

Safeguarding Adolescent Girls in Senior High Schools in Ghana to Enhance Human Resources for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: In Ghana, cases of young girls being abused in schools have increased. This study has sought to establish the drivers for this development, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect and analyse data from five senior high schools (SHSs) located in five different administrative districts in Ghana, selected using the simple random sampling technique. The conclusion from the study is that 53 per cent of the adolescent girls in SHSs reported not being safe. The study has established that inadequate school infrastructure, parental neglect of responsibilities to provide basic needs to young girls, and weak enforcement of child safeguarding policies and protocols were responsible for girls' feeling unsafe. It has been discovered that the Young Female Platform (YFP) established in some SHSs to provide reproductive health education and leadership skills is an empowering approach for girls to exercise the right to dignity. The need to expand the YFP concept to all SHSs in Ghana, the inclusion of dignity kits on the list of items provided under the Ghana Free Senior High School Programme (GFSHSP), and decentralising the sanctioning power of the Ghana Education Service (GES) were among the recommendations tabled to eliminate the abuse of girls in Ghana's SHSs.

Keywords: Adolescent Girls, Abuse, Senior High Schools, Safeguarding, Ghana

Résumé : Au Ghana, les situations de jeunes filles victimes d'abus dans les écoles ne cessent d'augmenter. Cette étude a cherché à déterminer les facteurs de cette évolution, en utilisant des approches quantitatives et qualitatives pour collecter et analyser les données de cinq écoles secondaires supérieures (SHS)

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situées dans cinq districts administratifs différents du Ghana, qui ont été sélectionnés à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage aléatoire simple. La conclusion de l'étude est que 53 % des filles adolescentes dans les écoles secondaires supérieures ont indiqué qu'elles ne se sentaient pas en sécurité. L'étude a établi que l'inadéquation des infrastructures scolaires, la négligence des parents à l'égard de leurs responsabilités en matière de satisfaction des besoins fondamentaux des jeunes filles et la faible application des mesures et protocoles de protection pour les enfants étaient à l'origine du sentiment d'insécurité des jeunes filles. Il a été découvert que Young Female Platform (YFP) mise en place dans certains SHS pour fournir une éducation à leur santé en matière de sexualité et des compétences en termes de leadership est une approche qui permet aux filles d'exercer leur droit à la dignité. La nécessité de répandre le concept YFP dans toutes les écoles secondaires du Ghana, l'inclusion de kits de dignité dans la liste des articles fournis dans le cadre du programme de gratuité des lycées du Ghana (GFSHSP) et la décentralisation du pouvoir de sanction du Ghana Education Service (GES) figurent parmi les recommandations visant à éliminer la violation du droit à la dignité des filles dans lesdites écoles.

Mots-clés : Adolescentes, abus, lycées, protection, Ghana

Introduction

In Ghana, the definition of a child, by law, is a boy or girl who is less than 18 years of age. This is in sync with the United Nations (1989) definition of a child; and it also falls within the basic and secondary education levels of education in Ghana. Adolescence is viewed as that period of the child's life which is associated with various physical, social, and emotional changes. It is usually the period between being a child and an adult. Rapid changes in adolescents make them vulnerable in several aspects, hence the need to strengthen child safeguarding policies and protocols to protect them from abuse or from being abusers. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2020), there are contentions as to what should be the adolescent age. However, the ages of 10 and 19 years are widely cited as the recognised adolescent age group. According to Baldwin (2011), parents, educators, and states need to invest heavily in adolescents' safeguarding projects because adolescence is the period of character formation, logical reasoning, and skills development.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2016), girls, as compared to boys, are more vulnerable to various forms of abuses in communities, schools, and at work. The propensity for them to be forced into early marriages, domestic servitude, and child trafficking is relatively higher than their boy counterparts. These conditions limit their opportunities for realising their full potential in sports, industry, and politics.

The advocacy for equity in the Ghanaian education system and community life is an unblemished one. Safety policies in schools and communities aim to see

girls through the full length of their education with economic, social, and health benefits to themselves, their families, and the nation. They are supposed to address current imbalances in Ghana's legislature which currently has 36 women out of the 275 members of parliament. This is particularly important because according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2021), females constitute 51 per cent of the population. Ghana is a signatory to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and is enjoined to provide equal opportunities for girls, boys, women, and men in all spheres of life. There is ample literature to show that schools, organisations, and communities that are safe, inclusive and non-abusive stimulate higher productivity and the achievement of personal and organisational goals (USAID 2018; Duszka 2015). According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2018), students who felt unsafe in school scored lower grades in mathematics as compared with their safe counterparts. Similarly, Duszka (2015) opines that safety is an area to invest in to ensure higher performance in schools. It is on the back of this logic that all schools in Ghana have to be safe for both girls and boys.

