

# **A Pilot Partnership to Respond to Violence Against Girls**

Presented by

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## **Introduction**

The sexual and physical violence that has infiltrated the South African school community is a reflection of South African society at large. South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. Rape and sexual abuse of children are increasing rapidly and are matters of grave concern at all levels of society and one that government is tacitly aware of. According to a South African Police Services (SAPS) statistical analysis of reported cases the victim age group of reported rape cases reflecting the highest rape ratio is the age category of twelve to seventeen year old girls. SAPS also report that 51 249 cases of rape were reported to police nationally in 1999. In addition, increasing reports of violence against girls within the school setting have emerged. In many senses reports of this phenomenon peaked with the launch of the research-based report published by Human Rights Watch during 2001.

Given the above, as only a ‘tip of the iceberg’ notion of the current situation in South Africa, it had become increasingly clear that a concerted effort was required to identify interventions to protect girls and young women. In addition, the school setting appeared to be a logical point from which to launch any such attempts both as it has become clear that it was the site of many injustices against girls (Human Rights Watch, 2001), and that it provided a structured environment within which interventions could, ideally and potentially be integrated into curriculum content. As a response, the

South Africa Council for Educators (SACE) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) identified this area as a joint priority.

### **The Background**

During 2001 UNICEF and SACE then set in place a consultative process that commissioned and drew on research and interventions conducted across the country. Initial meetings were held to workshop potential solutions to the issues at hand. Through this process the proposal to develop and test pilot project in three provinces emerged and became a reality through a public tender process.

### **Developing a Partnership**

Crisp, a Durban based organisation was selected as the UNICEF/SACE partner in KwaZulu Natal and was mandated to coordinate a provincial Partnership to Respond to Violence Against Girls. This initiative is part of a larger 12-month effort in three provinces (KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo and Eastern Cape) to provide coordination and facilitate access to information, resources and expertise for school communities to address violence and harassment of girls in school.

The partnership aims at targeting girls, boys, School Governing Bodies, parents, NGOs and CBOs, religious organisations, and government structures in a concerted attempt to highlight the problems of violence and harassment of girls and identify promising approaches to making the school environment friendlier and safer to both girls and boys.

The Partnership to Respond to Violence Against Girls hopes to facilitate new responses by strengthening relationships between stakeholders and identifying and making available to the partners information on available

resources, provincial and national expertise, successful strategies and models, and relevant research.

The Partnership is intended to complement and support other government and civil society efforts to reduce violence and harassment of girls in schools and in their communities. The Partnership will develop and disseminate a database of existing resources, expertise, service providers, research etc. A Provincial Working Group charged with elaborating and implementing an appropriate advocacy campaign as well as a provincial wide forum event in 2003 is also a Partnership task. In addition the Partnership will support and document at least three model learner based initiative in the province.

### **An overview of the research**

Two key research exercises informed UNICEF/SACE's decision to launch a project of this nature. The initial study was undertaken by an international organisation – Human Rights Watch (HRW) and was published in 2000. The second was a commissioned study by UNICEF, undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa.

#### ***Human Rights Watch***

In March and April 2000 Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigated cases of alleged rape, sexual abuse and harassment involving schoolgirls in South Africa and reviewed responses from school and Government to gender-based violence in schools.

HRW worked with numerous NGOs who had received hundreds of reports of gender based sexual violence in schools. Detailed interviews were held with thirty six girls about their experiences and with sexual violence and sexual harassment. Twenty-three of the girls were raped at school. Although just

eight public schools were visited in three provinces, the data gathered about incidents within the school domain was unacceptable by all standards.

Earlier research conducted by the HRW in 1995 on the “State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape” and again in 1997 on “Violence against women and the Medico-Legal system” resulted in a range of recommendations emerging from their findings. These recommendations remain relevant despite the time lapse between their presentation and the current situation. HRW acknowledged that the Government had made significant efforts to address issues surrounding violence against women and children especially within the Criminal Justice System but the challenges faced are no doubt enormous. However the patterns of abuse indicate that government action is needed in particular at the level of schools – this has been an enduring and key recommendation as was the realization that ending sexual violence and harassment in South African schools will require bold and obvious leadership and commitment at every level within the education system. To this effect the most current report stressed that the National Department of Education provide leadership and mobilise commitment for combating sexual violence in schools at every level in the Education system.

