

5. Bullying and punishment

Violence directed at young people and violence by young people is an issue of concern in both developed and developing countries¹. Young people themselves regularly identify violence as an issue, particularly violence in school which can include corporal punishment, bullying, discrimination and sexual abuse.

Young people's lack of power and generally low social status in society, as well as the classroom, makes boys and girls particularly vulnerable to violence. Schooling is commonly authoritarian in nature and a key element of this is the perceived right of teachers to punish in order to maintain control and order².

Similarly, gender violence and inequality predicated on traditional social and cultural assumptions of male authority over females is replicated in the classroom. This results in women and young girls being particularly at risk from sexual abuse³.

School-based violence is reinforced by the fact that teachers often lack accountability towards their students. Even if governments have made legal provisions for tackling the issue, these are usually broad and open to interpretation. Furthermore, laws may be contradictory or not rigorously enforced⁴.

Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is a common phenomenon in schools internationally. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that corporal punishment remains legal in at least 65 countries⁵, despite the fact that it directly contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The term 'corporal punishment' means to inflict punishment on the body. It includes a wide variety of actions such as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, shoving and choking as well as the use of a wide variety of objects such as wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins and hands. Corporal punishment may also take the form of painful body postures caused by being placed in an enclosed space, use of electric shocks, excessive exercise drills and the prevention of performing bodily functions⁶.

Although corporal punishment affects both boys and girls, a study of corporal punishment in schools in South Asia suggests that some young people suffer a greater risk of corporal punishment than others due to their ethnic, family or class background. Children with disabilities are found to be at even greater risk⁷.

Corporal punishment is a humiliating and degrading act of violence which has both physical and psychological affects on young people⁸. Beating a youngster causes pain, injury, humiliation, guilt, anxiety, helplessness, anger, vindictiveness and a sense of low self-worth. It can also increase vulnerability to depression. At its most extreme, corporal punishment may lead young people to commit suicide.

Young people subjected to repeated violence may exhibit dysfunctional behaviour such as poor communication. When driven by fear, children learn simply to please the teacher and may not acquire the skills and knowledge they need for their development. They are adverse to taking risks and being creative⁹.

Plan's response

Nepal

Children who participated in Plan Nepal's Children's Consultation raised the issue of corporal punishment which is common practice in schools. Plan Nepal is exploring the possibility of advocacy activity against corporal punishment at the local and national levels with other like minded non-governmental organisations.

Sri Lanka

"I do not like going to school because my teacher hit me in the presence of girls."

This comment was made during a Children's Consultation by Plan Sri Lanka to mark Children's Day.

Working in collaboration with The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), Plan staff analysed the issue of corporal punishment and took the first step of working on a strategy to initiate a multi-media campaign against corporal punishment through print, billboards, radio and television. This was aimed at a number of target groups including schools and school teachers.

Plan Sri Lanka will continue to work with the NCPA, schools, parents and communities to study this issue in depth so that long-term interventions can be developed in order to challenge adult attitudes toward discipline and corporal punishment.

Indonesia

The Children's Council, facilitated by Plan Indonesia in Makassar, works in collaboration with a local non-governmental organisation and a group of journalists. The objective of the Council is to create awareness of and advocate for children's rights. One topic that the members have engaged with is child protection law in schools.

Talking about his participation in the Council, Ukok said:

"Through the Children's Council we want to socialise the law on child protection at all levels of communities, especially to the schools, so there will be no more child violations at schools."¹⁰

In addition, continuous humiliation can result in young people being too scared to go to school – a place where they are meant to feel safe and secure¹¹. Not only do those youngsters subject to physical harm live in constant fear, but so too do those children who witness others being beaten, especially if punishment is inconsistently given and its reason is not understood¹². Fear of school contributes significantly to young people dropping out of education, denying them their right to learn and realise their full potential.

Advocates of corporal punishment in schools believe that young people are better controlled, respect and appreciate authority, develop better social skills as well as improved moral character and learn to better discipline themselves¹³. However, strong and consistent research evidence shows that physical punishment and the deliberate humiliation of children are significantly linked with the development of violent attitudes and actions in later life¹⁴.

Plan's response

Plan Togo is using a manual entitled 'Alternatives to Violence' with child-to-child school clubs in an effort to reduce violence and to prepare children to manage conflict situations. A project for girls' education is also being initiated and this will help young people develop drama and theatre against violence, based on their own school and household survey findings.