However, most adolescent girls face a number of challenges in their educational milieu as they transition to adulthood. There are major barriers to adolescent girls' education in Ghana and they have received less academic and programmatic attention. These are the various forms of abuses against them in schools and communities, which may be physical, psychological, and sexual. In view of Proulx and Martinez (2013), omitting and failure to address these issues poses a serious and legitimate question which is: How do responsible parents, educators, and governments continue to campaign for girls to be enrolled and retained in schools and yet remain adamant to their blatant abuse in schools? Teachers, particularly in their *loco parentis* capacity, are responsible for the safety of adolescent girls in schools and are strictly required to obey the *do no harm principle* (Ghana Education Service 2008). Yet, in 2018, 10 teachers were expelled by the Ghana Education Council for sexually abusing adolescent girls in SHSs (Ghanaweb, 23 November 2018). According to Anab (2020), there were 1,341 and 1,686 defilement cases that were reported in Ghana for 2016 and 2017, respectively, representing a 26 per cent increase. According to the same author, the situation for reported rape cases also increased from 497 to 514 for the same period. In recent years, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020) reported that more than 40 per cent of girls between the age bracket of 15-19 years experienced gender-based violence. One girl out of five was married off before attaining 18 years. These developments call for a re-examination of the legal and institutional framework for protecting children, especially within the school environment in Ghana. This is even more urgent given the fast-changing technological advancement, including mobile telephone, Internet connectivity, and other opportunities for perpetuating other forms of modern abuse in schools and communities. This is the motivation for engaging in this piece of research.

The Concept of Child Safeguarding

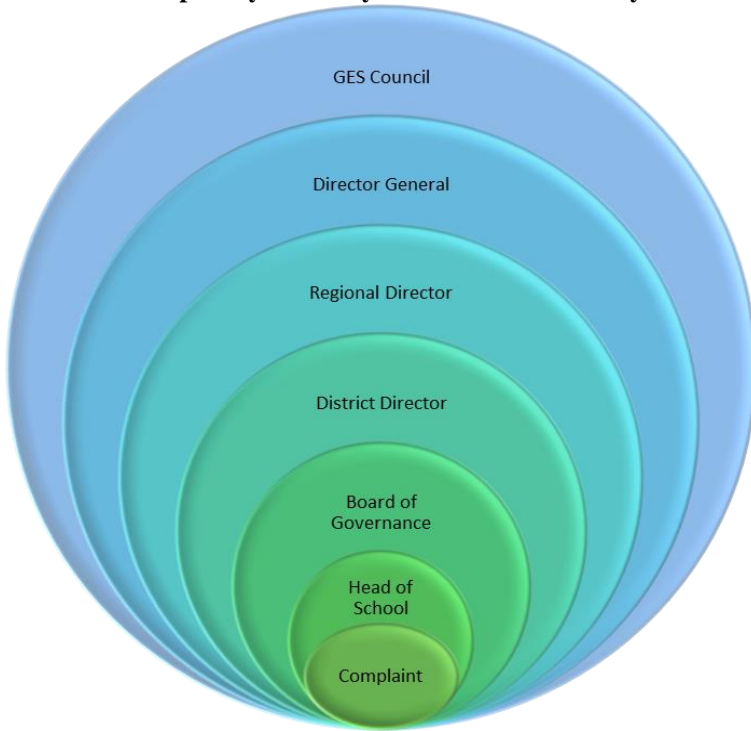
International development organisations such as Oxfam have mainstreamed safeguarding children and adults-at-risk in all their development projects and programmes. According to Oxfam (2018), safeguarding children involves all the laws, policies, and standard operating procedures put in place to prevent children and adults-at-risk from being abused. It involves setting up the required mechanisms to make schools, places of entertainment, and communities safe for children to realise their full potential. This shows that safeguarding children, especially adolescent girls, should entail three dimensions: setting up measures to prevent harm to children, protecting them from harm, and putting in place measures to support the survivors. In Ghana, bullying, sexual harassment, and sex for grades are outlawed. Some of the existing legal and institutional frameworks for adolescent girls in SHSs in Ghana are examined below.

