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Shaping norms when they form: Investing in Primary Prevention of Gender-based Violence through working with children in schools

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Introduction

Discourse on the importance of working with younger populations to address issues of gender inequity is quickly gaining ground around the world. This is driven by the recognition that challenging fundamental constructs of gender, namely masculinity and femininity, is critical to create shifts in norms – all of which set-in early through various socialization processes. Notions of gender roles, appropriate behaviors, and the resolution of conflict through the use of violence are all learned, and hence can be influenced. Primary prevention efforts are necessary as they offer the possibility of preventing the use of violence before it begins. They also provide alternatives of behaviors to children who have witnessed violence in their homes and other intimate surroundings.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

WHY DISCUSS ISSUES OF GENDER EQUITY AND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL?

The public education system is an institution uniquely placed to influence and shape children's thought processes, understanding of gender stereotypes and roles, and use of violence. It is here that learning, not only in terms of knowledge, but of thinking, values, and behaviors gets reinforced. In recent years, research from around the world highlights the need to work on gender issues, including gender-based violence, within the school setting and among school-going children (Dunne Máiréad et al. 2005; Pinheiro 2006). The United Nations Secretary-General's Report on Violence against Children states 'Children spend more time in the care of adults in pre-schools, schools, vocational training centres and other places of learning than they do anywhere else outside of their homes (The World report on Violence against children, 2005). The same report emphasizes the role that education can play in "encouraging children to learn self-respect, respect for others and how to express their feelings and negotiate for what they want without resort to physical or psychological violence." It has a responsibility to ensure that children have access to a rights-based, quality education, which is rooted in gender equality.

Yet the literature reveals that educational institutions more often than not reinforce gender stereotypes and perpetuate patterns of violence. In parts of South Asia, girls studying in mixed sex schools report harassment and sexual violence at the hands of male students and male teachers (Barker 2006). Girls in Nepal describe being harassed by boys on their way to school; if girls report this harassment, they are often punished by parents and withdrawn from school (Mathur et al. 2001). Several studies in South Asia indicate that violence at school, notably corporal punishment, leads to students dropping out of school (UNICEF 1998). It is now recognized that peer violence among school children also has significant impacts on both physical and mental health, especially if that violence is repeated or severe, and if victims lack adequate support (Rigby 2003). This evidence reinforces the need to change how educational institutions reinforce differential treatment for boys and girls, but also to influence underlying stereotypic gender norms, and the use of violence against women and girls, and against peers. Such inequitable gender norms can have a host of harmful consequences for girls and boys during childhood and beyond, including poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes.

Effort to design interventions that seek to influence these social norms and notions of masculinity-femininity must intervene at points when and where these gender notions are taking shape. **Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS)** is one such initiative, which was implemented by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Committee of Resource Organizations for Literacy (CORO) and the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) in 45 Municipal schools of Mumbai, India reaching to more than 8000 students of grades VI and VII of ages 12-14 years.

GENDER EQUITY MOVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

GEMS is a school-based program that aims to promote gender equality by encouraging equal relationships between girls and boys, examining the social norms that define men's and women's roles, value attached to these roles and questioning the use of violence. It uses a gender transformative approach to engage students in self-reflection and critical thinking through Group Education Activities in classrooms and campaigns.

THE GEMS APPROACH

GEMS uses the gender transformative approach, and adopts twin and mutually reinforcing strategies to promote gender equality – 1) engaging students in discussion and critical reflection through group education activities in classroom to question gender inequality and use of violence; and 2) create an enabling environment through school-based campaign and teachers' sensitization.

GEMS initiative uses a combination of cognitive–affective approach and life-skills with recognition of risk and protective factors. It is primarily because we are dealing with normative drivers - inequitable gender norms - and we believe that for a sustained behavior change at the individual levels we must first bring about attitudinal changes.

