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Sexual Violence against Girls in Schools: Addressing the Gaps between Policy and Practice in Awaso, Ghana

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Introduction: Background and Purpose

Girls' Education: Potential and Obstacles

In addition to being a fundamental human right, girls' education holds so much potential that the international community has come to perceive it as one of the key solutions to eradicate poverty and underdevelopment. It is now widely recognized that development indicators in such fields as health, gender equality and economic growth improve when girls have access to quality education. However, despite the established relationship between girls' education and several social development outcomes, gender disparities in education remain a strong concern. The latest UNESCO figures¹ reveal that girls represent 53% of the 67 million children who are out of school worldwide, 3.6 million of whom are absent from primary school classrooms due to gender inequalities. The gender parity ratio in sub-Saharan Africa, which hovers around 0.79 in kindergarten, 0.91 in primary school and 0.79 in secondary school, is especially concerning.^{2(p. 1, 2, 14)}

Several factors contribute to differences in enrolment and retention rates for boys and girls. Poverty and discrimination are two components that are widely documented in the literature and are the focus of many development projects.

An Overseen Obstacle – Sexual Violence against Girls in Schools

A major barrier to girls' education that has received much less academic and programmatic attention is sexual violence in schools, described as any sexual activity which is either unwanted or obtained by force, power or coercion, as well as sexually explicit verbal comments and repeated unwanted sexual advances.^{3(p.5)} Omitting to thoroughly study this issue poses a serious question: How can we, in good conscience, continue to push girls into schools without addressing the violence they are likely to face there? In addition to physical and psychological consequences such as broken bones and lowered self-esteem, violence has a demonstrated impact on a child's ability to get to and from school, to learn effectively while in school, and to remain in school long enough to reap the benefits of education.⁴

Although reliable data on the prevalence of sexual violence in schools are sparse due to the sensitive nature of the topic, considered taboo in many societies and rarely discussed, most experts agree that girls and young women are much more at risk of sexual violence in schools than boys and young men.^{5(p.1), 6(p.13-14)} Their lesser status as females and their reduced access to income-generating activities help explain this vulnerability.^{7(p.1)} According to UNICEF, approximately 20% of females

and 5-10% of males worldwide are sexually abused during their childhood.^{8(p.5)} As demonstrated by ActionAid International,^{9(p.2)} violence is a major cause of declining enrolment, attendance and graduation rates, especially among schoolgirls. Reducing violence against girls in schools will hence increase their enrolment, attendance and graduation rates, and thus contribute to maximizing the wide-reaching benefits of girls' education.

Fighting Sexual Violence against Girls in Awaso, Ghana

The case of Ghana deserves particular attention. Notwithstanding governmental commitments to prevent and prosecute sexual violence against girls in schools (SVAGS), an effort supported on the ground by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), SVAGS remains an alarming common practice.^{10,11,12} Yet the situation has failed to capture widespread interest among academics and policymakers. The adverse impact of sexual violence on equitable education, as well as ways to prevent its occurrence, is thus grossly misunderstood and under-documented.

The present article seeks to address this gap by exploring the interface between the seemingly solid Ghanaian legal and policy framework aiming to protect children in educational institutions and the high incidence of SVAGS in Awaso, a rural Ghanaian town. Its purpose is twofold: to identify the major barriers to implementing the existing laws and policies against SVAGS in Awaso, and to highlight strategies for lifting those barriers. While previous research explored causes and extent of SVAGS in Ghana, our study builds on that knowledge and examines the reasons for which policy frameworks have so far failed to eradicate this pervasive phenomenon. To this end, the creation of a non-hierarchical space allowing for an open discussion with community members, government officials and civil society personnel alike contributes to the search for endogenous solutions to put SVAGS policies into practice.

Awaso and its Geographical Context

This case study took place in Awaso, a small town of 6501 inhabitants located in the Bibiani-Anhwiaso-Bekwai district of the Western Region of Ghana. It is important to note that the town was chosen for this study not because it has higher incidence of SVAGS, but rather because the principal researcher had developed a relationship with community members following a work period in the region. The creation of links with local leaders and community members is necessary for a qualitative field study such as ours, and permitted us to overcome some resistances linked to the sensitive nature of a topic which intersects the two taboos of sexuality and violence against women and girls.

Although age distribution statistics are not available for the town itself, 37.5% of district residents are of school age (five to 19 years). Average yearly temperatures hover around 26°C (78.8°F), relative humidity is high, and soil fertility is high, which leads to superior agricultural output. This is an environmental asset since the Awaso economy is largely based on subsistence farming activities. Most women are involved in petty trading; farming and selling produce at the market, and do not have much formal education. Mining is an important activity in this village, which lies at the foot of a bauxite mine exploited by the Ghana Bauxite Company.