Existing Regulatory Frameworks for Safeguarding Children in Ghana

Code of Conduct for Teachers in the Ghana Education Service (GES)

The code of conduct for teachers in the GES provides guidelines for the minimum standard of appropriate conduct for members of the teaching profession. It classifies acts of physical, psychological, and sexual violence against children as major misconduct which should attract severest forms of sanctions when established (Sekyere 2017). It includes a framework for both the disciplinary authority and teachers. The Code of Conduct also spells out the guidelines for responding to allegations of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This covers allegations involving either teachers or fellow students, including sections relating to the procedures for lodging complaints and corresponding sanctions. However, the GES complaints handling mechanisms have been found to be deficient in two respects. First, the waiting time between the filing of alleged abused cases and completion of investigations is found to be too long; in some instances, over one year. Second, the Code of Conduct does not have elaborate mechanisms and resources for supporting victims of abuse. The point of emphasis here is that, even though the GES has a decentralised authority structure, the decision to dismiss a teacher for gross misconduct can only be taken by the GES Council. This is the reason why some parents and child rights organisations are advocating the devolution of power to make it possible for erring teachers who violate the Code of Conduct to be dismissed by the education authorities in their districts. A case to buttress this demand is the example of a sports teacher at the Tamale Senior High School who raped a 16-year-old girl. It took one year for the GES to complete investigations before terminating his employment (Ghanaweb, April 12, 2020). This delay in dispensing justice to the survivors traumatises them and their families. The existing framework exercising disciplinary measures against child abusers in SHSs is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: GES disciplinary authority structure for second cycle schools



Source: Sekyere (2017)

International Conventions to Protect Children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) remains the most prominent piece of UN international convention ratified by many states for protecting the rights of children. Having ratified the UNCRC in 1990, Ghana is, therefore, obliged to comply with the UNCRC Article 19 which states that:

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

Any form of abuse of adolescent girls either in school or in their communities by teachers, parents, peers, and/or caregivers is thus a violation of this UNCRC.

National Policies and Legislations

Since 1990, Ghana has enacted several pieces of legislation to protect children. Some of them are discussed below.

Ghana Free Senior High School Policy

Historically, some children from low-income households would discontinue their education at the basic level because they could not afford secondary level education. This violated the country's constitutional provision to make education accessible to all. In view of this, the government launched the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) in 2017. The policy makes secondary education free for all boys and girls who qualify to be enrolled in SHSs in the country. The FSHSP covers the tuition fees, feeding, and utility costs of students in SHSs. Students are also provided with the needed teaching and learning resources as well as giving teachers motivational packages (Abdul-Rahaman, Rahaman, Ming, and Salma 2018). There is evidence to show that this policy has increased school enrolments for both girls and boys at the secondary level of education in Ghana. According to the Ministry of Education (2018), enrolment increased from 361,771 in 2017 to 472,730 in 2018, representing a 31 per cent increase. The reduction of the burden on parents in the education of their children means both boys and girls, especially those from low-income households, who qualify for secondary education, can attend. The FSHSP, however, does not include the supply of dignity kits to adolescent girls, such as sanitary pads and toiletries. This still makes some girls vulnerable since they may be compelled to get financial assistance from men who are likely to demand sexual favours from them.

An important component of SHS education and the related FSHSP is the Computerised School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS). The CSSPS is a digital system meant to eliminate human biases in the selection and placement of students in technical, vocational, and secondary schools in Ghana. However, under the CSSPS, a number of adolescent girls have been placed in day schools outside their communities. Under such circumstances, they are compelled to rent hostels or live with relations which exposes them to a lot of harm, including sexual harassment, exploitation, and other abuses. Another challenge with the FSHSP has to do with congestion in schools due to the exponential increase in enrolments. This has over-stretched existing sanitary and accommodation facilities in schools which also impacts on adolescent girls negatively. To address the issue of congestion, the government has introduced a Double Track System. This is a semester model which allows some students to be in school and others on vacation rather than the Single-Track Trimester System. This, however, has not completely addressed the education challenges at the SHS level and their impact on adolescent girls in Ghana.

The Constitution of Ghana

The 1992 Constitution of Ghana has clear provisions aimed at protecting the human rights and freedoms of citizens. The key provisions in the constitution are referenced below:

Every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this Chapter but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest (Article 12(2)).

