



Engaging school personnel in making schools safe for girls in Botswana, Malawi, and Mozambique



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2015
Received in revised form 26 October 2015
Accepted 30 October 2015
Available online 1 December 2015

Keywords:

Girl
Sub-Saharan Africa
Botswana
Malawi
Mozambique
School

ABSTRACT

Girls are vulnerable to HIV in part because the social systems in which they live have failed to protect them. This study evaluates a program aimed at making schools safe for girl learners in order to reduce girls' vulnerability to HIV in Botswana, Malawi, and Mozambique. In addition to an extensive process evaluation with school personnel program participants, program facilitators, and community members, a cross-sectional post-intervention survey was conducted among adolescent girls in the three countries. The total sample size was 1249 adolescent girls (ages 11–18). Bivariate and multilevel, multivariate analyses were conducted to assess the association between school participation in the intervention and a decrease in teachers offering sex in exchange for academic favors. In Botswana, girls who attended an intervention school, as compared to girls who attended a non-intervention school, were significantly more likely to report a reduction in teachers offering sex in exchange for favors. Communication interventions that both challenge and empower school personnel to create safer environments for schoolgirls can have positive effects, particularly in settings with sufficient resources to support change.

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1. Introduction

Educating girls has profound implications for the girls themselves, their families, their communities, their nations, and the world. For every year girls are educated above the national average it increases their earning potential by 10–20% (Levine et al., 2009). Educated girls are also more likely to delay childbearing and have fewer children, which is a boon for their health as well as the health of their children (UNICEF, 2007). Research has shown that educating girls is also crucial for economic development at a national level. Educating girls, in fact, sparks development in the most cost-effective manner (Tembon and Fort, 2008). Therefore, it is vitally important to encourage girls to attend and stay in school; however, girls are not always safe at school.

Research has shown that some school staff, including teachers, sexually harass students, both in developed nations (AAUW, 2001; Timmerman, 2003) and developing nations (Bhana, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Jewkes and Abrahams, 2002; Muhanguzi, 2011; Ngakane et al., 2012; Prinsloo, 2006; USAID, 2003). In

addition, research has demonstrated that these actions are underreported due to a history of poor responses, or the absence of any response, by the school administration to the allegations (Bhana, 2012; Dunne et al., 2006; Mirembe and Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011). In response to these findings, some have called for research and programs focused on working with students to address these issues (Muhanguzi, 2011), while other researchers have called for more interventions with school personnel (Bhana, 2012; Dunne et al., 2006; Timmerman, 2003). Others highlight the need to acknowledge and address the central role of gender to enable a transformative schooling experience for pupils, school staff, and instructors alike (Morrell et al., 2002).

In anticipation of designing and implementing a program to create a more protective environment for adolescent girls in selected communities in Botswana, Malawi, and Mozambique, formative research that included an activity for participants to identify safe and unsafe places in the community through a community mapping exercise was conducted. Community members reported mixed feelings about the safety of schools. Some participants, especially the younger participants, marked the schools as a safe place. Others, including the older adolescent girls, marked the schools as unsafe places due to the way teachers use their power over students to demand sex for better grades (Underwood et al., 2011a). Given the finding that some teachers exploit female students, and the fact that girls are more likely than

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boys to drop out of school at a tender age, which makes them more vulnerable to HIV infection, the Go Girls! Initiative (GGI) developed a program component designed to work with the schools and school personnel in half of the target communities.

1.1. Conceptual framework

A social ecological perspective informed the development and implementation of GGI (Schwandt and Underwood, 2013) as well as the research study described in this article. This framework explicitly shifts the focus from the individual-as-risk-taker, which places the onus on the individual, to the systemic and foundational contextual factors that render girls vulnerable to HIV. The social ecological perspective views individuals as nested within a system of socio-cultural relationships – families, social networks, schools, communities, nations – that potentially influence, directly or indirectly, individuals' ability or propensity to act. This approach draws attention to the role of extra-individual factors in health outcomes (Rose, 1985), and yet does not ignore the individual, whose sexual encounters constitute the proximal determinants of HIV risk. Rather, individuals' choices, decisions, and behaviors are theorized to depend not only on their own characteristics, but also on group- or community-level attributes and understandings, which together constitute the intermediate determinants of HIV risk. These factors in turn implicate the distal determinants of HIV risk, or the larger structural and environmental contexts within which they live. In sum, social ecology is a systems approach that examines the "degree of fit between people's biological, behavioral, and socio-cultural needs and the environmental resources available to them" (Stokols, 1996, p. 288).