While the Bibiani-Anhwiaso-Bekwai district is dominated by the Twi-speaking Akan ethnic group (79.4%),¹³ Awaso itself is inhabited mostly by Sefwi-speaking Sefwis.¹⁴ The main religion in the district is Christianity (88.7%), followed by Islam (7.5%) and traditional religions (3.8%).¹⁵ Like the rest of the district, Awaso is also mainly Christian, and its denominations include Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecost, Methodist, Anglican, Christ Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Church of Christ and Seventh Day Adventist.¹⁴

School-aged children in Awaso have access to four public schools. According to teachers and other school staff, these schools are underfunded and have insufficient teachers, classrooms and learning materials. They also lack basic facilities and utilities such as latrines, water and electricity. The shortage of latrines is an important barrier to girls' education in the community. Going into the bush when they need to urinate is humiliating for female teachers and students alike, and also makes girls prone to abuse, as these areas are unsupervised. Lack of proper sanitation facilities also leads to decreased school attendance, as many girls and female teachers stay home during their menses to avoid humiliation.¹⁶

Like in many rural Ghanaian communities, Awaso parents tend to engage their children in various income-generating activities after school. As a result, children have little time to study, a constraint which increases the likelihood that they will repeat grades, hence decreasing their motivation. This is especially true for girls, who are often asked to help their mothers sell crops at the market or supervise their younger siblings. The average school dropout level in the community is Junior High School (JHS).

Ghanaian Education System Policies and Reforms

Since its independence in 1957, Ghana has been recognized as a country that places high importance on education. The *Education Act* of 1961 laid

the legislative foundations for the organization and administration of the country's education system, which was at that time considered among the most developed in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁷ Subsequently, the government implemented systemic reforms to maintain and improve the access and quality of Ghanaian education, as illustrated by the Education Reform Programme of 1987, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education Programme (FCUBE) of 1996, and more recently (2005/06), the nationwide Capitation Grant Scheme strategy to provide public primary schools a yearly monetary compensation for each enrolled pupil. Other pro-poor education initiatives launched by the national government include the School Feeding Programme, the provision of free exercise books and uniforms in some schools, and the erection of buildings for schools that were previously set up under trees. Together with the rest of the education sector, these initiatives cost the Ghanaian government approximately 30% of its total national budget and 11% of its GDP.^{18(p.12)} This represents heavy government expenditure on education and demonstrates the Ghanaian government's strong prioritization of this sector.

In 1997, the Government created the Girls' Education Unit (GEU) within the Ghana Education Service (GES) to focus its efforts on access to quality education for girls. The unit promotes girls' rights to and within education, and aims to increase their enrolment, retention and achievement. Girls' Education Officers (GEOs) are posted by the GEU to each of the 170 districts in the country, and work to support girls' education at the regional level.

The Education Strategic Plan (ESP) (2003-2015), which guides education policy and planning in Ghana, is in line with the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS). The ESP guides the country's efforts to meet Millennium Development Goals two and three, which are respectively related to the provision of universal basic education and the achievement of gender equality at all levels of education by 2015. Girls' access to education is found within the ten priorities presented in the current ESP. Eliminating education-related fees through the Capitation Grant has been successful in narrowing the gender gap.¹⁹ More specifically, the gender parity index jumped from 92% in 1999 to 99% in 2007 at the primary level and from 80% in 1999 to 89% in 2007 at the secondary level.²⁰ However, these statistics represent averages that hide geographic disparities. Indeed, some of the poorer districts have a low gender parity index of 70%.²¹ One must also consider retention and completion rates to get a true picture of girls' education in the country. Both these rates are about 10% higher for boys – retention being at 90% for the latter compared with 80% for female pupils, while the primary cycle completion rates hover

around 91% for boys as opposed to 79% for girls.²¹ Finally, the gender parity index figures presented above refer strictly to access to education, and relay no information on the type of barriers girls tend to face, namely sexual violence in schools, or the quality of the education they receive as opposed to boys.

Understanding Sexual Violence against Girls

Although research has shown that girls from minority groups and disadvantaged economic backgrounds are more prone to being victims of all types of violence⁹ and suffer from the highest incidence of abuse, violence constitutes a reality for girls of all ages, ethnicities, class, caste, and religion.^{22(p.4)} Regardless of geographic, ethnic, religious and economic context, sexual violence triggers a social taboo loaded with feelings of shame and guilt. Even in societies where gender equality is considered to be attained, and in which female victims might feel supported when speaking out about incidents of sexual violence, such abuse remains very difficult for its survivors to discuss. Despite the challenges associated with collecting data on sexual violence, a nation-wide study conducted in Ghana shows that females are most at risk of all forms of such violence between the ages of 10 and 18.^{10(p.12)} Although girls and young women selling items on the streets of Ghana's major cities are potentially more at risk than schoolgirls, girls' safety in Awaso schools, paradoxically deemed "protective environments", remains compromised through rape, bullying and other types of abuse. A second inquiry on school safety in Ghana established that the average age at which rape and defilement occur is 14 years, and ranges between 4 and 17 years.¹¹ Information on where the abuse is committed varies, but the two most common places are schools (including on the way there and back; 9.6%¹¹ to 53.3%¹²) and home (46.6%¹² to 67.3%¹¹).