A person shall not be discriminated against on grounds of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status (Article 17(2)).

A child shall not be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 28 (3)).

Therefore, any form of abuse meted out to adolescent girls in educational institutions is a violation of the 1992 Constitution and is punishable by law.

Children's Act 1998, Act 560

The Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560) is a more comprehensive piece of legislation that seeks to protect children. The Children's Act has clear provisions against torture and degrading treatment of children. It states:

No person shall subject a child to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment including any cultural practice which dehumanises or is injurious to the physical and mental well-being of a child (Article 13(1)).

In Ghana, many adolescent girls have had their education truncated due to forced and child marriages. The Children's Act abhors as stated in Article 14(1) that "No person shall force a child (a) to be betrothed; (b) to be the subject of a dowry transaction; or (c) to be married." The Criminal Code (Amendment) Act of 1998 (Act 554) has equally delineated sanctions for people who commit such crimes against adolescent girls.

In spite of these legal provisions, reported cases of abuse of adolescent girls in schools continue to increase in Ghana. This research, therefore, has sought to answer the following questions: (1) Do adolescent girls in senior high schools in Ghana feel safe? (2) What are the concerns of adolescent girls regarding their safety in Ghanaian senior high schools? (3) What measures have educational stakeholders initiated to improve the safety of adolescent girls in senior high schools in Ghana?

Methodology

The study was conducted in five districts and five SHSs out of the 10 districts and 20 SHSs in Ghana where girls were supported by ActionAid Ghana to access reproductive health services. It involved the use of the purposive sampling technique to select five districts out of the 10 districts and the simple random sampling technique to select one of the two SHSs in the five selected districts. The selected SHSs were: Ghana SHS, in the Tamale Metropolis; Kadjebi SHS, in Kadjebi District; Zebilla SHS, in Zebilla; Sunyani SHS, in Sunyani Municipality, and Ullo SHS, in Jirapa District. The five districts were purposively selected to represent the different regions of the country and also based on the time and cost consideration of the researchers. The population of the adolescent girls supported by ActionAid Ghana in the five sampled schools was 1,500 girls. This is made up of 250 girls in Kadjebi SHS, 300 girls in Ullo SHS, 350 girls in Ghana SHS, 250 girls in Zebilla SHS, and 350 girls in Sunyani SHS. Based on this, the popular Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination technique was used to calculate the sample size. The sample size calculation was based on 50 per cent of the proportion of the population, confidence level of 95 per cent, an accuracy rate of plus or minus 5 per cent, and 3 per cent non-response rate. This resulted in sample size of 315 adolescent girls representing 21 per cent of the population as indicated below:

$$s = \frac{X^2NP(1-P)}{d^2(N-1) + X^2P(1-P)}$$

Where:

s is the required sample size

N is the population size = 1,500

P is the population proportion = 0.5

X is the 95% level of confidence = 1.96

d is the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion = 0.05

Calculation:

$$s = \frac{[(1.96)^2 \times 1,500(0.5)(1-0.5)]}{[(0.05)^2 \times (1,500-1)] + [(1.96)^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)]}$$

$$s = \frac{[3.8416 \times 1,500(0.25)]}{[(0.0025 \times 1,499) + (3.8416 \times 0.25)]}$$

$$s = \frac{[3.8416 \times 375]}{[3.7475 + 0.9604]}$$

$$s = 1,440.6 \div 4.7079$$

$$s = 305.9$$

Minimum sample size required = 306

Adding a refusal or non-response rate of 3% = $\{3/100\} \times 306 = 9$

Therefore, the estimated sample size required = 306+9 = 315

A mixed research method was used for the study. This involved the use of five focus group discussions (FGDs) with 60 adolescent girls who were the executives of the Young Female Platforms established in the SHSs by ActionAid Ghana, that is, 12 girls per school. Also, key informant interviews

(KIIs) were conducted with one female teacher from each selected school. The female teachers were purposively selected because they served as mentors to the girls in the established Young Female Platforms. Other key informants included three staff from the District Assemblies and two staffs from the Department of Social Welfare. Quantitative data was collected through a survey. The survey questions were programmed using the Kobocollect App and collected electronically by five research assistants. The use of the Kobocollect software reduced the time required to complete the questionnaires. The sampled schools and respondents are presented in Table 1. More data was obtained from literature review of relevant policies and pieces of local and international legislations related to safeguarding children. The quantitative data was processed using SPSS version 26 and presented in bar graphs while the qualitative data was presented using verbatim quotations and descriptions under specific themes.

