers' Code of Conduct and stronger enforcement of regulations on teacher misconduct. Schools and communities received training on the revised code. In project schools, the number of teachers who knew how to report a violation of the code increased from 45% to 75%, with the vast majority agreeing they had a responsibility to report violations (Devtech Systems Inc., 2008).

To ensure accountability measures are effective they must be reinforced by legal and policy frameworks at government, district and school levels, be widely disseminated and be enforced through effective leadership. Where existing laws and codes provide adequate legal protection against violence, their enforcement remains a challenge in some countries. In South Africa, strategies to address gender-based violence are supported by a strong legal and policy framework and detailed guidelines for schools. Yet schools are not legally required to adopt the national guidelines, and school leaders have been reluctant to report abuse of students by fellow staff members (Brock et al., 2014).

In the United Kingdom, head teachers and governing bodies are legally required to report allegations against school staff and volunteers to the Local Education Authority. Schools must have established procedures to make referrals to the Disclosure and Barring Service if a member of staff has been dismissed or removed, and it is a criminal offence not to make a referral when the criteria have been met (UK Department of Education, 2014).

Policy and programme frameworks require systematic monitoring and evaluation. In Côte d'Ivoire, where a national cross-sector policy on child protection was finalised in 2012, a framework for the coordination and monitoring of child protection strategies has been established in the Ministry of National Education and Technical Education (UNICEF, 2013).

Comprehensive approaches require better evidence about which strategies effectively reduce the prevalence of SRGBV, including more robust systems for measuring levels of and responses to violence, and intersecting risk factors. The full range of actors involved in translating policy into action should be identified. Enforcement of laws is often poor, reporting and referral systems weak, and policy implementation patchy, partly because of deep-seated social and gender norms at the district, community and school levels (Parkes, 2015). Coordination across all levels is needed to understand the perspectives of different stakeholders, what constrains and enables them to act, and what support, training and resources they need.

## Key policy recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to secure commitments and collaboration from global and national education stakeholders, including governments, ministries of educations and donors. They particularly focus on informative collection, focused research, policy formation and global action. They acknowledge the gaps in the current evidence base, the emerging good practice in preventing and responding to SRGBV, and the beginnings of a more coordinated response.

### *Develop a clear understanding of SRGBV*

Without a clear understanding of the different forms of school-related gender-based violence, attempts at measuring its prevalence or impact will remain disjointed and policy and programmatic responses fragmented. The development of a comprehensive and internationally-agreed definition of SRGBV is an essential first step.

### *Strengthen research and harmonize monitoring*

Research to clarify the drivers, risk factors and different contexts of SRGBV must be expanded, and particular attention paid to previously under-researched and vulnerable groups. Guidelines on the ethical and methodological issues of research and data collection with children, victims of violence and vulnerable people should be developed, agreed and disseminated.

A monitoring framework with standardised indicators allows partners to harmonize their approaches to measuring SRGBV and enables governments and stakeholders to formally establish the extent of the issue. The integration of core SRGBV indicators into national systems such as Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and the National Commitments and Policies Instruments (NCPI) is needed to improve monitoring of SRGBV over time and the implementation of policy and programme responses. Capacity-building and the strengthening of reporting at district and school level are vital to ensure timely responses to the problem.

Questions on SRGBV that reflect a range of cultural contexts should also be incorporated into existing household surveys and learning assessments to gather comparable data on its prevalence and impact on educational outcomes. Modules should recognize different forms of SRGBV, be disaggregated by gender of both victim and perpetrator, and be clearly time-bound.

### *Demonstrate leadership, particularly at the national level*

SRGBV must be incorporated into national policies and action plans that recognize the need for prevention, responses to mitigate its impact, and accountability. Commitment and leadership from national governments are a necessary starting point to achieve these objectives. Recent reviews from Plan International, UNESCO and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs propose key principles for government action on SRGBV. These include safe and effective reporting and responses, well-trained personnel, effective legislation and regulation and multi-sector coordination and collaboration. International community support for the development of comprehensive national responses, as well as the allocation of resources to implement such programmes, is essential. Targeted support for schools in poor and disadvantaged communities should be included in such frameworks.

### *Collaborate using a multisectoral approach*

Gender-based violence in and around schools concerns not only the education sector, but also the justice and health sectors, local communities, and those working towards gender equality and child protection more widely. Addressing school-related gender-based violence requires a multisectoral approach with collaboration at the district level across education, health and youth and social welfare sectors, as well as cooperation at the national level between ministries. The inclusion of communities and those most affected by SRGBV will ensure greater programme success and sustainability. The media can also play an important role in promoting better understanding of SRGBV among the general public by alerting parents to the nature of the problem and reinforcing positive messages received by children in schools and clubs.

### *Improve partnerships and coordination*

Tackling SRGBV necessitates coordination among diverse partners, including local, regional and international advocacy groups and civil society coalitions, research organizations, faith-based institutions and the private sector, as well as bilateral and multilateral donors. SRGBV should be situated within ongoing efforts to end gender-based violence and improve gender equality and not be addressed in isolation. Strategies to address gender-based violence in education settings need to be integrated in international responses to conflict and humanitarian crises. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) provides guidance with its calls for integrated measures to eliminate violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment in educational settings.

## Recognise SRGBV in the post-2015 framework

SRGBV must be clearly recognized in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal framework, and should be included in efforts to achieve equity in education targets. SRGBV indicators should be used to monitor progress in achieving safe, inclusive and non-violent school settings. Without this, school-related gender-based violence will not be addressed effectively, and will impede the achievement of other education targets, as well as the SDG goal on gender equality.

## Conclusion

School-related gender-based violence is an appalling phenomenon that undermines efforts to provide good quality education and achieve Education for All. It has consequences on attendance, learning and completion of all learners, and has wider negative impacts on families and communities.

Schools are the place where SRGBV occurs, but they are also the place where it can stop. Schools should be learning environments where social norms and gender inequalities are challenged and transformed, including attitudes and practices condoning violence. SRGBV cannot be addressed unless it is better understood. The inability to recognize and respond to SRGBV prevents the transformation of schools into empowering spaces for girls, boys and teachers.

The international community will soon confirm its post-2015 commitment to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.'<sup>4</sup> This laudable goal will not be achieved unless gender is recognized as a driving factor in school violence, strong monitoring frameworks are adopted and genuine commitment is made to eliminate gender-based violence in schools.

1. This policy paper focuses on primary and secondary education. The problem of gender-based violence in tertiary education has been well documented in some countries and is an additional area of concern (Fleck-Henderson, 2012).
2. This survey of over 9,000 schoolchildren was conducted in Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and Viet Nam.
3. Implemented in Guyana, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Philippines, South Africa and Thailand
4. The SDG goal for education proposed by the Open Working Group.
5. This paper draws on several reviews and analysis of school violence and school-related gender-based violence. A full list can be found online: <http://bit.ly/srgbvref>

EFA Global Monitoring Report  
c/o UNESCO  
7, place de Fontenoy  
75352 Paris 07 SP, France  
Email: [efareport@unesco.org](mailto:efareport@unesco.org)  
Tel: +33 (1) 45 68 10 36  
Fax: +33 (1) 45 68 56 41  
[www.efareport.unesco.org](http://www.efareport.unesco.org)

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The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a multi-stakeholder partnership in support of the MDGs and EFA goals on girls' education and gender equality. It is committed to working towards policy impact through collective advocacy and coordinated action; effectiveness through knowledge exchange and sharing of evidence-based solutions; & achieving results through strengthened partnerships and collaborative approaches. UNICEF hosts the UNGEI Secretariat and is also a member of the Global Advisory Committee.