

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

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Ending gender-based violence in schools

By Jacquiline Emodok

A big number of pupils in primary schools across Uganda have been emotionally and physically abused by a teacher or bullied in school by their peers. School related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a major barrier to education in Uganda because it leads to poor performance and undermines the retention of pupils in school. Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is mainly in three forms namely; bullying, corporal punishment, sexual abuse and harassment.

A recent SRGBV study by USAID/ Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity indicates that 95.6% of pupils in Primary Three and Primary Five experienced bullying, 88.5% of pupils in Primary Three and Primary Five experienced corporal punishment, and 41.2% of Primary Three and 50.1% of Primary Five pupils

experienced sexual abuse. With these alarming statistics, the education ministry with support from USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity devised a strategy to use teachers, parents and community members as change agents to promote a positive school climate in various districts.

According to Denis Kayiwa, the communications specialist, USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity, a total 2,658 community change agents have been trained in communities around 1,431 primary schools in 14 districts supported by the project.

The training is conducted using a journeys curriculum which engages learners in a reflection process to share their experiences with corporal punishment and how it affects their stay in school.

Retention of students

“When I heard these stories I decided that teachers and the whole school community had to make a change and



Community change agents trained during the project facilitating a community dialogue meeting on violence

I volunteered to work as a community change agent,” William Golooba a community change agent in Mukono district says.

He says from the stories shared by the learners, he learnt that bullying makes students biased and they eventually lose interest in

whole compound or carry bricks on their arms for long hours in the sun just because they came late. When this happens children can become dehydrated and will not be feeling well so they may not turn up at school the following day,” Semuwemba explains. Golooba says he also learnt that sexual harassment is not entirely physical, but also verbal. “Some teachers can ask a girl a question and when she fails to answer it properly, they hurl insults such as saying the girl cannot reason in spite of her big breasts. Such comments affect a learner’s esteem and they hate being in the teacher’s class,” Golooba says.

Semuwemba notes that boys are also victims of sexual harassment, especially verbal sexual harassment perpetrated by their peers and community members. “Boys who develop deep voices are called names and it is worse when they are still in primary school because some community members ask them why are they wasting time in school when they are

mature instead of starting their own families,” he says.

Community change agents

Community change agents hold meetings once or twice a month in varying school communities. These meetings are coordinated by the school heads that help to mobilise parents, teachers and community members. During these meetings the community is engaged in building a community friendly environment that is free from violence. The reflection dialogues are to bridge any gaps of violence that may be realized in communities and come up with locally grown change solutions of response and alternative ways on how to address incidences of indiscipline in children. “Most time we tell parents to be approachable and create a friendship with their children. This eases communication and understanding of causes of the undesired behaviour and how to work with a child to improve as a positive discipline” he explains.