Table 1: Sampled categories

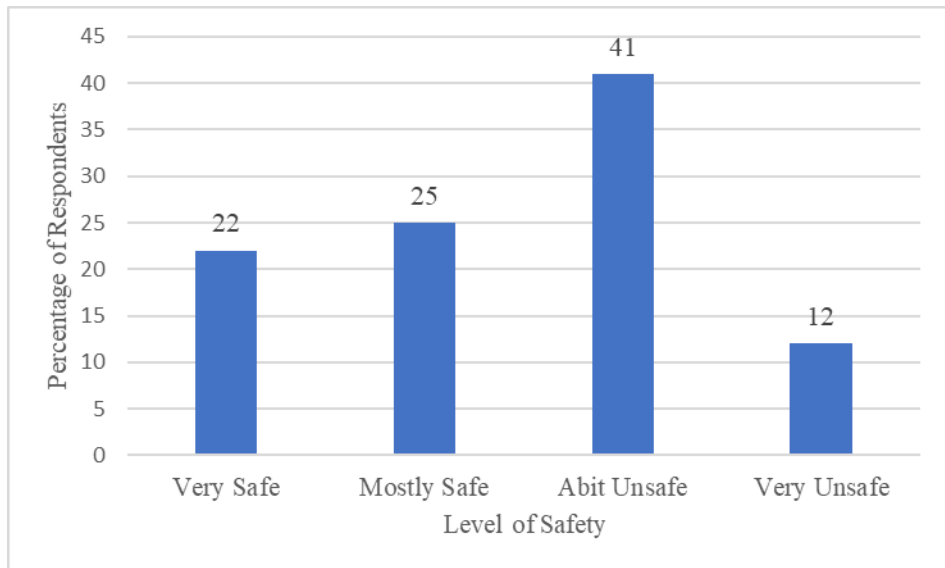
Region	District	School	Adolescent girls		Female Teachers	Key informants	
			Questionnaire	FGD		Social welfare	Assembly member
Oti	Kadjebi	Kadjebi SHS	63	12	1	-	-
Bono	Sunyani	Sunyani SHS	63	12	1	-	-
Upper West	Jirapa	Ulllo SHS	63	12	1	1	-
Upper East	Zebilla	Zebilla SHS	63	12	1	1	1
Northern	Tamale	Ghana SHS	63	12	1	1	1
Total			315	60	5	3	2

Results and Discussion

Safety of Adolescent Girls in Ghana

To assess the level of safety of students, the researchers used a 4-point Likert item rating (McLeod 2019). The results indicated that the majority, 123 (41 per cent), felt a bit unsafe and another 36 (12 per cent) felt very unsafe. This implies that in total, 53 per cent of the adolescent girls indicated a degree of feeling unsafe in school and required some actions to improve their safety as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of adolescent girls who feel safe or unsafe in selected SHSs in Ghana



This finding is corroborated by UNICEF (2020) assertion that more than 40 per cent of 15-19-year-old girls experienced gender-based violence in Ghana. This high figure requires urgent action by the state and non-state actors in the education sector in Ghana to protect adolescent girls from harm in schools. The lack of stringent measures to address this phenomenon impacts negatively on the human capital development of Ghana. This is because the abuse of adolescent girls affects their self-esteem; namely their ability to manifest their talents, skills, and abilities and ultimately, their academic performance in school.

Concerns of Adolescent Girls Regarding Their Safety in Schools

The study identified a number of reasons why adolescent girls felt unsafe in their schools (see Figure 3). First, they indicated that they were unsafe because of inadequate sanitary facilities in their schools. They mentioned challenges associated with toilets and urinary facilities which are not only inadequate but also unfriendly to girls. In some of the schools, the researchers observed girls sharing toilets and urinary facilities with their male counterparts. Additionally, running water, detergents, and tissue paper were not readily available to support handwashing with soap and running water as per the Ghana Health Service protocols. The girls also indicated that, in some cases, they spent part of their study periods looking for water from nearby communities, which affected their academic work.