Causes of Sexual Violence in Schools

Gender disparities put girls and women at a disadvantage from a very young age, and are among the main underlying causes of sexual abuse in schools.¹⁰ Girls' low economic power is another reported cause of sexual violence, and those whose parents cannot afford their school fees sometimes enter sexual relationships in exchange for tuition money. In fact, poverty reportedly leads some mothers to push their daughters to engage in sexual relationships with boys or men that can support them financially.¹²

Other factors thought to increase sexual violence include parents' failure to educate their children on the risks associated with sexual activity;

the tendency for parents to settle sexual abuse cases privately at home; parents sharing a room with children who are exposed to sexual acts; the influence of older children on younger ones; and girls' provocative dressing, walking and mannerism.^{11(p.34)} This last argument also explains the wide scope of the victim-blaming phenomenon, in which "the behaviour of the victim becomes the center of the attention (and) rarely are perpetrators held accountable or considered to be responsible for their behaviour".^{10(p.14)}

Studies conducted in Ghana show that the main perpetrators of sexual abuse are not strangers but rather familiar figures such as classmates, teachers, neighbours and relatives. While most survivors are abused by members of the opposite sex (one study shows that 89.7% of female victims were abused by males and 64.5% of male victims were abused by females),^{12(p.29)} same-sex abuse does also occur.

Regulatory Framework on SVAGS in Ghana International Instruments

Ghana was the first country to ratify, in 1990, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).²³ This convention includes provisions defending all children and youth's right to be protected from sexual exploitation and other unlawful sexual practices (Article 34). It also provides for access to quality education that "safeguards the child from all forms of violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual violence, while he or she is in school and in the care of teachers" (Article 19). The UNCRC places responsibility on the states for protecting children from all forms of violence, and to establish protective, investigative and preventive mechanisms for this protection.

The same is true of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), which specifies that state parties must "take specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment and especially physical or mental injury or abuse, neglect, or maltreatment including sexual abuse" (Article 16).²⁴

Furthermore, the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (2004) holds that states should initiate and engage sustained public campaigns against gender-based violence and trafficking of women and girls, reinforce legal mechanisms that will protect women at the national level, and end impunity of crimes committed against women in a manner that will change and positively alter the attitude and behaviour of society.²⁵ The Declaration also affirms that states should take specific

measures to ensure the education of girls and literacy of women, especially in rural areas, to achieve the Education for All (EFA) goals.

National Instruments

National Ghanaian legal and policy frameworks for child protection from sexual violence in schools stem from the aforementioned international and regional frameworks, and include the 1992 Constitution, the Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560), the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act of 1998 (Act 554) and the Code of Professional Conduct of the Ghana Education Service (GES).

Chapter 5 of the 1992 Constitution spells out the fundamental human rights and freedoms of all citizens, including children, and states that "[e]very person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual" (Act 12, subsection 2).²⁶ Article 28 is more specific, and describes children's rights to protection: "Parliament shall enact such laws as are necessary to ensure that [...] children and young persons receive special protection against exposure to physical and moral hazards" (section 1d).²⁶ It also clearly states that "[a] child shall not be subjected to torture or other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (section 3).²⁶ This holds true in any context, including learning environments.

The Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560) consolidates the Ghanaian legislative framework relating to child protection and maintenance. It defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years (Section 1), and states that "[n]o person shall deprive a child access to education, immunization, adequate diet, clothing, shelter, medical attention or any other thing required for his development" (Section 8, subsection 1).²⁷ On the topic of child marriage, which is sometimes presented as an acceptable solution to pregnancy following child sexual abuse, it states that "[n]o person shall force a child (a) to be betrothed; (b) to be the subject of a dowry transaction; or (c) to be married" (Section 14).²⁷

