# *"The boys won't leave the girls alone!"*: the importance of advocacy and educational leadership in addressing School-Related-Gender-Based-Violence (SRGBV).

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**ABSTRACT**

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution entitled 'Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development,' among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 4 relates to equitable and quality education for all and Goal 5 strives to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. Both SDGs will be the focus of the paper in the context of School-Related-Gender-Based-Violence and the role of education in challenging and addressing gender-based-violence (GBV). The paper will also consider GBV as an ethical concern and child protection priority, highlighting the pernicious and chronic impact of the concern on the health and well-being of girls and boys, including their educational attainment. There is a focus on the role of the adult within the educational context in listening to children affected by SRGBV and advocating and intervening for their safety and well-being at school. Finally, emphasis is placed on the importance of effective and inspirational school leadership as a quality driver for promoting gender equality and, enhancing the life outcomes for children and young people at school.

## INTRODUCTION

One key aspect of the nature of violence studies and its prevention, is that of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and there is a need to recognise the global pervasiveness of this issue. GBV does not happen in isolation and is inextricably linked to concepts of power, privilege and inequality (Storkey, 2015; van der Gaag, 2017). School-Related Gender-Based-Violence (SRGBV) is defined by UNESCO/UNGEI (2015) as 'acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated because of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.' This violence affects millions of children worldwide cutting across all cultures, traditions and economic divides and is a form of gender discrimination.

The title of the paper is from the lyrics of a once popular children's song in Belfast and the chorus goes as follows:

*I'll tell me ma when I go home*
*The boys won't leave the girls alone*
*They pulled my hair, they stole my comb,*
*Well that's alright till I go home.*


The words of this apparently simple folk song capture some of the narratives of GBV in the school and in the streets, where girls become the subject of harassment, fear and violence by their male peers. There is a great deal of scholarship on the subject of this paper (Connell, 1987; Cole, 2016; Foshee, 1996; Marshall, 2009; UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; WHO, 2009) and consideration is given to why School-Related-Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) is a critical issue to be addressed in the context of quality education. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution entitled 'Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development' and among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) there are two which will be the focus of this paper. Goal 4 seeks to 'Ensure equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and Goal 5 strives to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. The international agenda for quality in education should pay close attention to the two outlined SDGs in this paper, as the relationship between gender, equality and pedagogy are intertwined. To eliminate SRGBV, there is a need for inspiring quality education, instilled with the principles of social justice to promote greater opportunities for girls and boys as the next generation of global citizens.

In responding to the concern of SRGBV, it is important firstly, to sketch succinctly the significance of the two mentioned SDGs as quality assurance measures in promoting advocacy of children's rights. Secondly, to offer some insights of current research on the concern of SRGBV as a means of defining the problem within a child protection context, paving the way for an international human rights and moral framework towards equality for all. Thirdly and finally, to draw some of the implications of these issues in the context of a feminist informed critical pedagogy and leadership in our schools across the globe. In referring to professional advocacy, it may be useful to define this concept in relation to an educational context. Catapano (2006) discusses the importance of education and mentoring of trainee teachers (p.81) in advocacy strategies during their training practice. She explains the need for a teacher to be able to recognise 'social justice' issues affecting children in their community. Catapano further states how supportive teacher mentoring can promote reflective thinking, problem-solving skills as part of an advocacy strategy, which engenders trainee teachers as:

'classroom teachers who can make changes that impact children and their families by looking for solutions to problems with families and accessing support through community resources' (p. 87).

Admittedly, Catapano does not appear to be writing specifically within a child protection context, but the author does highlight the transferability and adaptability of sound advocacy within the skills repertoire of the teacher in promoting children's well-

being in schools. The delivery of quality of education is allied to the advocacy and leadership skills of educationalists, as children have the right to be taught by inspirational teachers within safe environments that are inclusive, gender sensitive, and non-violent. This promotes learning that enables each child to enjoy and achieve in their educational experiences. The paper underlines the importance of professional advocacy and leadership in challenging attitudes and behaviours in school environments that tolerate and perpetuate gender discrimination, and inequality between girls and boys, women and men.