Second, the adolescent girls indicated that they experienced harassment from some teachers, boys, and community members. The common forms of abuse cited included: inappropriate touching of their private parts by teachers in their offices and by boys during entertainment and other unwelcome physical contacts, such as patting, touching, pinching, and hitting. The other forms are texting of pornographic materials to them (although they are not expected to use mobile phones in school), verbal abuse and threats from teachers in class and outside the classroom environment because of their refusal to accept their love proposals, leering (suggestive staring) or other offensive gestures, and actual physical sexual assault. These bizarre and undesirable acts are captured below from one of the girls during an FGD:

I feel sad and unhappy in this school because some of the boys call us ‘village girls’ implying we are ill-mannered and don’t know how to dress and walk like modern girls. Some say we do not have ‘coca cola shape’ implying we are not beautiful; and others also call us ‘campus girls’ meaning we are promiscuous. The most annoying thing is that some teachers ask you to come to their houses and massage them because they are tired from teaching (FGD participant, Ghana, SHS Tamale, 20 November 2019).

Third, the adolescent girls indicated that they did not feel safe because they were compelled to accept monetary support from older men. This is due to their parents being either poor or not willing to provide them with their basic necessities, such as sanitary pads, teaching and learning materials, fees for extra classes, provisions, and pocket money. The key informants corroborated this point. They indicated that some of the senior girls pressurize younger girls to get involved in amorous relations with teachers and other rich men to acquire these basic necessities. They confirmed that the peer pressure is quite strong among adolescent girls, hence the need to educate them to be confident.

Fourth, the study also revealed that the inaccessibility of appropriate reproductive health information and services was a reason why some girls felt vulnerable and unsafe in school. The School Health Education Programme (SHEP) was introduced to provide reproductive health education for adolescent girls in the schools. But the study has found this to be ineffective because some of the girls reported a number of conditions related to menstruation which they had no information about or did not know where and how to access youth friendly health services. The conditions mentioned included: ²pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS); ³menorrhagia; ⁴polymenorrhagia and ⁵dysmenorrhagia. This finding is corroborated by House, Mahon, and Cavill (2013) who note that

² Consistent and severe pattern of emotional and physical symptoms such as pain, bloating and mood changes that occur in the later part of the menstrual cycle

³ Excessive, very heavy and prolonged bleeding which can lead to anaemia and becomes fatal if not treated

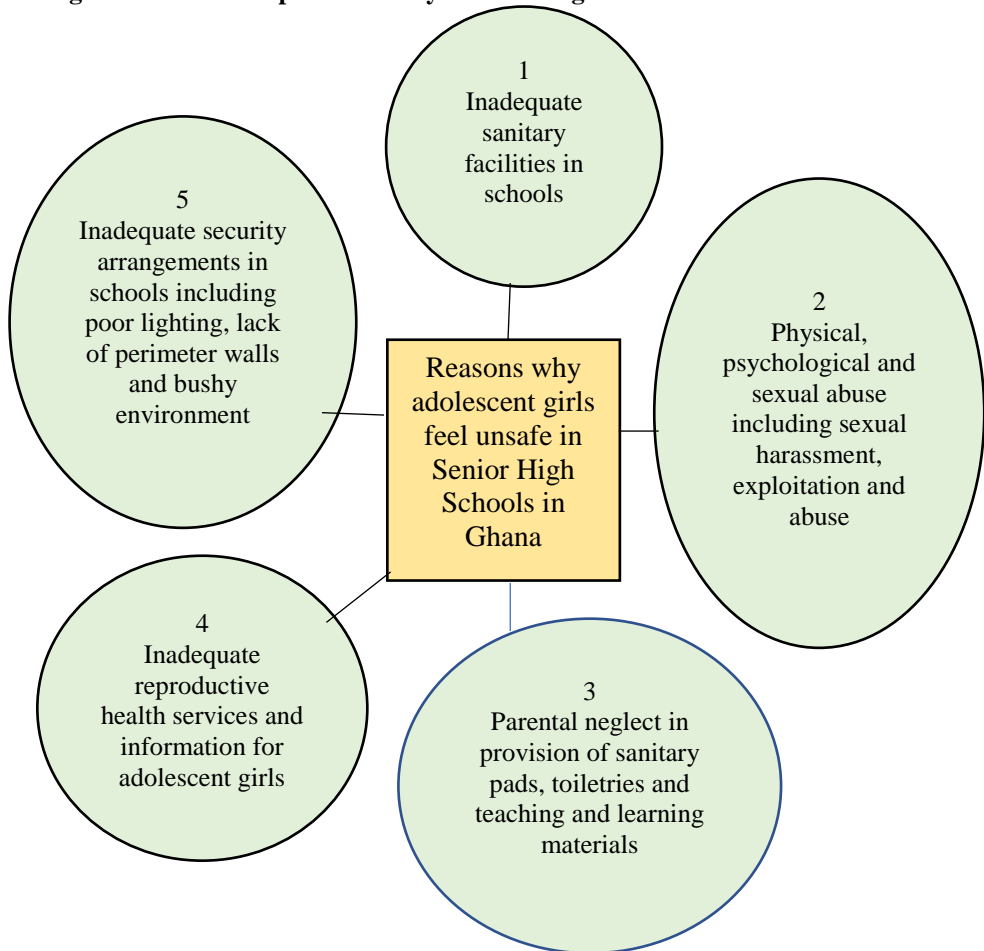
⁴ Frequent periods of short cycles (less than 21 days)

