



## The Safety of Women and Girls in Educational Settings: A Global Overview and Suggestions for Policy Change

**Elaina Behounek**

Middle Georgia State University, United States

### Abstract

Safety in educational settings is a barrier to equality for women and girls. This article highlights four key areas that perpetuate inequality in education for women and girls, and that contribute to a worldwide lack of safety in educational settings for women and girls: cultural norms, societal norms, sexual assault and sexual harassment. All four areas form part of a social-structural condition that underpins a world in which women and girls experience violence and an economic and social inequality that contributes to their lack of safety in educational settings. Several solutions are proposed to combat this. To improve the life outcomes of women and girls, we must invest in approaches that empower and educate them in safe environments. In doing so, we must also ensure that such approaches are holistic and intersectional.

### Keywords

Safety; education; gender; policy; gender-based violence; inequality.

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## **Introduction**

The United Nations identified 16 sustainable development goals as a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all' (United Nations 2019: 1), of which two are quality education and gender equality. Including these goals highlights a certain lack of equity, and focusing on these important areas is necessary to create a better future for all. Women and girls experience inequality in ways that affect their opportunities, such as experiencing a lack of safety in educational settings (Atta 2015; Sultana 2010; World Economic Forum 2018). Systems of patriarchal power dominate most societies, which leads to social exclusion, oppression and inequality for women and girls (Atta 2015; Bourdieu 2001; Ortner 2014; Sultana 2010; World Economic Forum 2018). When societal and cultural norms relegate women and girls to a lower status than that of men and boys, inequality, and often violence, is often the result (Ruto 2009). Although many measures of inequality exist, I will highlight four key areas of inequality: cultural norms, societal norms, sexual assault and sexual harassment. It is imperative that policymakers, community leaders and individuals work towards promoting social change in these areas, so that women and girls can have equal opportunities and live safe lives. Although this article will not exhaustively examine all issues related to safety for women and girls in educational settings, it will illuminate the four key issues that should be the focus of any policy change.

## **Cultural and Societal Norms: The Devaluation of Women and Girls**

The United Nations' sustainable development goals (see United Nations 2019) reflect the ways in which social statuses overlap and intersect. Using a feminist and intersectional framework is vital for understanding how the oppressions and privileges of these social statuses simultaneously operate (Crenshaw 1991; Collins and Chepp 2013). Women regularly experience multiple oppressions that operate in situational, symbolic, individual and institutional levels (Collins 2004; Harding 1986). Cultural norms create and reinforce gendered hierarchies (Connell 1987). Gendered norms promote a world in which those perceived as female experience oppression, exploitation and violence (Connell 1987). In almost all societies, women and girls are considered less valuable and are treated as if they are second-class citizens (Connell 1987, United Nations 2019). Women have had to continually fight for their rights to education (Education Cannot Wait 2019), and the fight for access and safety in educational settings continues. For example, there are current attempts in the United States to change Title IX laws, which are laws prohibiting sex discrimination in any educational system that receives federal funds; these attempts to change the laws are unfortunately expected to lead to more rights for alleged perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence and fewer rights for victims (who are overwhelmingly women and girls) (Clymer 2018). Title IX laws represent a push for the safety and rights of women and girls in educational settings—women and girls who face cultures of violence, harassment, exclusion and fear in their educational journeys. Overcoming these cultures will not be an easy task. The World Economic Forum (2018) predicts that gender equality will not be reached for another 108 years (more data can be found in the Global Gender Gap Report).