This conceptual framework depicts the fact that resource availability (Mukherjee et al., 2003), community support for girls as well as social support from parents, teachers, and other community members (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Rogers, 1995) and girls' normative constructs (Fishbein and Azjen, 1975) all influence their resilience or, seen negatively, their vulnerability to negative health outcomes. In short, individuals' choices, decisions and behaviors are theorized to depend not only on their own characteristics, but also on family- or community-level attributes, thus implicating the larger social and environmental contexts within which they live (Krieger, 1994).

While the social ecological framework provides insight into the intertwined and overlapping relationships of the multilevel world in which we live, it does not provide theory regarding how those relationships can inhibit or enable change. For that, we turned to the theories of the Brazilian educator Freire (2000), who argued that people were not always able to see that the world is changeable. To that end, he led a movement to enable small groups in communities around the world to engage in face-to-face dialog so that they could "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" and thus "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 83).

As individuals come to understand that the world can be transformed, if initially only at the margins, their thinking about a particular matter begins to change. Cleland and Wilson (1987) introduced the notion of "ideation" when referring to the constellation of cognitive, emotional, and social factors associated with behavioral change or the propensity to take action. Their key idea is that a shared language and geographic proximity allow "changing perceptions, ideas, and aspirations" to be communicated with members of any given community. This is even more so when individuals are brought together purposively to change the text and tenor of relationships, as was the case with the school personnel intervention that was part of GGI. While communication may serve to reinforce normative beliefs, communication

interventions can also bring individuals together to rethink and reconstruct their ways of thinking and, ultimately, their actions. Indeed, research has demonstrated that communication programs can introduce and promote new ways of thinking, in part by suggesting different approaches to an issue and in part by sparking discussions about the topic of interest (Kincaid, 2004), and that participation in or exposure to communication interventions is statistically and significantly correlated with changing the quality of relationships or with taking action (Underwood et al., 2011b).

The guiding hypothesis of this study is that girl learners at intervention schools will be more likely to report increased safety at school, specifically a reduction in teachers demanding sex in exchange for favors, than will girl learners at non GGI intervention schools. While the anticipated change would be expected to take place among teachers, the beneficiaries would be female students.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

GGI was implemented in four communities in the Thyolo district of Malawi, four communities in the Francistown district of Botswana, and eight communities in Mozambique – four in Zambezia Province and four in Nampula Province. Communities were selected based on a set of predetermined criteria, including 15–25% HIV prevalence, population size of approximately 5000, geographic accessibility, and availability of relevant non-governmental organizations to implement program activities. While the national HIV prevalence differs greatly between Botswana, Malawi, and Mozambique – the highest prevalence is found in Botswana and the lowest in Malawi – GGI selected districts in each country with similar levels of high HIV prevalence – between 18% and 23% (BAIS IV, 2008; NSO and ORC Macro, 2005; UNAIDS, 2008).

2.2. Intervention

GGI comprised eight components: community mobilization, adult-child communication, community-based life skills, a reality radio program, cross-sectoral fora, school-based life skills, economic strengthening, and school personnel training. The focus of this paper is on the experience and outcome of the school personnel training.

GGI developed the School Personnel Training program component to work with the schools and school personnel in the intervention communities with the intention of creating safer school environments for girls. The training was designed to assist a broad range of school personnel to understand girls' vulnerability to HIV and the relationship between girls' vulnerability to HIV, school, and education. The goal of the training was to promote gender equitable teaching practices, address harmful school practices and environments that put girls at risk of HIV, and to equip school personnel with the skills to create a safe learning environment for all pupils. Through this program, GGI aimed to have school personnel recognize and strengthen their roles as protectors of vulnerable girls and agents of change in their schools.

The School Personnel Training was a three- or four-day workshop of fourteen sessions and included all teachers and school personnel who worked with girl learners aged 10–17. The fourteen sessions included topics from gender norms and expectations to power, coercion, and consent (see Table 1 for the complete list of session topics and sub-topics). The workshop facilitators, all of whom were education consultants who had been teachers, relied on a variety of techniques; these included brainstorming, group discussions, role-play, and skills-building exercises. Particular

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