The Children's Act also reiterates the point made in Section 3 of Chapter 5 of the 1992 Constitution regarding the caning and other degrading forms of punishment subjected to children, including those who refuse teachers' and schoolmates' sexual advances. While the Act speaks to agencies responsible for ensuring children's well-being, the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act of 1998 (Act 554) delineates various aspects of sexual offences and determines penal measures for offenders. It defines rape as "the carnal knowledge of a female of 16 years or above without her consent" (section 98),²⁸ and states that "[w]hoever commits rape shall

be guilty of a first-degree felony and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of not less than five years and not more than 25 years” (Section 97).²⁸ Defilement is defined as “the natural or unnatural carnal knowledge of any child under 16 years of age” (section 101, subsection 1),²⁸ with punishment for “[w]hoever naturally or unnaturally carnally knows any child under 16 years of age, whether with or without his or her consent, [...] to imprisonment for a term of not less than 7 years and not more than 25 years” (Section 101, subsection 2).²⁸

The Code of Professional Conduct of the Ghana Education Service (GES) has been adopted by both the GES and the Ghana National Association of Teachers, for teaching and non-teaching personnel. Section 27 of the code stipulates that “[n]o teacher shall indulge in immoral relations with a pupil or a student of his own school or in any educational institution in which he performs any official duties”.²⁹ In fact, it also states that “[n]o teacher should indulge in immoral or sexual relations with a pupil or student in any educational institution”.²⁹ The same is true with regards to the non-teaching staff of the GES. The GES deems sexual offences as a major misconduct, and gives authority to the Ghana Education Service Council or any other body to whom that power has been delegated to ensure disciplinary measures are taken against offenders.

This national legal and policy framework is consistent with international conventions ratified by the country. Taken together, these engagements are a testament to the Ghanaian government’s commitment of protecting its children from all types of abuse including sexual violence, in all circumstances and environments. It also obliges the government to put in place the necessary mechanisms to comply with these engagements. However, applying the framework has been problematic in Awaso, and indeed in the rest of the country.

Research Methodology

Given the breakdowns in the implementation of this policy framework, as well as the government’s failure to protect girls from sexual violence in schools, the present research aims to answer the following questions: What are the barriers to implementing policies on the protection of schoolgirls from sexual violence in Awaso, Ghana? How can those barriers be lifted, thus bridging the gap between policy and practice?

Inspired by Haraway’s feminist standpoint theory,³⁰ our field research adopted a methodology focusing on context-specific or partial knowledge, non-hierarchical exchange, mutual trust and commitment towards participants. This exploratory qualitative analysis therefore has no

presumption of being exhaustive, nor does it aim to produce generalizable findings. According to Bell³¹ and Singh,³² exploratory research is not intended to provide the final and conclusive answers, but help us to gain a better understanding of the problem while leaving room for further research.

Within this research context, the knowledge production process evolved around four distinct phases: pre-research, data collection, qualitative analysis, and result dissemination, altogether spread out over a five month period (from January to May 2010).

Pre-research

From January to April 2010, an informal pre-research period was carried out during a 12-week internship in Bibiani, which lies 34 km from Awaso in the Western Region of Ghana.

Data Collection

As illustrated in Table 1, a total of 153 participants were solicited for data collection, including 86 students, 20 parents, and 28 teachers from Awaso and Bibiani, as well as 10 NGO personnel and nine representatives from local and national government ministries.

Table 1. Participant sample

Method	Group	Number of participants		
		Total	Female	Male
Classroom observation (Junior High School 1-3)	Students	75	35	40
	Teachers	4	1	3
Subtotal		79	36	43
Individual semi-structured interviews	National government officials	5	3	2
	Local government officials	4	2	2
	NGO representatives	10	6	4
Subtotal		19	11	8
Focus Group Discussions	Awaso parents	20	9	11
	Basic School teachers ⁱ	10	3	7
	Senior High School teachers	14	4	10
	Senior High School students	11	11	0
Subtotal		55	27	28
TOTAL		153	74	79

ⁱ Basic School in Ghana consists of Primary School (P1 to P6) and Junior High School (JHS 1 to JHS 3).

Classroom Observation

In April 2010, with the authorization of the designated school principals, we conducted four one-hour observation sessions in two Awaso schools. Their aim was to better assess interactions between students – boys and girls – and between students and teachers. While we did not expect to witness sexual violence during these short observation periods, the time devoted to observation did allow us to identify gendered dynamics and behavioural patterns. Four classes were chosen for observation, based on headmasters' recommendations and teachers' willingness to accept observation in their classroom. A total of 75 students and four teachers – one woman and three men – were observed.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

In addition, we conducted a total of 19 individual semi-structured interviews of approximately 40 to 60 minutes each. More specifically, we interviewed nine representatives of local and national government ministries, working at both the national level in Accra and at the district level in Bibiani. They represented the Ghana Education Service and its Girls' Education Unit, the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare. Ten civil society representatives completed the interview schedule. They were mainly employed by NGOs working on education, human rights, child rights, social justice, and women's empowerment.ⁱⁱ