Ferris and Winthrop (2010) offered an example of how gender operates in educational settings and demonstrated the complex ways that inequality in education occurs specifically in Pakistan. In Pakistan, female teachers who were displaced by violence were hesitant to return to work because they feared for their safety in areas in which militant groups targeted schools. This situation generates a vicious cycle: few girls can obtain a good education, which entails that few can become teachers (as gender norms require that female teachers teach female students). In this cycle, 'safety issues constrain female teachers and students alike, exacerbating the problem' (Reeves et al. 2015, as cited in UNESCO 2019: 36). This example illustrates the complex and overlapping ways that women's and girl's experiences are shaped. It is essential to take an intersectional approach when exploring GBV, 'While we might say, then, that the phenomenon of violence against women is global and general, we must add that its manifestations are also shaped by the values and circumstances of particular cultures. Violence against women does not look the

same across cultures' (Fontes & McCloskey 2011: 151). Specific cultural norms, expectations, and laws impact the ways violence against women and girls are perpetrated, experienced, as well as the responses to abuse. When creating policy to address inequality, using an intersectional lens is vital for its success.

### **Gender-Based Violence**

Women and girls experience intimate partner violence, domestic violence or gender-based violence (GBV) at epidemic rates (I will hereafter generally refer to violence against women and girls as GBV). GBV is a global pandemic that affects one in three women in their lifetimes (Girls not Brides 2019). Thirty-five per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence (World Health Organization 2017). Further, as many as 38 per cent of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner (World Health Organization 2017). These data illustrate the pervasive nature of GBV in the world.

Violence against women, and the fear of it, negatively influences school attendance and leads to poorer rates of successful education. In Nicaragua, 63 per cent of the children of abused women had to repeat a school year and dropped out of school an average of four years earlier than other students (UNICEF 2014 :11). In Zambia, girls who experienced sexual violence were found to have greater difficulties concentrating on their studies; some students transferred to another school to escape harassment, and others dropped out of school due to pregnancy (UNICEF 2014: 11). These cases exemplify how violence causes serious disruptions in school (HRW 2018; Lloyd 2018)—in which school personnel are often ill equipped to manage the situation and women and girls are negatively affected by the culture of violence.

GBV is a complex and culturally specific concept. Violence in one part of the world manifests differently in other parts of the world. For example, cultural and societal norms regarding female genital mutilation (FGM), marital rape and child brides exemplify divergent norms that influence the treatment of women and girls. As an example, in the United States, FGM is considered an extreme form of GBV and is widely condemned (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2019). However, it is culturally accepted in other countries. For example, in 13 African countries over 50% of girls and women aged 15-49 have undergone genital mutilation (UNICEF 2013: 2). In Somalia 98% of girls and women aged 15-49 have undergone genital mutilation (UNICEF 2013: 2). Cultural and societal norms across the world continue the practice of FGM: it is estimated that 140 million girls and women alive today have been victims of FGM (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2019). As a similar example, marital rape is legal in 10 jurisdictions in the world, even when the wife is a child bride (Equality Now 2017). The United States even do not have legislation that explicitly frames marital rape as a crime (Equality Now 2017), and several other countries permit rapists to marry their victims and avoid punishment (Equality Now 2017).

Child marriage is another barrier to education and equality for women and girls (Raj et al. 2019). Almost 750 million women and girls alive today have been married by the age of 18 (Girls not Brides 2019). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund documented high numbers of girls who were forced into early marriages in specific countries: Niger (76 per cent), Chad (67 per cent), Mali (52 per cent), Bangladesh (59 per cent), Guinea (51 per cent), Central African Republic (68 per cent), Mozambique (48 per cent) and Nepal (40 per cent) (UNICEF 2018: 2). Girls married before the age of 18 experience higher rates of intimate partner violence than those who are unmarried by that age (Kidman 2017; Speizer and Pearson 2010). Despite these rates, at least 117 countries continue to allow girls to marry young (UNESCO 2019). When these girls are married, they are considered property and their education is not valued—which directly affects their life outcomes, as educational achievement is strongly correlated with earning potential, occupational achievement, health outcomes (Godha et al. 2013) and freedom (UNESCO 2019). Girls with multiple marginalities face increased disadvantages, 'In general, the interaction

of gender with poverty or location tends to work to the disadvantage of girls in poorer countries with low completion rates and social expectations that they marry early' (UNESCO 2019: p. 9). Research reveals that girls with more education in India are less likely to be child brides (Pinto 2019). While no person is exempt from GBV, those with greater resources have more options available to them. Education is thus acknowledged as a vital source of empowerment and autonomy.