Indeed acts of violence by young people in school are on the increase and are directed both at fellow students and at teachers. In the US, for example, two teenage assailants took their own lives after shooting twelve of their fellow students and a teacher¹⁵. In Germany, teenagers were jailed for torturing a classmate for months and posting film clips of the abuse on the internet¹⁶ whilst, in Japan, a 12-year-old girl was stabbed in the neck and killed by an 11 year-old classmate¹⁷.

Guns

A UNESO study on gangs and drug trafficking in or near Brazilian schools found that four per cent of students surveyed said that they had or have had a firearm and 70 per cent of these (almost 130,000 students) reported that these weapons were for use in schools. Some nine per cent of the students said they knew where, and from whom, arms could be bought and 55 per cent of these said that getting hold of a weapon was easy¹⁸.



Plan's response

Brazil

In Brazil the proportion of the population most exposed to violence are youths aged 15–24 years old¹⁹. In light of this, young people participating in a media project supported by Plan Brazil produced a video on violence in schools.

Explaining about the video at the 2004 Fourth International Summit on Media for Children and Adolescents, 16 year-old Ana Claudia said:

"I learned a lot about the problems caused by dealers selling drugs to children in the school and why there is so much violence. The film has changed things. Now there is less violence because the school has better security and the police protect us."²⁰

Haiti

Plan Haiti supported a teenager-led survey on how the CRC is being violated in their communities. Violence at school scored highest in nearly every community. Based on this finding, the teenagers developed their own campaign against violence in school.

A Human Rights Watch study of corporal punishment in Kenya concluded that violence in a school helps to breed violence. As one head teacher said, "One thing leads to another; show me a school that has excessive corporal punishment and I'll show you a school that has bullying."²¹

Bullying

Like corporal punishment, bullying takes many forms including physical violence, threats, name-calling and sarcasm, spreading rumours, persistent teasing and exclusion from a group, torment, ridicule, humiliation and abusive comments²². Again, the effects of bullying can be both physical and psychological.

Teacher-student bullying and student-student bullying are common problems in schools around the world. In the UK, for instance, a telephone child-counselling charity reports that bullying is the single biggest reason for youngsters contacting the helpline. About half the young people who call about bullying say they are verbally abused, whilst a third speaks of being punched, kicked or pushed.

My father registered me at a municipal school. But when I went there, the headmistress despised the displaced kids. She kept telling us we were dirty and unkempt... the other kids did not even allow us to sit on the benches and were pushing us off onto the ground instead²³.

Fourteen year-old Umaru told Plan Sierra Leone about her experience of school before the civil war and joining the Rapid Education Programme facilitated by Plan, the Ministry of Education and the Federation of African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

Young people who are bullied can be discriminated against for having the 'wrong' coloured hair, eyes or skin, for wearing the 'wrong' clothes, for speaking another language or for being in a wheelchair²⁴. Children in developing countries also identify poverty as a reason for being bullied, with research suggesting that social interactions and relationships with others can be far more important to young people than having to go without food or other commodities²⁵.

Another growing reason for being bullied is the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Children, whose parents are ill because of HIV/AIDS, or those who have been orphaned by the disease, may be rejected by their friends and schoolmates. As one 16 year-old South African girl put it: “They treat you badly. You don’t feel like walking in the street, they give you names. They whisper when you pass. They take it that when one person in the house is sick, all of you in that house are sick.”²⁶

Sexuality

Attention is also increasingly focusing on homophobic bullying – abuse based on sexuality²⁷. This is frequently predicated on the belief that girls and boys must conform to rigid rules of conduct on appearance based on their gender. Youth who violate these rules run the risk of punishment at the hands of their peers and by adults²⁸.

Researchers studying lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in the US, Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand and the UK, among other countries, have reached similar conclusions about the pervasiveness of antigay violence in schools.

One study in the US, for example, found that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were nearly three times more likely than their peers to have been involved in at least one physical fight at school, three times more likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school and nearly four times more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe²⁹.