⁵ Pain, backaches, abdominal pain or cramps during menstruation

menstrual cycle medical conditions associated with adolescent girls can affect their studies, confidence, and physical growth if not addressed appropriately.

Fifth, the study has identified a number of concerns related to the security arrangements in the schools which make the adolescent girls very uncomfortable and unsafe. These include: lack of perimeter walls or where they exist, broken perimeter walls around some of the schools, which makes it possible for people to intrude easily; poor lighting systems, which makes it unsafe to move about freely at night; bushy environments with the risk of bites from reptiles; and few security persons manning girls' dormitories. The lax security arrangements expose girls to harm.

Figure 3: The five top reasons why adolescent girls feel unsafe in Ghana SHSs



Source: Field survey, November, 2017

Measures to Improve Adolescent Girls' Safety in Ghana SHSs

The study has found that a number of educational stakeholders are concerned about the safety of adolescent girls in Ghana SHSs and have initiated specific actions to improve their safety. These stakeholders include: Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), especially ActionAid Ghana; the School Management Committees; Parents-Teachers-Associations; Old Student Associations; District, Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies; and other gender-based state institutions. Those the study identified are presented and discussed below.

Young Female Platforms (YFPs): The YFPs have been established by ActionAid Ghana which is a registered national NGO that has been working in Ghana since 1990. The organisation uses a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to development where rights holders are empowered and mobilised to demand accountability and the fulfilment of their rights. ActionAid Ghana, in partnership with the management of SHSs in Ghana, has formed YFPs in the community schools. A typical YFP is made up of 30 students with a female mentor who is a teacher in the school. The YFP members elect their own leaders and receive training from ActionAid Ghana. The training focuses on violence against adolescent girls, reporting procedures in case a girl is abused, basic leadership skills, action plan development skills, adolescent reproductive health education, basic financial literacy skills, and advocacy skills. These trainings have empowered the adolescent girls to report cases of abuse to school management. Other state institutions have also been invited to handle cases and to offer psychosocial counselling to victims when required by the YFP mentors. The YFP has also had violence reporting boxes mounted at vantage points in the schools. Girls are educated and encouraged to write cases of violence against them and drop them in the boxes locked with three padlocks. These boxes are opened weekly and cases of violence against girls are reported to the appropriate authorities for investigation. The study has found these initiatives to be useful since they have created additional spaces for young girls to exchange ideas and report cases of abuse against them. The trainings have also boosted the self-esteem and confidence of the girls. The value of the YFPs was confirmed by one girl in one of the FGDs held at the Ullo SHS in Jirapa quoted below:

I really feel safe now. Before our platform was established, I was always worried about getting pregnant. But now, our mentor and the personnel of the GHS have enhanced our skills in reproductive health. I know where to go for reproductive health information and services and certainly know where to go when I am sexually harassed. This year alone, seven of my friends who are not members of our YFP got pregnant and did not return to school. I would like us to share the information we received on reproductive health with other young girls to reduce the teenage pregnancy cases in our schools and communities (FGD participant, Ullo SHS, Jirapa, 29 November 2019).

The study has further found out that the school management structures as well as state and non-state institutions are actively addressing some of the challenges which border on the security of the students, especially the adolescent girls in the sampled schools. At the time of the study, these stakeholders had completed or were in the process of completing projects, such as installation of water systems, construction of toilet facilities, expansions of dormitories and laboratories, and improvement of lighting systems in the schools. The study has found these initiatives to be complementary to the efforts by the state to provide safe learning environments for all students in Ghana.