Data continues to highlight the epidemic rates of violence against women and girls, the far-reaching negative effects of violence and the inadequate solutions of managing GBV (UNESCO 2019). The examples in this section illustrate how complex understanding violence against women and girls is, as well as the variety of norms that exist. Any solutions will need to address countries' normative cultural expectations and laws, so that they can ensure that the change will last.

### **Sexual Assault, Harassment and School-Related GBV**

Sexual violence is a common experience for women and girls across the globe. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2019: 1), one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college in the United States, more than 90 per cent of sexual assaults are unreported and nine out of 10 victims of rape and sexual assault among college women know their offender. The statistics reveal a pattern of violence that is widespread. In Brazil, research suggests that eight per cent of students from grades five to eight have witnessed sexual violence within the school environment (UNICEF 2014: 1). Both female and male undergraduate students in the United States experience sexual assault (26.4 per cent and 6.9 per cent, respectively), and students who identify as LGBT+ experience a disproportionately higher rate of violent victimisation (AAU 2019: 7). In fact, 65.1 per cent of TGQN (persons who identify as transgender, non-binary and other) report experiencing harassing behaviour (AAU 2019: 7). The Association of American Universities Campus Climate Survey revealed an increase in the numbers of sexual assault, harassment and stalking on college campuses since 2015 (AAU 2019). Sixteen per cent of girls reported being propositioned in a sexual way by their teachers (Ruto 2009) and among the school-aged girls who became pregnant, 76 per cent dropped out of school (Ruto 2009). Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of women in rural Peru, 28 per cent in Tanzania, 30 per cent in rural Bangladesh and 40 per cent in South Africa reported their first sexual experiences as not being consensual (Fontes & McCloskey 2011: 154). Logie, Alaggia and Rwigema (2014) found that LGBT+ survivors of sexual violence experience increased risks of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem and self-rated health and low levels of social and familial support. Survivors and victims of GBV exhibit numerous negative health outcomes, including depression, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, PTSD, self-harming behaviours, substance abuse, dissociation, eating disorders, sleep disorders and suicide (RAINN 2019; WHO 2017).

Girls experience violence not only at home and at school, but also on their way to school. Research in Tanzania shows that 23 per cent of women aged 13–24 reported suffering at least one incident of sexual violence while travelling to or from school (Women Deliver 2016). In Zambia, 19 per cent of women reported that their first incident of sexual violence occurred before the age of 18 on the way to or from school (Women Deliver 2016). Another example is Kenya, where girls aged 13–17 years old who experienced sexual violence reported that the violence occurred on their way to or during school (UNICEF 2010: 2). This trend of violence can also be found in other countries: 'South Sudanese female refugees seeking access to education and other services in Cairo, Egypt, were exposed to sexual harassment and violence on the way to class' (UNESCO 2019: 7). Ruto's (2009) examination of sexual abuse in school-aged children in Kenya found that 60 per cent of girls were sexually harassed, of which 24 per cent reported the abuse as having occurred at school and 15 per cent reported it having occurred on the way home from school. When nearly a quarter of women and girls experience sexual violence on their way to, or from, the environment is not safe. These data illustrate the pervasive ways that sexual violence creates unsafe

environments—particularly for women and girls—and how it creates opportunities for GBV to occur.

### **Sexual harassment and Bullying**

'Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual conduct, and can include unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, and physical behaviors that interfere with an individual's right to receive an equal education' (Hill and Kearl 2011: 6; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2001). Sexual harassment is considered a form of sexual discrimination and is prohibited in schools by Title IX in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2001). The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women asserted that 'extensive discrimination against women continues to exist' and that this 'violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity' (United Nations Human Rights 1979: 1). Further, the convention called for all states to take 'all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men' (United Nations Human Rights 1979: 1). A fundamental element of the freedom mentioned in the convention would include access to equitable education (United Nations Human Rights 1979).