Such abuse hampers students’ ability to get an education and takes a tremendous toll on their emotional well-being. Perhaps because so many lesbian, gay, bisexual youth experience abuses on a daily basis, these young people are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to use alcohol or other drugs, engage in risky sexual behaviours or to run away from home³⁰.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is usually only one aspect of a wider problem of school-based violence which includes corporal punishment and bullying³¹. Yet, whilst corporal punishment and bullying generally affects both boys and girls, sexual violence is overwhelmingly carried out against girl students by male students and teachers³².

As such, sexual harassment poses a powerful barrier to girls’ and young women’s access to education and their ability to benefit from it. It is a powerful factor both in influencing parents to keep girls out of school and for girls themselves avoiding school. In addition to suffering physical and psychological trauma, young girls also face the consequences of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections, including the HIV virus³³.

The problem of sexual abuse is particularly well documented in Africa where sexual harassment of female students by males is common practice and often ignored. In some ways it is seen as ‘normal’ and inevitable. Research in a number of junior secondary schools in Ghana, Malawi and Zimbabwe suggests that this is because, by failing to clamp down on sexual abuse and aggressive behaviour, schools send out the message that it is acceptable³⁴.

Students generally believe that it is better to stay quiet rather than risk reporting the abuse to a teacher. This is not surprising given that teachers themselves are often implicated. As well as feeling that nothing will be done, students may also have strong feelings of shame and blame, a fear of not being believed or a fear of the consequences of speaking up³⁵. This may help explain why, although some incidences of sexual harassment towards males have been reported, there are knowledge gaps around homophobia and gender-based violence affecting boys³⁶.

Plan's response

Schools should play an important role in securing the rights of youth to participation, free association and expression. However, students internationally tend to have very little control over what they learn, when and where. They also have little if no say in how their schools are organised.

However, encouraging the active participation of young people in the running of their school can help to tackle problems of violence within it. Research shows that:

- School rules compiled in partnership with students are more likely to be relevant, understood and adhered to
- Young people who are encouraged to express their opinions and to be assertive will be more likely to have higher self-esteem and move from a position of confidence. As a consequence, they will be better equipped to deal with abusive, threatening or unfair situations because they will be in a better position to seek advice and exit a harmful situation when necessary
- Participation that involves a diversity of young people can build a sense of belonging, solidarity, justice and responsibility, caring for people in need and sensitivity towards people who are different³⁷

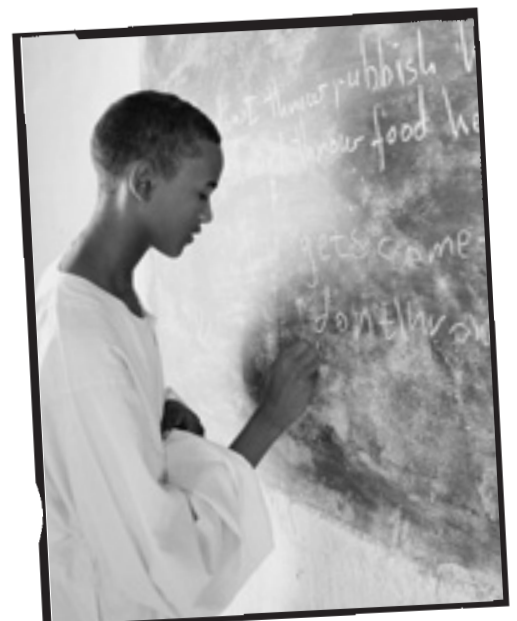
A cornerstone of Plan's Child Centred Community Development approach is the active participation of children and their communities in their own development.

This may take the form of a Children's Club, for example, through which young people can protect themselves from violence by providing each other with peer support and by learning and practicing skills such as self-organisation, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Plan's 'School Improvement Program' (SIP) is designed so that students are empowered to become active participants in their own learning and not just passive recipients. Their involvement in all aspects of school life means that solutions can be sought through dialogue with their family, community and teachers in a process that listens to and respects everyone's views.

SIP is made up of the following core elements:

- Ensuring teachers are competent and motivated
- Promoting active learning methods
- Promoting the active participation of children and parents in school governance
- Ensuring a safe, sound and effective learning environment
- Establishing a relevant curriculum
- Ensuring that children are properly prepared for school
- Ensuring empowered and supportive school leaders
- Advocating for supportive supervision from the government



Adam Hinton

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child

Article 28.2

To ensure that school discipline is administered "in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the Convention"