## SRGBV AS A HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERN

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a chronic global concern, it affects both women and men, but women and girls represent most victims (Garcia-Moreno, Pallitto, Devries, Stöckl, Watts, Abrahams, and Petzold, 2013; WHO, 2009) . It is perhaps one of the most serious and most tolerated human rights violations which reinforces inequalities between men and women, boys and girls. Storkey (2015) emphasises the gravity of the reality in describing how every minute, of every day in our world that there are incidents of domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment, acid attacks, female genital mutilation (FGM), femicide or trafficking of women and girls. Globally, almost one third of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2013).

UNICEF's (2014) study revealed that bullying is one of the most prevalent forms of violence in schools affecting one in three children worldwide between the ages of 13 to 15 years. A UK based study (Richards, Buckler, Coupe, Eason, and Woolley, 2015) of almost 9,000 children highlighted that boys were more likely to bully than girls, and girls are more likely to be bullied. It is important to note that while there is extensive research on bullying, GBV is not consistently identified as a concern.  The literature does allude to the use of technologies in young people's relationships to reinforce aspects of emotional abuse and controlling behaviours (Barter, 2018, Hinduja and Patchin, 2010, Landstedt and Persson, 2014, Slonje and Smith, 2008). Homophobic bullying was identified as one of the most common forms of bullying according to UNESCO (2012, 2014 and 2016) global studies. Over 60% of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans-sexual, Inter-sexual (LGBTI) students in Chile, Peru and Mexico were bullied, over 55% of self-identified LGBTI children in Thailand reported bullying and, in the UK, more than 90% of secondary school children reported homophobic bullying in their schools (UNESCO, 2012). Research by Plan International UK (2015) found that one in five women reported some form of sexual assault within or around the school environment, including flashing, groping or rape. The child's gender may also play a part in how they respond to abuse and violence, some girls may accept that sexual harassment is a social norm, while boys may perceive reporting abuse to a teacher as undermining their masculinity (Brown and Winterton, 2010).

**THE INTERNATIONAL FOCUS ON GENDER AND EDUCATION**

In reference to the 2030 agenda as mentioned, SDG 4 echoes the principle of Article 26 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights that states 'Everyone has the right to education'. Education, now more than ever perhaps is of critical significance in terms of the global challenges of our modern lives troubled by war and terrorism, poverty, hunger and disease and destruction of the bio-diversity systems of our planet. SDG 4 is a key factor in being instrumental to ensure free and equitable education to all children, from early childhood to adolescence leading to tertiary level studies or vocational training; such opportunities are key to redressing gender disparities including discrimination based on economic status, disability, culture or ethnicity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 encapsulates these values including as Cole (2012) suggests, the right of the child to their own sexuality, when this is evident. In meeting SDG4, every girl and boy is empowered to their own sustainable development, contributing to the growth and development of their community and positive citizenship in the promotion of peace and tolerance towards other human beings.

SDG 5 places emphasis on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Worldwide, women and girls face multiple discriminations not only because of their gender, but also because of their class, economic status, the colour of their skin, their disability or sexual orientation (van der Gaag, 2017). By being born a girl, you are more likely to be subjected to exploitation, violence and poverty (Storkey, 2015). Education is empowering for girls but can also be dangerous. Empowering because it not only benefits the girl, but her family and the wider community. Dangerous because unless men and boys are educated about gender equality to promote a change in more gender equitable attitudes, girls and women may be more vulnerable to abuse for challenging the status quo and become further oppressed and silenced. The consequences of SRGBV are extensive and undoubtedly impact on the child becoming vulnerable and in need of protection from threatened, or actual abuse. It could be argued that SRGBV is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, Koss, and Marks, 1998), as SRGBV does impact on the mental, physical and sexual health and well-being of the child. Consequently, SRGBV as an ACE increases the risk of low education attainment, of poor mental health, reduced employability, productivity and economic security. As an adult there may be increased likelihood of risk-taking behaviours such as drinking and smoking, self-harm, poor relationships, overall a poor quality of life and premature death (UNICEF, 2014).


**THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN ADDRESSING SRGBV**

It is important in addressing SRGBV to consider the role of education in terms of advocacy and pedagogical leadership in shaping the minds and hearts of children on gender relations, as citizens in the making of our societies of today and tomorrow. There is an urgent need to revitalise and articulate the language of human rights within our schools' curricula, coupled with this discourse is the necessary integration of feminist politics in promoting the democratic principle of equality in universal

childhoods. Feminist approaches in addressing SRGBV are not to be shied away from in the spirit of strong educational leadership. Feminism has contributed to many achievements in the lives of women and girls across the world who have endured many disadvantages and discriminations. Alderson (2016, p.6) reminds us of how 'Feminism promoted richer, kinder versions of being human, and more rounded, fulfilling versions of the lives of men and women and potentially of children'. The tensions and tyranny of developing gendered identities and roles played out at home and subsequently in classrooms, playgrounds and beyond the school gates are quickly realised. Children from an early age begin to develop an acute appreciation of the prescribed gender norms and behaviours of society, and a sensitivity to the risk of punitive consequences of non-compliance by those adults and peers around them (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Brown, Alabi, Huynh & Masten, 2011; O' Brien, 2011; Kornienko, Santos, Martin & Granger, 2016). Girls as daughters and sisters are caught in a pedagogical paradox; being educated for independence, autonomy and empowerment while dealing with the challenges of sexism, patriarchy and inequality because of their femininity.

It follows, therefore, that a feminist informed critical pedagogy (Martin, 2012) serves to critique the ethics of democratic education to enabling better gender equality within the school community, and beyond. McLaren (2015) describes this as developing students' understanding of the lives of those who are oppressed and less powerful and becoming part of a movement to promote social justice and equality. So, the student becomes more than an empathic bystander. However, critically, the challenge for all of us in addressing SRGBV is the need to take stock of the organisational culture, including the honour-culture (Osterman, Brown & Ryan, 2011) of education itself. Many of our teachers are women and because of their gender, may be oppressed and suppressed within their own personal and professional contexts. This reality is troubling when the implications of SRGBV are considered within the culture of the school and how this relates to the women working within this institution.

Yuval-Davis (1997) questions the relationship between the concepts of a nation and that of gender, as she suggests that women are not given an active role in the development of a nation, but instead are its keepers and symbols of femininity. The notion of a "good woman" or "good girl" extends from the privacy of the home to the public sphere, where "good female teachers and students" become extensions of the binary forms of gender femininities, earmarking the differences and inequalities between men and women, boys and girls. Herein lies the challenge for all of us as educationalists. There is a critical need to further advocate women and girls' agency within education, as teachers and students, without regulation and scrutiny of conforming to culturally prescribed gender norms and without fear of reprisal or violence. This is by no means a simple task, as the suggestion of feminist approaches in education in some countries may be rebuked by those in power or upholding the status quo. However, the language of human rights in confronting SRGBV is difficult to ignore when addressed in terms of promoting social justice, and a better quality of life for the individual and the wider community. Quality education, which values dispositions of advocacy for children and inspirational leaders as teachers, develops and enhances opportunities for dialogue and understanding between men and women in advancing social justice for women and girls across the international community.

## CONCLUSION

Education does have a role in addressing gender inequality, but this process requires care so as not to alienate boys or exacerbate negative responses towards their female peers. Gender equality is integral to democratic education and, should benefit every child within the school community. It needs to be more than educators promoting and advocating the rights of the child and listening to the child, and more than celebrating diversity, and challenging oppression and discrimination. These issues are important, but each adult within the school community should embody the principles of social justice such as equality, appreciation of diversity and promoting supportive environments for children. The principles of advocacy and inspirational leadership are sustained by the attitudes and behaviours of adults towards each other and the children in their care. Democratised education can be transformational within a human rights framework, and feminist advocacy is not distinguished as "girls' issues or problems" but instead is valued as an essential component of quality education provision. Consequently, all children in the school community benefit from the well-being and welfare of the girls in their midst. It acknowledges and embraces the benefits and the rightness of gender equality in their lives, and the lives of their children in the future. In doing so, the Belfast girl in the lyrics of the song can be greater assured when she does get home, of an understanding by her mother and father of the non-acceptance of SRGBV. Ideally, the song in fact becomes part of folklore, as it represents the existence of GBV in a history of troubling times due to gender inequalities in our societies.

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