Nearly two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment in the United States (National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2019). Forty-eight per cent of middle school (grades 7–12) students in the United States reported experiencing harassment at school, and 87 per cent reported having experienced negative effects that resulted from the harassment (Hill and Kearl 2011). Female students experience harassment more frequently than boys and feel that it is more 'physically intrusive' (Hill and Kearl 2011). Slightly more female students report being bullied at school compared to male students in the United States (23 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively) (PACER Centre, Inc. 2019).

These high rates of sexual harassment experienced by women can be further localised into certain areas of college in the United States and the United Kingdom. Women in the sciences, medicine and engineering faculties in the United States reported numerous sexual harassment experiences and asserted that these experiences resulted in reduced productivity and in the women facing the ensuing negative effects in their careers (Lindquist and McKay 2018). When women cannot perform their duties, or attend to their education, without fear of violence, they are not able to enjoy freedoms outlined as essential to freedom by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (1979). Broad et al. (2018) reported that 63.3 per cent of medical education students in the United Kingdom witnessed harassment or discrimination. To extend further into this localised setting of college, medical students within marginalised groups experienced disproportionate amounts of harassment or discrimination (Broad et al. 2018). For example, female students had 2.6 times higher odds of experiencing harassment than male students (Broad et al. 2018: 10). Despite these high rates of sexual harassment, most students did not report incidents due to the 'ineffective and potential victimizing of the reporter' (Broad et al. 2018: 414). One approach to tackling these rates of harassment and to managing GBV in school settings in the United States has been through implementing Title IX legislation.

### **Title IX**

Title IX legislation prohibits sexual discrimination in any educational institution that receives federal funds (US Department of Education 2017). This legislation offers a broad coverage for educational institutions to manage sexual harassment and violence. The guidelines state that 'the school must take steps to understand what occurred and to respond appropriately' (US Department of Education 2017: 1), and any schools that fail to comply risk losing their funding. The legislation distinctly outlines the damage that is caused by sexual violence and harassment

in schools, as well as the need for clear processes to address these issues. ‘Dear colleague’ letters are guidance documents issued by a federal agency to help explain and interpret existing laws and regulations. Several of these dear colleague letters have led to important changes in the implementation of Title IX across educational institutions (US Department of Education 2017). Despite this guidance, several challenges and an uneven handling of sexual harassment and violence in educational institutions can still be observed. In 2017, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos suggested changes to Title IX laws that would undermine the safety of victims and increase the rights of alleged abusers (Clymer 2018). This discussion of the United States law illustrates the complexity of GBV in educational settings, the legislative efforts that have been dedicated to combatting GBV and the efforts dedicated to implementing changes that may consequently negatively affect victims and survivors of GBV.

## **Proposed Solutions for Social change**

### ***Policy: In Schools***

Comprehensive policy change must be enacted to ensure that community and institutional changes are implemented, starting within the community. Schools are an important source of community and continuity, as well as a place in which social change can occur. As schools are gendered institutions (Dunne et al. 2006)—and as education and skills grant agency to women and girls—a gendered lens should be used when analysing education (North 2019, as cited in UNESCO 2019).

I present several evidence-based suggestions for changes as proposed by the World Bank (2019): providing gender sensitivity training for teachers; creating a school environment that rejects and prevents violence, including GBV; offering specialised courses on human rights, including women’s rights; and fostering non-violent social relationships and mutual tolerance among students. To create policy that reflects the needs of women and girls, we should endeavour to reform education sector laws and policies, improve institutional responses to GBV at the school level and promote community mobilisation in support of girls’ safety and rights (The World Bank 2015). The education sector can also be actioned to reduce the sexual harassment of women—it should collaborate with other sectors to ensure that the wellbeing of girls and young women is safeguarded and it should provide vital support to community-level social norm and behaviour change interventions to reduce the acceptability of GBV.