Perhaps the most pertinent set of recommendations made by HRW in their most recent work were those addressed directly to the government of South Africa. These included:

#### School Based Plans:

To ensure a more effective response to sexual violence against girls in schools the National Department of Education should:

- Adopt a National Plan of Action on Sexual Violence and Harassment in Schools, it should include at a minimum, where not in place:

- Guidelines to schools detailing the appropriate response to allegations by pupils of rape, sexual assault, or harassment whether by Teachers or fellow pupils;
  - A provision of funding for counseling and medical services for victims of sexual violence;
  - A code of conduct for both pupils and teachers that expressly prohibits sexual violence, harassment and other sexual misconduct in schools.
  - The code of conduct should be distributed and its content widely publicised among those in education system.
  - A provision for compulsory education and training for pupils teachers and principals on the issues related to sexual violence and gender discrimination, including methods for early identification of, and intervention to prevent, abusive behaviour.
- The formal appointment in every provincial education department of a director responsible for implementing policy on gender based violence in schools;
  - Mechanisms to hold schools accountable for failure to adequately respond to allegations of sexual violence or for failure to cooperate with investigations conducted by the criminal justice system.

#### Protection From Perpetrators Of Abuse:

- Failure to report child abuse to the relevant authorities is a criminal offense, the laws pertaining to this should be widely publicized and enforced and all school employees should be educated about their obligations to report child abuse to relevant authorities.

- Teachers facing allegations of rape or sexual misconduct should be suspended with pay, the allegations reported to the police, and the suspension continued pending the police investigation and trial.
- Individuals who have been convicted of sexual assault or rape should not be permitted to teach anywhere in the SA school system. With regards to the employment of any teacher schools should review teacher records for incidents of sexual abuse, including inquiring with previous employers and police. School principals should be required to report confirmed incidents of sexual misconduct by teachers to Provincial departments of education. Information should be kept in a confidential database and should be checked prior to a school hiring a teacher.

#### Abuse Prevention:

- School governing bodies should be required to address the problem of sexual violence and its prevention as a regular item on the agenda.
- Schools should foster collaboration with relevant NGOs working on rape, sexual assault, child abuse or domestic violence issues for the purposes of providing training, counseling and advocacy training;

#### Victim Support And Protection:

- Provincial departments of education and health should ensure that the health care and psychological needs of survivors of sexual assault are met. All pupils and teachers to have culturally appropriate and clear information on HIV/AIDS as well as information relating to post exposure prophylaxis.

- Provincial departments of education should take steps to prevent the practice of virginity testing in schools and should develop educational materials to address the issues surrounding this practice.

#### Children And The Justice System:

- Children requiring to give evidence in court should receive pre-trial legal counseling and be adequately prepared for trial and have access to intermediaries who can translate court proceedings into “child friendly language” and to facilities to enable them to give testimony outside the presence of the accused.
- Pupils should be informed of their rights within the justice system.

#### Investigation And Documentation Of Data:

- Steps should be taken by schools, education departments, police, or other appropriate bodies such as Stats SA, to improve the collection of data concerning crimes of violence against pupils in order to inform the development of effective responses.

HRW (2001) concluded that acts of sexual violence and violence against girls at school remained largely unchallenged by school officials and impacted greatly on educational quality and equality in South Africa. In school environments where sexual violence and harassment is tolerated, it compromises the right of girl children and is in acute variance with South Africa’s Constitution and its international legal obligations.

#### ***Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Research***

The HSRC was commissioned to conduct research into school responses to violence against girls. Their study aimed to understand the nature of violence

against girls, examine school responses and identify key areas for interventions in response to this problem (HSRC, 2001). Their study took place in on primary and one high school in:

- A Gauteng township
- A Cape Flats township
- A rural settlement in KwaZulu-Natal
- Two former 'white' urban schools in Gauteng.

The study identified a number of key findings which, *inter alia*, will be presented below (HSRC, 2001).

Violence against girls in schools:

Violence against girls takes place across school grades, with sexual harassment tending to be directed initially at grade five levels and increasing as the girls pass through higher grades. The study also found that boys tended to respond to conflict directed at girls using physical violence rather than constructive conflict resolution methods.

With regards rape, the study confirmed that this was generally under reported and that younger girls were more at risk of rape within their homes and communities, while high school girls were at risk both within the school setting and outside of school. It was also noted that boys were at risk of sexual harassment, particularly when young and that boys 'on the margin' were often 'feminized as a form of degradation by being sexually harassed.' (HSRC, 2001, OHS).