Besides, the study has also found that the SHEP addresses adolescent girls' reproductive health and hygiene education needs. The SHEP has been running since 1992 as a major programme of the GES. According to the GES (2013), the SHEP seeks to provide students with basic knowledge and skills in nutrition and other healthy living education. This ensures that students are healthy when in school and participate in all aspects of the school curriculum. However, the SHEP is not well organised in schools. Respondents provided several reasons for the weak implementation of the SHEP. First, the SHEP was handled by staffs who had limited knowledge on health and nutrition, including the guidance and counselling coordinators, senior housemistresses, and sports or science teachers in the SHSs who were not specialists in health and nutrition. Second, even for the non-specialists handling the SHEP in the schools, in-service and refresher training for them was irregular, with no motivational packages for the teachers. Third, the SHEP activities were also haphazardly organised, voluntary in nature, and allotted little funding and time on the school scheme of activities. As it existed, the SHEP was inadequate in addressing the reproductive health information needs of the adolescent girls in the SHSs in Ghana.

The research has showed the FSHSP is contributing to the safety of adolescent girls. Under this policy, adolescent girls have benefitted from free uniforms, textbooks, physical education kits, and feeding. It is a constructive policy since it has reduced the financial burden on parents/caregivers in the education of their children. It has also reduced the vulnerability of adolescent girls. Some respondents indicated that they did not have to contact relatives and rich men to pay their fees, with the attendant risks. However, the study has identified the absence of sanitary pads and toiletries as part of the FSHSP package to be a challenge to adolescent girls. Some of the girls reported that they have had to beg both male and female friends to provide them with sanitary pads and toiletries since they could not afford to buy these items.

Conclusion

In conclusion, 53 per cent of girls in SHSs in Ghana do not feel safe. This could be interpreted to mean that the state policies on SHS are not gender-sensitive. A gender-blind approach to secondary education is a disadvantage to the learners. In the specific case of this finding, the implications and consequences are

dearth for the young girls. First, it could lead to some of them dropping out of school. Second, it could result in poor academic performance in school. Third, it could affect the development of social skills, including teamwork and effective leadership. The reasons why the majority of the girls in SHSs in Ghana do not feel safe include: poor sanitary facilities in the schools; sexual harassment from boys, teachers, and community members; parental neglect which makes them vulnerable to men willing to provide for their personal needs in school; inadequate reproductive health information and services in school; and poor school infrastructure, including lack of perimeter walls and lighting systems. The research shows that some measures are being taken by the educational stakeholders in the study districts. These include: the formation of YFPs to improve the confidence, leadership skills, and reproductive health information and services for girls in the SHSs and improvement of school infrastructure, including lighting systems and construction of school perimeter walls. However, investments from the state to address these challenges remain insufficient.

Recommendations

From the above conclusions, the GES needs to decentralise its disciplinary procedures, including the power to dismiss teachers and students who sexually harass girls in schools to the district level. The current grievance procedure which reserves the power of dismissal of teachers found to have abused adolescent girls to the GES Council is inadequate. The current procedure is associated with delays in concluding abuse cases which cause a lot of psychological stress to the adolescent girls and their parents/caregivers.

Second, the FSHSP of Ghana should include the provision of sanitary pads and toiletries for the adolescent girls in the SHSs in Ghana. This will reduce the risk of men luring them with these supplies and sexually abusing them.

Third, YFPs are empowering and should be encouraged in all SHSs in Ghana to benefit all girls in schools. The GES should collaborate with NGOs to develop training manuals and schedule trainings for teachers in schools to effectively manage these platforms.

Fourth, more collaboration between the GES and the Ghana Health Service is required to strengthen the SHEP in secondary schools. This will improve access to reproductive and hygiene education and youth friendly health services for adolescent girls in Ghana.

Fifth, the District Assemblies, old students, and GES should ensure that all SHSs in Ghana are walled with security gates manned by trained security personnel and lighting situation improved and maintained regularly.

Lastly, the CSSPS should be redesigned to ensure adolescent girls are placed in schools in their communities or those with accommodation facilities. This will minimise the risk of adolescent girls having to live on their own in rented

hostels, which exposes them to harm, including sexual harassment and exploitation.

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