Community-based education is an important step for creating lasting social change. Establishing community-based schools has proved to be a promising approach for increasing girls’ access to education. These schools must have proper water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and they should focus on recruiting and training female teachers (UNESCO 2019: 46). There is a need for more female teachers, particularly in communities in which cultural norms dictate same-sex only interactions before marriage (i.e., girls must be taught only by women). Additionally, given the rates of abuse experienced by girls, female teachers are needed so that a survivor-centred and trauma-informed approach can be used. It is likely the teachers themselves have experienced GBV, and will be capable of understanding survivor needs better than those who may not have experienced GBV. This need for more female teachers is intricately linked to the need to shift the normative valuations of women and girls—from those of women being a burden and property to those of women deserving value, worth and respect.

The Campus Climate Survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2019) illustrated that data collection is possible and vital for understanding the climate on campuses. The survey gauged climate by examining the ‘perceptions and beliefs related to sexual assault and harassment’ (BJS 2019: 1). These types of studies and surveys should be expanded to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of the violence that students experience.

In the United States, it is important to urge legislators to maintain the highest standards for processes related to addressing Title IX complaints in schools. Title IX works to create equity in education through funding decisions. It is used to address issues related to GBV, sexual assault and harassment, and any changes to the legislation should consider and utilise the advice of the two dear colleague letters that outline best practices for managing GBV in education settings in the United States. One aspect of best practices is Loy's (2019) argument that students should be provided legal counsel in Title IX cases. Another is Cyphert's (2018) suggestion to include restorative justice approaches in Title IX hearings and an evidentiary rule to exclude statements from hearings, as well as ensuring the centrality of informed consent procedures for survivors.

### ***Data Collection and Dissemination***

Increased data collection, research and dissemination is required regarding the many ways that GBV affects women and girls, as this information relates to opportunities and experiences in education and is vital to our ability to create lasting solutions. Without indicators and measures of inequality, we cannot create change. As such, establishing better indicators for gender inequality in education is greatly needed, as well as a broader monitoring framework for assessing the effect of the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2019).

### ***Community-Level Changes/Norms***

Changing the norms and beliefs regarding gender while acknowledging local communities—and working within them—is vital for any proposed changes to have a lasting influence. These changes will likely be the most challenging to confront, and initiatives like Educate Girls can provide a template for such community-based work (Educate Girls 2019). I suggest the creation of a task force to research best practices for local communities and to understand how initiatives are being implemented, as well as how they succeed and fail.

To establish equity, the abolition of child marriage in all countries is necessary. According to The World Bank (2019), keeping girls in school is the most efficient method for reducing child marriage. Data continually demonstrate the devastating effects of child marriage in the lives of girls and women. When the world attributes a girl's value only by the ways in which she can perform gendered obligations, it overlooks the incredible contributions that she can make.

### ***Criminal Justice Reform***

There is a demand and a need for harsher sentencing for perpetrators of GBV. Included in any reform should be better procedures in the criminal justice system for investigating and adjudicating GBV. This reform would involve shifting gender norms and legislation to both hold abusers accountable and to safeguard women and girls from violence. Klugman et al.'s (2014) micro-analysis suggested that women living in countries with domestic violence laws are seven per cent less likely to experience violence when compared to women living in countries without such laws. The same study found that the prevalence of domestic violence reduced by about two per cent each year in a country that had domestic violence legislation in place.