In addition, four focus group discussions (FGDs) took place. The first gathered 20 parents (11 men and nine women) in Awaso. Themes discussed included girls' education, gender relations, gender-based violence in schools and strategies to fight this violence. Initially, two separate discussions were planned; one with members of each sex. However, while each group was given a different arrival time for the discussion, both male and female participants arrived together. Groups were therefore combined with a conscious effort to stimulate women's participation and somehow challenge traditional gender norms. The second FGD was held with 10 Awaso teachers (seven men and three

ⁱⁱ NGO personnel worked with the following organizations: World University Service of Canada (WUSC), Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC), ActionAid, Child Rights International, the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Center, Put A Smile On A Face Foundation, the Human Rights Advocacy Center, Songtaba, and the Ark Foundation.

women, which is fairly representative of the observed gender ratio among teachers in the region), representing each of the village schools. The third focus group was formed by 14 teachers (10 men and four women) from one of the nearest Senior High Schools (SHS), located in a nearby community. While the school is not in Awaso, it was necessary to include opinions from teachers working at SHS level since most sexual violence is reported by girls of secondary school age, at or after puberty;^{6(p.14)} an age group which covers girls both in JHS and SHS. The fourth and final FGD was conducted with 11 female students studying at SHS level, aged 16, 17 and 18 years old.

Together, these interviews and FGDs allowed for data collection on girls' education in the region, gender relations in the community, male sexual and gender-based violence in schools, and various programs aimed at reducing it. Interview questions also touched on obstacles to protecting girls in school as well as gaps in regional and national protection and prevention programs.

Although English is the official and administrative language of Ghana, many residents of rural communities do not speak it fluently. However, this issue was not as important a problem as first envisaged, given that school staff, representatives of NGOs and civil servants spoke English very well. As for the FGD with parents, two trusted participants offered to translate comments spoken in Twi and Sefwi. This was necessary only a few times during the discussion, given that the vast majority of participants spoke English.

Qualitative Analysis

We used qualitative analysis drawing on Rubin & Rubin's step-by-step model, which "entails classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining material from the interviews to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns, or to stitch together descriptions of events into a coherent narrative".^{33(p.201)} More specifically, we transcribed and imported interview and FGD data into the QDA Miner software. Every transcript was systematically examined and coded manually in the software. Concepts and themes most relevant to the research questions were then examined for commonalities and divergences, allowing participants' experiences and understandings to be taken both individually and as a whole. Patterns were identified among genders and groups of participants. We then summarized findings and made links across concepts and themes. We also verified the accuracy and consistency of the findings by reviewing the transcripts.

Result Dissemination

Finally, in the hope of raising participants' consciousness and contributing to girls' empowerment,³⁴ we conducted a discussion period with Awaso community members at the end of the research period to share preliminary results and thus provide them with an opportunity for expressing their views.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board approved the research. Besides the usual informed consent from participants and the guarantee of protecting their identities, we scheduled interviews in a place and time chosen by interviewees in order to accommodate them as much as possible. Extra care was taken to warrant students' comfort, anonymity and emotional safety during and after the FGD with the girls.

Key Findings

Systematically, parents, teachers, NGO staff and local government representatives corroborate the absence of community, school or government led initiatives against SVAGS in Awaso. Just as participants agree that they are not equipped with local prevention and support initiatives, they share the opinion that SVAGS happens in their community. Parents are most aware of sexual relationships between girls and so-called "sugar daddies", ie, community members who pay girls for sex. They also mention that poverty leads some mothers to encourage their daughters to enter such relationships. When speaking about sexual relationships among classmates, parents do not feel that those are to be considered violence. Moreover, they ignore the existence of sexual relationships between students and teachers in their community. Rather than dismiss the possibility, one father points to the lack of reporting to explain that they had not heard of such cases. "You know, it is possible, but I have not heard of it. Often, even the mother will not know. They will never find out. Most times, children will hide it."

Like parents, teachers who work at the basic school level are fast to acknowledge that students have sex with sugar daddies. In fact, they unanimously estimate that 50% to 60% of JHS female students and 20% of primary school female students in the community have sugar daddies. They are understandably more guarded when asked about sexual relationships with teachers. SHS teachers are generally a little more open than basic school teachers when speaking about teacher-student sexual relationships. "It happens, in so many schools. It happens everywhere. [men laughing]" "It can also happen here." "We know about it, but you

know, it's an open secret... Those things, you know, there's nothing you can do about it." Like parents and basic school teachers, they mention that many female students have sex with community members, and do so mostly for money. This supports findings from previous research³⁵ and confirms that girls from poor families are more at risk of accepting transactional sex than girls from richer families, a finding that should be kept in mind by policymakers. SHS teachers also acknowledge sexual relationships between girls and their male classmates, both among couples and in exchange for boys' tutoring help with so-called "difficult subjects" such as math and science. "You see, some girls, their IQ is very low, and they always depend on boys when it comes to calculus and science. And the guy, whatever he says, some girl just accepts it because she realizes that if she doesn't have sex with him, he will refuse to tutor her. So she will pay him with sex."

