

Gender based violence and basic education in PNG

by Pes Wilson

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Universal Basic Education (UBE) has been a prominent feature of international development goals. Papua New Guinea's [Universal Basic Education Plan \(UBEP\) runs from 2010 to 2019](#). One of the impediments to the successful attainment of UBEP in PNG is the issue of violence against girls and women (VAG/W) in schools.

[Research](#) that I conducted examines how school leaders address VAG/W in schools and the implications for UBEP and education policies in PNG. Its impact in undermining girls' education seems to be underestimated. I interviewed four school leaders and surveyed 101 students in two different schools in PNG, one in the Central Province (rural) and the other in the National Capital District (NCD) (urban). This research used mixed quantitative and qualitative methods.

Students' experiences

It is important to gauge school leaders' and students' views to understand their perceptions of safety based on their lived experiences of feeling safe. Their experiences and understandings influence the promotion of a learning environment free from violence. This is especially important for girls who are most likely to be disadvantaged in terms of accessibility, participation and retention in PNG schools. Violence and oppression of girls endangers their freedom to pursue education. My research revealed that boys felt safer at school than girls. 84% of male students indicated that they felt safe at school compared to 49% of female students. Furthermore, though 31% of the females indicated they felt unsafe in the school, none of the males felt unsafe.

Clearly, when compared to male students, female students do not feel safe or free at school. Improvements are needed in the implementation of educational policies to ensure that all girls are able to pursue education in a school environment that is free from violence. This demands greater collaboration among school leaders, whose understanding of basic education and gender equity in education policies is therefore important.

Shared leadership

This study also established that the leaders of the two schools were instrumental in promoting discipline and peace in the schools by working with the teachers, students and the school board. This type of approach is known as shared leadership in which all stakeholders take joint ownership of issues like school discipline. In order for such practices to be more sustainable, each leader must be fully aware of the relevant policies that provide the foundational basis for all school leaders to promote gender equity in education. Policies related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and gender equity are the cornerstone and building blocks for many countries that ratified a commitment to advance the participation, protection and engagement of girls and women in all spheres of development, including education and schools.

This study revealed that all the school leaders were fully aware and understood well the concepts of the MDGs, UBEP, and other gender equity policies. Subsequently they became responsive to sustaining and promoting the equal participation of school-age girls to attend schools in a milieu free from violence. Such a high level of understanding by school leaders in valuing education as everyone's right is critical.

Affirmation of girls' rights to education

The school leaders fully understood the importance of girls' rights to education, irrespective of their sex, age, religion, ethnicity, tribal affiliations and nationality. However, the students had mixed views. Most stated that girls have the right to pursue education free from being harassed, violated or threatened physically, sexually or psychologically. 66% of the students agreed that girls have equal rights to education. However, 25% indicated that education is only sometimes the right of girls.

The interview data for the rural school in Central Province highlighted how, more generally, schools in the rural parts of PNG experience problems in delivering basic education proficiently, as highlighted by the head teacher. In these areas, despite beautifully crafted government education policies, the delivery of education services is still hampered by poor road infrastructure, electricity, health and, most importantly, educational services. The government needs to play an active role in sustaining, leading, facilitating and promoting equal education opportunities through adequate investment in school infrastructure, roads, teacher training and staff development initiatives, and educational resources like teaching aids, if the government is serious in seeing ratified educational policies become reality, particularly in rural areas.

Policies are mere plans of actions adopted by a state. What matters most is the effective and sustainable implementation of plans through concerted government investment in policy-enabling factors.

The study's focus was on the effectiveness of school leaders in addressing VAG/W and its relevance for the government's UBE policy implementations in PNG. PNG is a highly patrilineal or male-oriented country. In such a situation, VAG/W is intimately linked to deeply entrenched social norms such as values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and practices, making it extremely difficult for school leaders to address. Female students face many challenges, including an unsafe environment and a belief among some students that they do not have the same right to education as boys. Despite these challenges, this study affirmed that school leaders have understood girls' educational rights and are now employing significant approaches such as school policies to tackle VAG/W at their schools. Schools differ in terms of their level of understanding of policy interventions and conventions on girls' rights to education. Some schools and school leaders are performing better than others. Overall the study revealed that there was strong leadership will in addressing VAG/W and most school leaders valued the notion of girls' right to education.

This blog is based on the author's Master's thesis, which can be accessed [here](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/gender-based-violence-and-basic-education-in-png-20191002/>