Our theoretical premise is that we must capacitate the children to recognize, anticipate and challenge the inequitable gender norms as they are played out in their day to day lives in order to promote positive outcomes related to health and wellbeing and prevent the violence that happens as a consequence of these inequitable norms. We also recognize

Gender transformative approach: change social relations between men and women

- Pausing and reflecting on our realities
- Going beyond giving and receiving information to changing the way we process information
- Creating dissonance as an approach – critical thinking
- Establishing safe spaces and a supportive environment for group reflection

how different systematic structures promote and perpetuate these inequitable norms and use of violence, and those must be addressed in an ecological framework and effort should be made to strengthen the larger system. Thus, in addition to intervening with students in classroom, we organized school-wide campaign, sensitization meetings with teachers and reached parents through students and Parent-

Teacher meeting.

GEMS project was designed over a three year period (2008-2011). The first two years focused on providing the proof of concept and model on working with children in schools, to challenge and change inequitable gender attitudes through direct intervention. The approach generated interest among the school and education system and the changes in students further impressed the teachers of the feasibility and relevance of such an initiative. This was a deliberate strategy wherein teachers were involved gradually

through the 2 years and the initial skepticism and misgivings were overcome, making them potential allies, rather than being asked to implement the program in the beginning itself. Leveraging this, Year 3 was designed as a phase for preparing the ground for potential scale-up of GEMS. More systematic work with the system, at the municipal, ward and school level was initiated to explore and utilize the available entry points/spaces or “pegs” to advocate for GEMS.

GEMS ACTIVITIES

Group Education Activities

During short project period, we focused on students and school environment. We conducted GEA with students in classroom. It used participatory methodologies such as role plays, games, debates and discussions to engage students in meaningful and relevant interactions and reflection about key issues. The GEA were conducted by trained facilitators from CORO and TISS and held during the regular school day. Each session lasted about 45 minutes. The first year covered three themes: gender, the body and violence through 10 sessions. The 15 sessions in year 2 focused on deepening students’ understanding of gender and building skills to respond positively to discrimination and violence (see Table 1 for a list of the GEA sessions for each academic year). The content and methodology for the sessions were designed based on the data gathered during the formative research.

In year 1, sessions were conducted for separately for boys and girls by the same sex facilitator, while in year 2, it was combined. Using the existing literature and discussion with students, we realized that students might not be comfortable to discuss these issues in presence of students of other sex as these were new – not in terms of experience, but in reflection and articulation. After being comfortable and more articulate, second year sessions were conducted together.

Presence of trained facilitators with gender perspective also helped in engaging students, as they had the ability to be interactive and reach out to children in ways that most traditional teachers don’t.

School-based campaign

The GEMS school campaign was a week-long series of events designed in consultation with the students and involved games, competitions, debates and short plays. Each event was lead by a facilitated and supported by teachers/students. In addition, opportunities were used to integrate GEMS discussion in school programs – speech during assembly, sports day, children’s day, etc. This approach of group session and school-wide campaigns ensured that in addition to individual reflection, a critical mass was exposed to the messages and that an immediate group of peers was created that were supportive of the gender equitable norms.

Sensitization of teachers

Fostering ownership within the system through sensitization of teachers and headmasters was key strategy for environment building. We recognized that the success of the programs would lie in the teachers/facilitators' ability to be interactive and reach out to children in ways that most traditional teachers don't. However, teachers are not a monolithic category; they are gatekeepers, but also potential allies. During the short project period, we adopted two strategies – 1) organize sensitization meetings to bring teachers who are either in opposition or on the fence into the fold of the program to realize the value of these transformative changes such that they do not negate the gains of these through their negative attitudes; and 2) efforts to transform supportive teachers into 'advocates' and making them part of implementing teams.

The gradual inclusion of teachers in the program helped in overcoming initial skepticism and misgiving about the feasibility and relevance of such an initiative. The changes in students further impressed the teachers and encouraged them to be 'advocate' of the program and be part of the implementation team, rather than being asked to do so. Three rounds of training of half-day each were conducted to build their perspective on the key issues. However, we recognize that gender discussion is not about imparting knowledge but engaging in a process of self-reflection and introspection and creating dissonance on fundamental values, beliefs and its manifestation. It's a long process and needs support to sustain and practice. Therefore, in next phase of the program, we are working with teachers to build their perspective and support them in taking the discussion forward among them and with students.