Of all discussion groups, students are the least hesitant to admit the existence of unlawful relationships between teachers and students. "Yes, it happens that the girls have sex with the teachers. Definitely." "Most of the teachers befriend some of the students. [...] They befriend them and have sex with them. We have been seeing it, all the time." Such statements signal the necessity for closer monitoring of student-teacher relationships, including, for example, stricter surveillance of school grounds and more severe sanctioning of improper student-teacher exchanges.

Analyzing the various difficulties in eradicating SVAGS by gathering thoughts from local participants cognizant of the local context and experts who have in-depth knowledge of the topic allows for a better understanding of the underlying dynamics of violence and a more thorough search for solutions. The present study groups these difficulties into the following four categories based on participants' answers: lack of knowledge; lack of financial resources; deep-set values; and popular perceptions of masculinity, femininity and violence against women and girls.

Lack of Knowledge

Most parents, civil society actors and government personnel agree that lack of knowledge about reporting mechanisms is the main factor halting action against SVAGS. For cases to be prosecuted and for survivors to receive assistance, incidents must be reported to the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service, the most well-known government institution working on the SVAGS issue. However, most parents (and students) do not understand where, why, and

how to report cases. The fact that the nearest DOVVSU office is 34 km away, in the regional capital, makes it all the more difficult to know about their activities and working mechanisms.

Another important hurdle to fighting SVAGS, as reported by expert NGO representatives, is the fact that personnel from many ministries are in dire need of training on dealing with violence against girls. Moreover, although Ghanaian law states that the responsibility to investigate cases and take decisions on prosecution rests with DOVVSU officers, people at all levels, including headmasters, community leaders and GEOs, take it upon themselves to decide the fate of perpetrators. This contributes to low reporting rates, since girls and their families see reported perpetrators being given symbolic, if any, sanctions.

The second most commonly cited area in which knowledge is deemed insufficient is Ghana's legislative framework. FGDs with parents, students and teachers confirmed this, as participants made no mention of this framework. A young lady working for a child rights NGO remembers her own experience: "They just say you have rights but they wouldn't even tell you what the rights are. So really, the girls don't know their rights." Government representatives share this opinion, and underscore the need to educate children, teachers and communities about girls' rights. Indeed, recognizing girls' rights to a safe learning environment is the first step in ensuring that they are safe in schools, but concrete actions must also be taken, and designated funding allotted, to ensure widespread knowledge of these rights.

Not surprisingly, only experts working in child-rights NGOs mention ignorance of the consequences of violence against girls and women as a barrier to fighting SVAGS. Most of them agree that community members are failing to think deeper into the consequences of violence for victims, causing a lack of empathy. In return, this lack of empathy plays a role in both the high rates of perpetration of violence and the low rates of reporting.

Lack of Financial Resources

According to the overwhelming majority of participants, lack of money at both the family level and government level is a key barrier to fighting SVAGS. Families' poverty plays a large role in their decision not to report cases of abuse, as it renders them unable to pay for medical examinations and forms. When families do choose to report a case, they also have to pay their transportation costs to get to the nearest DOVVSU office (in the case of Awaso, they must pay for a taxi to get to the district capital), to the hospital and to court. For this reason, girls from poor families have fewer

chances of having their case taken on by their family. Despite legislation that explicitly states that reporting cases of violence should be completely free of charge, in the words of one civil society worker, “[s]omething that is supposed to be free is not free at the end of the day, [and] it becomes expensive for the victims and their families”. “[They] end up paying a little. And a little to an average Ghanaian is a lot,” adds another NGO representative. Police bribes and fuel money for doctors to testify in court are often demanded. On top of these financial burdens, families have to contend with corruption, and knowing that the time, money and emotional difficulties related to reporting a case may not lead to a fair trial strongly discourages reporting. “If you are not in luck,” explains a government expert, “some big man somewhere is involved”. As they get away with their violent and abusive actions, these perpetrators continue to prey on schoolgirls and perpetrate violence against them.

Family poverty also leads parents to accept money from perpetrators instead of insisting on legal sanctions. As one female representative of civil society explains, “[s]ometimes [the perpetrators give] some sort of money as compensation. And you know, in a society where there's so much poverty, you wouldn't deny that. Once people see money, it's a lot of inducement and enticement, and therefore... You know.” Furthermore, poverty leads some families to accept perpetrators' offers to marry their daughters if they have impregnated them, because it guarantees support for the girl and her baby. Once again, girls from poor families are more at risk of seeing this offer accepted than girls from financially secure families. The fact that perpetrators often have many dependents “who will suffer if they are taken to jail” is another argument provided by parents to explain poverty's impact on the refusal to report cases.