School Responses:

The key areas that impacted on a school's capacity to respond effectively to violence against girls were identified as follows (HSRC, 2001, OHS):

- Levels of acknowledgement:  
The school community varies in its levels of awareness and acknowledgement of the problem. In addition, male educators tended to minimize or deny the existence of the problem. These factors impact on the willingness and ability of the school to take unified action and the levels of reporting of violence.
- Attitudes  
The study found that there existed some confusion about what was considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour towards girls. This influenced and impacted upon the fact that girls were often blamed for provoking attacks and that violence was something the girl could have prevented by 'know(ing) better'.
- Policies, procedures and structures:  
The study found that clear guidelines were required to spell out what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour towards girls. Also, related to these guidelines there existed a need for comprehensive policies on response processes, clear communication channels, and that procedures and structures needed to be set in place to make such processes effective.

Their recommendations for solutions can be summarised as four key points (HSRC, 2001):

- Reorientation away from the problem by moving the focus to solutions.
- Improving school and community responses through the development of guidelines, policies and communication channels, and by encouraging inter-school action on the issue (including issues such as after school care).

- Maximising human resource potential by educating parents on pertinent and related issues, accepting learners as equal partners in solutions and training of educators on socially acceptable behaviour and monitoring.
- Promoting awareness and knowledge by maintaining public discourse, information dissemination, creative forums and publication of successful initiatives.
- Facilitating individual change by exploring issues such as internal/personal motivation, demystification, and confidence development.

### **And now to action!**

#### School Partners:

The findings and suggestions that emerged from the research are now in the process of being placed into action in three provinces (as noted earlier). In KwaZulu-Natal, three schools have been identified and have agreed to become partners in this process. It is important to note that their identification does not relate to levels of abuse at the particular schools, but rather out of the school's willingness to participate important work of this nature and their potential demographic representation of the province.

#### Partner schools are located as follows:

- Kokstad, in the KZN/eastern Cape boarder area. This is a rural but rapidly developing node where the high school serves learners who come in from deep rural areas, townships and the residential areas in and around the town. The school has a boarding establishment and also serves day scholars and educating takes place in both English and Afrikaans.
- Jozini District, in 'deep' rural KwaZulu-Natal. Here the school serves children living in rural homesteads and who are in many cases

potentially living in poverty in an under serviced region of the province.

- Chatsworth, where the children attending the primary school are from the established residential areas of Chatsworth and from the informal settlements that have developed in and around the township.

At each of the schools a project facilitator has been appointed to facilitate interventions within that context. The primary aim within each of the schools is the development of learner based initiatives and the piloting and evaluation of these. These activities recognise the learners as partners and will emerge from each of the contexts as potentially unique solutions.

#### Community Partners:

The project has set up what is known as a Provincial Working Group, a relatively small group of persons involved directly in the schools and representatives from key components of the broader school community. Membership includes representation from SACE, from the NGO sector, from the Education sector, from the Parent Body sector and from the local government Crime Prevention sector. The primary aim of this group is to guide exercises in lobbying and advocacy around the prevention of violence against girls in the school setting.

An additional group of community representatives has also been formed in an advisory capacity – this Project Advisory Team is made up of representatives of provincial departments, business, NGOs and experts in this field, SAPS and other related institutions. The aim of this group is to provide input and commentary on processes and procedures that are engaged in and that emerge from the project as its work progresses.

The project process essentially began in earnest in August 2002 and will end in May 2003 with a provincial Forum event that aims to bring together all role players and other critical partners to present the findings, share a resource database, present the learner based initiatives and work towards a more permanent process that will sustain the work of the initiative.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has reported on a ‘work in progress’ in its earliest stages, and provided a historical synopsis of its development. The authors hope that this paper stimulates thought and action about school based interventions and that it serves as a crude but emerging model to demonstrate the relationship between public concern over an issue, international and national partnerships in response to the concern, the development of research around the issue and the use of research as a foundation for action and community collaboration. This is an exciting journey along a path that is often painful and demanding. A journey where there will be detours and often mistakes in ‘reading the map’. It is an important journey in which our destination is the arrival at a ‘place’ where young girls, and indeed young boys go to school assured that it is a safe and nurturing place – a basic human right!

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