KEY RESULTS

The study used a three-arm, quasi-experimental design to assess the effects of the program on the students. It was carried out in a randomly selected sample of 45 Municipal schools.¹ The schools were randomly and equally distributed across three arms – 1) Group Education Activities (GEA) and the school-based campaign; 2) only the school-based campaign; and 3) a control group with no GEMS intervention. A total of 2035 students (1100 girls and 935 boys) across the three arms completed a self-administered survey before the intervention (baseline survey) as well as at the end of the intervention period six months later (1st follow-up survey). 2nd follow-up survey was conducted at the end of the 2nd year intervention. A total of 754 students in Grade VII (426 girls and 328 boys) out of 2035 participated in this as students of grade VII moved out of the school after first round of intervention. The surveys covered three broad areas: gender roles, violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH).

Overall, there were positive changes seen in gender attitudes, and specific behaviors. Indicators such as perception of students towards girl's education, age at marriage, relationships, sexuality and sexual violence improved in the desired direction in the

¹ The schools were located in M-East, M-West, R-North, R-Central and R-South wards, which were the field areas of our implementing partners CORO and TISS.

intervention areas, while no change or negative change was recorded in control schools. Details of key results are provided below:

GEMS results in a positive shift in students' attitudes toward gender equality.

The evaluation results revealed that the interventions were able to produce positive changes in gender attitudes across both the intervention groups. After the first round of the intervention, there was a significant increase in the proportion of boys and girls with high equality scores in the two intervention arms compared to those in the control arm, more so among girls than boys. Among girls, percentage with high equality score increased from 28% to 57% in GEA+ schools, 19% to 39% in campaign, while 24% to 32% in control.

There was a significant positive trend in the GEA+ group that girls should be older at marriage than the legal age of 18 years.

The proportion of students believing that girls should be at least 18 years old at marriage increased over time in all groups, reaching nearly 100 percent at the 2nd follow-up survey. But in the GEA+ group, support consistently increased among both boys and girls for girls to be even older at marriage – at least 21 years. Among all students in this arm the proportion increased from 15 percent at baseline to 22 percent at 2nd follow up. In control schools, it declined from 18 percent to 14 percent at 2nd follow up while it remained around 10- 13 percent in the campaign schools. Age at marriage was addressed in several of the sessions that focused on gender discrimination during both rounds of the intervention.

Boys and girls in the GEA+ schools reported greater changes in their own behavior than those in the campaign only schools.

Students in the intervention schools were asked whether or not they had undergone certain changes after their participation in the program. For boys in both intervention arms the greatest changes (reported by more than half the boys in each group) were doing more household chores, stopping the teasing of girls and curbing the use of abusive language. For girls, the most common changes were using less abusive language, understanding boys better and opposing gender discrimination. Many of these reported changes were significantly greater among the girls and boys in the GEA+ schools compared to the campaign only schools. At the 2nd follow up, there was continued improvement in two indicators: a significantly higher proportion of students in GEA+ schools said they better understood the opposite sex and they opposed gender discrimination compared to campaign schools.

Some voices of students:

...After the sessions, I changed myself. I started thinking of not reacting too quickly. I used to quarrel a lot with my friend. I used to get angry a lot but now I understand... Girl from GEA+ school

I never worked at home before. I started two years ago at the same time when our sessions began. The sessions were about relationships, communicating with family members, not answering back. I used to think that boys should only do outdoor chores. Now I think that they should help women and work with them [at home]. Boy from GEA+ school

A girl was standing on the road when two or three boys pulled her dupatta (scarf). The girl called out for help. We shouted at them and threatened to inform their parents about this. They apologized immediately. I was not frightened while doing so. ...I could not stop harassment in the past. But because of the classroom sessions we got to know many things such as harassment of girls should be stopped, boys should understand the feelings and emotions of girls and girls should oppose violence. Girl from GEA+ school

After the second round of the intervention, more students in both intervention groups reported they would take action in response to sexual harassment.