For government and civil society participants, paucity of state funds for transportation greatly hinders staff's ability to carry out activities laid out in their mandates. Overall, there is a consensus that the government has recognized the problem of male sexual and gender-based violence in schools and has put in place a set of laws and programs to address it, but has failed to fund their implementation. Policymakers would do well to ensure designated bodies receive specific and adequate funding to carry out their mandated activities.

Deep-Set Values: Family, Community, and Religion

Ghanaian culture is very much centered on family and community values. It is also strongly guided by religious tradition. While the powerful ties that link families and neighbours have clear positive repercussions, such as

mutual help, collective responsibility, and reciprocal obligations,³⁶ they also lead to some negative ramifications. As a representative of civil society reveals, “[t]his customary way of thinking interferes with [the] justice system”. Usually, survivors’ family members, neighbours and pastors use social pressure to prohibit them from reporting cases to the police. In doing so, they aim to protect family and community members from shame, imprisonment and loss of ability to care for their dependents. The well-being of the wider family and community therefore becomes more important than that of the survivor of abuse, as well as the protection of potential future victims.

Social networks see to the preservation of family honour, as explains a government official working at the local level: “You know how we value family lineage; people don’t want to earn a bad name for anybody in the family. So you see that they would want to solve it in private; they would want to solve it quietly. They don’t want to tarnish the family name.”

Many male and female participants quote the Bible to justify gender hierarchies: “The Bible says ‘Respect and obey your husband.’ We put a lot of meaning to it. It’s important here. If you don’t, you are not going to be the favourite of the men in the community. Everybody is going to look down on you.” Although the overwhelming majority of Ghanaian men and women see religion as a force for good in their lives, it can also exhibit negative consequences. When religion and community pressure are used together to justify women’s oppression and to silence abuse, reporting cases becomes even more difficult for survivors and their families.

On top of justifying gender hierarchies, religion acts as a barrier to fighting SVAGS by making it virtually impossible for parents and school staff to provide comprehensive sex education. As a male teacher working at one of the basic schools says, “[i]n this country, we all worship God, [...] and we always say ‘sexin’ without marryin’ is a sin!’ There’s no need for it.” SHS teachers agree, and we see that their understanding of sex education is limited to abstinence: “Sex education must be emphasized. [Children] must know the negative effects of sex before marriage.” Discussions with female students reveal that they have internalized this message, although they seem conflicted between their experiences and their religious lessons when it comes to condom use: “No, you should not use [condoms]. You should abstain. That is what the Bible says. We have our club here, the Virgins and Abstinence Club. But in reality, some cannot abstain. So what do we do...” These statements point to the need for a comprehensive national sex education strategy, which would be respectful

of the country's religious traditions but would also provide students with various options for protecting themselves.

Gendered Hierarchies and Popular Perceptions of Violence against Women and Girls

Unlike community members, experts from NGOs and government departments working in Accra display an understanding of the link between systemic gender-based discrimination in Ghanaian society and SVAGS. This is not surprising given that those working in the areas of human rights, child rights, education and women's empowerment generally benefit from gender awareness training. In a context where parents, teachers and students know that sexual violence happens but do not grasp patriarchy's role in setting the stage for it, they are left struggling to find explanations for these acts. As emphasized by NGOs and government representatives, current socialization practices creates a situation in which children learn that boys and men are entitled to power, decision making and access to women's bodies, whereas girls and women are to be quiet and submissive. Such gendered socialization was observed first hand during classroom observation, when a school pastor interrupted a teacher during class to talk about the issue of sexual abuse with JHS 1 students:

Pastor: "Can anyone tell me if they have heard of sexual abuse of girls in the community?"

Boy: "I have heard of that last year. A man in the community tried to force the house girl to have sex. But then she screamed and ran away."

Pastor: "Oh too bad, the man missed it. What happened, was he not strong? Was he not man enough? [pastor laughs]"

With this interaction, the pastor, a well-respected authority figure in the school, passes on strong gender stereotypes and socializes boys to be strong and sexually aggressive.

Many participants also address the issue that violence against girls and women is considered an ordinary occurrence. From their point of view, domestic violence is seen as a way to "discipline wives"; to "correct unwanted behaviour". Many women never report this kind of abuse, because they have learned that they must "respect and obey their husbands," as directed in the Bible. As a consequence, explains a female NGO worker, those who do report it do not receive much sympathy, and in fact are often sent back home by male officers "to settle it in the house". Such cultural issues make it difficult to challenge violence against girls and

women, and thorough reflection is needed on this topic if policies to protect girls from sexual violence are to be put into practice.

