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

Christabelle Sethna

Christabelle.Sethna@uottawa.ca

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Gender-based violence has captured global attention; it refers primarily to the violence that men commit against women in the context of societal inequality. This violence may include forced contraceptive use, sterilization and abortion, sex-selection abortion, infanticide, incest, dating violence, rape, sexual harassment, forced sex work, sex trafficking, intimate partner violence, dowry murders, honour killings, FGM and acid attacks. These acts can occur in wartime and in peacetime, and their prevalence exists in direct relation to poverty. Gender-based violence is said to be one of the greatest impediments to gender equality.¹

From the 1980s onward, feminist awareness of gender-based violence in schools²⁻⁴ grew at the same time that calls for equality of access to education for women and girls, especially in developing countries, increased. Closing the education gender gap was touted as an enormous benefit to poor nations, yielding gains in literacy, sexual and reproductive health and economic development, and leading to the attainment of female equality.^{5,6} The education of women and girls figures prominently in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, notably universal primary education and gender equality and empowerment of women.⁷ Although education enrollments for women and girls have risen, educational institutions are not necessarily safe sites for women and girls; in fact, sexual violence in schools is said to be a major barrier to female education.⁸

Ongoing attention to gender-based violence is laudable, and the more recent spotlight on violence against women and girls in schools is significant. However, researchers must go further. They must examine *why*, *when* and *how* men and boys perpetrate violence against women and girls in transnational contexts, particularly during a post-9/11 era of globalization that is marked by an appeal to a masculinized and militarized "war on terror." It is all too tempting to resort to biological, psychological, religious, economic or cultural explanations for male violence. A focus on these explanations could result in reductionist, sexist or racist points of view. A far more profound analysis is required of i) the complex tangible rewards men and boys can accrue as a result of gender inequality and ii) the perpetration of gender-based violence as a means of maintaining or restoring those rewards, even when these means have emerged out of negative inputs or result in negative outcomes for men and boys in developing *and* developed nations. Placing patriarchy, male privilege and male heterosexual entitlement front and centre in research on gender-based violence can help us to analyze the intersection of various expressions of masculinities in concert with local specificities, global

realities and variables like gender, race, class, sexuality, age and nationality.^{9,10}

This approach would question why Western media appear more than willing to attribute, say, acid attacks on schoolgirls in Afghanistan or the shooting of the young Pakistani education activist, Malala Yousafzai, to gender-based violence that is embedded deeply in ostensibly primitive religious or cultural traditions.¹¹ By contrast, Western media routinely attribute school shootings in Western countries to a host of reasons such as the availability of guns, psychological disturbance, and violence in video games, television and music, even when, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the shooters are young, white and male and the victims of their rampages are young, white and female. Indeed, in her study on school shootings in the United States, Klein suggests that gender-based violence in schools is so common that it renders invisible the gendered dynamics of school shootings, even though they are directly connected to boys' participation in sexual harassment and dating violence. School shootings are a way for some boys to reaffirm "normalized masculinity" by targeting girls who rejected them as romantic suitors and by addressing taunts about their effeminacy.¹² Similarly Kantola, Norocel and Repo assess school shootings in Finland, determining that the press coverage portrayed the shooters involved as troubled young men because they used violence irrationally in comparison to state-sanctioned police and military violence, which was said to be rational. In refusing to address the gendered nature of the school shootings, cherished notions of Finnish "gender neutrality" could be upheld.¹³

The overwhelming amount of data on gender-based violence all over the world indicates that it will continue to be an impediment to gender equality. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers examine the role men and boys play in sexual violence in schools via a transnational context that includes countries rich *and* poor.

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