The students were asked about how they might respond to someone touching them inappropriately or exposing themselves. At the 1st follow up there were no significant positive changes for boys or girls in the intervention arms compared to the control arm in terms of whether they would protest or complain to someone about the offending behaviors. But at the 2nd follow up, significantly more students in the GEA+ and campaign groups said they would mount either response. For example, more than seven in 10 students in both groups would complain about the sexual harassment. The increase among the students from 1st to 2nd follow up was primarily driven by the girls, a promising result given that female victims are often blamed for being the cause of sexual harassment and violence which, in turn, discourages disclosure.

The results pertaining to students' involvement in school violence were mixed, while response to violence shows a strong positive trend

The proportion of students reported perpetrating violence increased from baseline to 1st follow-up. One possible explanation is that the group sessions sensitized students to behaviors that they initially considered normative, like pushing or hitting, but now learned that they were forms of violence. The decrease in reported physical violence from the 1st to the 2nd follow-up, however, is encouraging. What is perhaps more significant is that among students who were not exposed to the programs, the use of violence steadily increases over time.

Another change observed was in the survey question asked about the students' reaction to the last incidence of peer-inflicted violence at school. Responses such as "tried to stop it" or "sought help" were categorized as positive reactions, while "hit back" was categorized as a negative reaction (another category was no reaction). The findings are presented for boys and girls together because of the small sample sizes. The proportion of students who reported a positive reaction increased in the GEA+ arm from baseline to 1st follow-up, while at the same time those who reported a negative reaction decreased. These changes were significant when compared to the control arm. At the 2nd follow up there was a further increase in positive action among the students in the GEA+ schools but not in the other two arms.

Even after controlling for background variables, such as age, sex, working status of the mother and household and personal assets and the students' gender equality scores at baseline, the changes were significant . After two rounds of the intervention, students from GEA+ schools were more than four times as likely to have high gender equality scores and three times as likely to disagree with the statement, "Since girls have to get married, they should not be sent for higher education," compared to the control arm. The students in the GEA+ schools were also more likely to support a higher age at marriage (21+ years) and disagree with the statement, "There are times when a boy needs to beat his girlfriend." Two rounds of the campaign also succeeded in bringing about significant positive changes for three of the four indicators.

Overall, the GEMS experience provides evidence of a useful and feasible methodology for creating discussion around gender equality within the school setting. The findings suggest that a methodology that involves students in self-reflection has the potential to make a positive difference in attitudes and behaviors. Schools, being spaces for learning, have a role beyond giving knowledge to also fostering support for gender equality and non-violence.

GOING FORWARD

The GEMS intervention provides several key learnings for the issues of gender equity and violence prevention. First, it provides evidence that use of violence and gender stereotypes are learnt early in life- and that interventions can be successful in changing these. It also proves that such change is significant and measurable and occurs both in boys and girls. Secondly it demonstrates the feasibility and possibility of undertaking such interventions through institutions that engage with children on a daily and continuous basis. As GEMS gets adapted to different cultural settings, evidence gathered proves that fundamental concepts of power, gender roles and the use of violence are universal among children , making a program like GEMS relevant in multiple regional and international settings. Third GEMS demonstrates a methodology that is evaluated for the impact it can produce. It provides a strong recommendation for the need to include gender within schools, and call for the need to invest in group education activities as part of efforts by schools and educational institutions to change gender norms. Group education activities provide platforms for boys and girls to confront, challenge and ask

questions about entrenched gender roles and relationships, contributing to more gender equitable attitudes and behaviors among students.

For programs such as GEMS to become institutionalized, several challenges such as acceptance by the formal education system and conviction, interest and skills of teachers and other officials will need to be addressed. The issue of balancing scale with quality needs to be carefully thought through. The need for such programs and evidence of their impact must be used to mobilize institutional support and long-term commitment to address violence and generate further evidence of the sustainability of its impact. Violence among both boys and girls is deeply rooted and normalized, but that a series of group sessions plus a campaign can set in motion a process in which students become more aware of their own and others' behaviors. In school settings, aggressive behaviors among boys in particular are often tolerated or ignored, as they are considered natural. Yet schools have an important role to play in helping students distinguish between what is "play" versus what is "violence" – an important prerequisite for ultimately reducing a range of behaviors harmful to girls and women as well as boys and men.