Bridging the Gap between Policy and Practice: Lifting Barriers to Policy Implementation

The following section is based on participants' comments and reflections. Although many insightful recommendations were brought forward during interviews and discussions, this list is not exhaustive and should not be treated as such. Rather, our aim is to present policymakers ground-up advice that takes into consideration the reflections of people who are aware of realities on the ground and whose needs are not often heard.

Filling the Knowledge Gap: Training, Sensitization, and Empowerment

1. **Plan, fund, and carry out widespread awareness-raising campaigns on girls' rights, on the consequences of sexual violence against girls in schools, and on where and how to report cases.** Sensitizing children, youth and adults of all communities and income levels helps girls to avoid situations of abuse, increases parents' and teachers' empathy towards victims, enhances the likelihood that cases will be reported, and decreases the probability that parents will accept either money or a perpetrator's offer to marry their daughter who has been abused. Awareness campaigns also help broaden people's definition of violence, and lead them to understand that many of the situations they dismiss as exchanges are indeed acts of violence. In doing so, awareness campaigns decrease public inaction on the issue of violence against women and girls.

Girls' clubs constitute one way to raise awareness, and are an increasingly popular solution to fighting gender inequalities in education in Ghana. These clubs are spaces in which girls meet, and where they learn about and discuss their rights. They meet role models and learn to advocate for their rights to be respected. Clubs are seen as an excellent way of spreading knowledge on children's rights, on the detrimental effects of violence, and on reporting mechanisms, among other issues.

2. **Ensure proper training of staff at various victim-service points.** These include schools, Girls' Education Unit offices and DOVVSU offices. It is imperative to ensure that sufficient people are trained to handle cases of sexual violence, and that those people are

identified and accessible to children and adults in the community. Participants suggested that teachers and other community members be trained on child protection, gender responsive schools, counseling and reporting cases of abuse. They also mentioned that DOVVSU officers need thorough training on handling women's and children's issues in order to support the challenges they face and be able to offer better adapted victim support.

Making it Happen: Financing the Change

3. **Adjust ministerial budgets to increase the state's capacity to fulfill its national and international commitments towards child protection.** It is imperative for the structures in place to be allotted sufficient funding to carry out the activities listed in their mandate. Such activities include DOVVSU awareness campaigns and GEU school supervision visits, both crucial in the fight against SVAGS. In addition to healthier state funding of mandated activities, ground-up recommendations include increased collaboration between ministries in order to avoid duplication and to consolidate efforts, and funding assistance requests with international NGOs and the donor community.
4. **Eliminate all costs to reporting.** Ensure strict application of policies in place, and ensure that all costs linked to reporting cases are fully covered by the state. This includes transportation, medical examinations, court fees and other miscellaneous fees.

Playing by the Rules and Harnessing the Cultures' Strength by Being Inclusive

5. **Ensure fair trials of perpetrators.** Fair trials are an essential pillar of states that follow the rule of law. They increase victims' faith in the justice system, without which the chances that they will report cases are very slim. Arresting, trying and condemning perpetrators also reduces the number of abusers in schools and communities, which in turn contributes to keeping girls safe from harm.
6. **Work in collaboration with men and boys.** Involving men and boys in the quest for gender equality has the potential to transform them into allies, and helps ensure positive change to girls' condition. An accent on good parenting and on girl-child protection would take advantage of Ghanaians' strong family and community values.

Recommendations for Future Research in lieu of Conclusion

Solutions suggested by community members and experts alike represent a potential starting point for concrete action. Future research could investigate how these changes may best be made, drawing lessons learned from Ghana's own experiences with social change. African countries that share cultural similarities with Ghana could also be looked to for examples of successful initiatives. Another research question that deserves further development is how to increase the impact of gender sensitive social initiatives in a context of limited government and family resources. These could include initiatives aiming to diminish violence against all women and girls, and go beyond violence in the learning environment to include broader contexts. Finally, more research is also needed on the effects of girl-centered initiatives on male-female relationships, since they present the danger of aggravating boys' anger and resentment towards girls.

As Ghanaians continue their quest to ensure girls learn in safe environments that are free from violence and discrimination, they are helping to shape a society whose belief in respect and equality is palpable not only on paper, but also in citizens' everyday actions. They are raising girls who will know their rights and contribute to their community in meaningful ways. The Ghanaian government must do more to achieve the level of child protection it has committed to when it signed various international and national instruments. As a strong leader among African nations, it must seize the opportunity to make SVAGS history. Not only is this a legal imperative, but it is also a pressing moral and ethical one.

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