### ***Highlighting Programs That Work***

When we globally attribute value to women and girls, we witness positive social change. There are successful programs that have worked to dismantle hegemonic norms and that have created social change within the communities in which they operate. While many programs have prompted important social changes, Educate Girls is worth highlighting due to its community-based approach that works *within* communities and with established norms to make lasting social change. Established in 2007, Educate Girls is a non-profit organisation that focuses on mobilising communities for girls' education in India's rural and educationally 'backward' areas (Educate Girls 2019). It has created a comprehensive model for government reforms through community ownership. Through community intervention, there has been an increase in girls' literacy rates in India. The approach tackles the vital importance of shifting the norms and attitudes of women

and girls—it involves a shift in the perception of girls as being burdens to one in which they are vital resources for the community. By using existing resources, people in the community change their conversations about family ideas. Upon its inception in 2018, Educate Girls achieved 160 per cent of the final learning target, reaching over 7,000 children (Educate Girls 2019). Programs such as this are successful because they utilise existing resources—community members who know the embedded cultural norms and values; they start there for a community-based change.

Another noteworthy program is Education Cannot Wait (ECW) (2019). ECW focuses on the belief that education is a human right. It serves the most at-risk groups for educational loss and those in conflict or crisis: ‘Children that are taken out of school are more exposed to violence, trafficking, child labour, child marriage and recruitment by armed groups’ (Education Cannot Wait 2019: 1). The ECW program mirrors the Educate Girls initiative in its method of using existing community resources to enact social change.

The Fighting School-Related GBV project is another program that has prompted social change towards a safer environment for women and girls in educational settings. The program focuses on prevention efforts rather than on providing services after the violence has occurred. Using evidence-based standards, with regular monitoring at the district, and national levels, data collection and accountability regarding SRGBV can be improved (United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative 2019). The program provides a framework through which research-based work is implemented, assessed and integrated into schools to create change at the community level.

In examining these three programs, it becomes clear that they work within communities and use existing resources. These programs acknowledge the existing cultural and societal norms and work with those systems to create change that is meaningful to the communities with whom the work is performed. Rather than approaching the changes as outsiders, these programs focus on building rapport and using community members to guide change. Although this is not possible in all communities, it is one vital strength of the programs.

## **Conclusion**

Decreasing violence against women and girls requires a community-based, multi-pronged approach, as well as sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders. The most effective initiatives address the underlying risk factors for violence, including the social norms of gender roles and the acceptability of violence (The World Bank 2019). To ensure that equality and safety become a focus for all countries, we should establish sanctions or incentives for those countries who do not have commitments for equality in education. Currently, only 44 per cent of countries are committed to equality in education, as illustrated through the ratification of three treaties related to gender inequality in education (United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative 2019). International treaties do not pay specific attention to school-related GBV (Parkes 2016); however, policy should focus on the ‘practical inadequacies of (policy) enactment in the resourcing, training, and building-in mechanisms for accountability related to SRGBV [school-related GBV]’ (Parkes 2016: 102). All implemented or proposed programmatic changes should have accessible outcome measures.

All programs should ensure best practices by relying on evidence-based research and assessment (UNESCO 2019), and approaches should be intersectional, with a focus on the specific needs of the populations being targeted with gender-responsive programming (UNESCO 2019). One important component of all the legislation and policy that is directed at change is the clear operationalisation and definitions of terms. For example, Hurren (2018) provided a partial glossary of terms for use in sexual harassment cases experienced by faculty members.

Parkes’s (2016: 93) study illustrated the problems of implementing policy when definitions of what constitutes violence are not uniform, and it pushed for changes in the ‘middle level’ (i.e., school, community, district and national levels). The clear conceptualisation and use of culturally



specific policies is vital for success (Parkes 2016). Through strong commitment at the institutional level, institutions can shift norms and values to allow women and girls equal access to resources and reduce discrimination (UNESCO 2019: 23). Policy changes have demonstrated a focus on GBV and have provided strong foundations for future work (Parkes 2016).

Sexual assault and harassment are experienced by women and girls across the world. GBV entails negative consequences for women and girls, communities and our world. It is through concerted and global efforts—those using evidence-based and community-informed practices—that social change will become possible.

*Correspondence:* Dr Elaina Behounek, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Department of Psychology and Criminal Justice, Middle Georgia State University, 100 University Parkway, Macon, Georgia 31206. Email: [elaina.behounek@mga.edu](mailto:elaina.behounek@mga.edu)

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