Whether it is female infanticide, forced abortion, gang rape, human trafficking, or any other form of violence that girls and women suffer, they all share one characteristic. These are actions directed at women and girls simply because of their sex. These acts of violence inflict physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm on women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women [and girls], including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” Perpetrators and victims of violence are, however, of both sexes. Men are also known to suffer from gender-based violence (GBV) but the magnitude is near insignificant as compared to that of women. Women suffer most because of patriarchal values which accord them lower social status. When we talk about GBV, what readily comes to mind is violence perpetrated against women and girls.

GBV violates several recognised human rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture, equal protection before the law, liberty and security of person, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental...
violates women’s right to control their sexuality.

**Types of GBV**

Women and girls suffer from numerous forms of violence and these include acts that cause physical harm such as female genital mutilation. Other forms of violence include stalking, blaming without reason, neglect, and sexual harm such as rape and forced prostitution. Often, these groupings only reflect the nature of the violence and not the effects.

The most pervasive form of GBV women and girls suffer is **domestic violence**. This usually takes place in the home and is perpetrated by family members or relations. Domestic violence includes forced marital sex, incest, honour killings, female infanticide, child beating, etc. Many girls in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle-East are exposed to female genital mutilation. This type of GBV varies from partial or total removal of the external female genitalia to the narrowing of the vaginal opening through stitching. This practise is part of a concerted effort to make women abide by cultural dictates and control their sexuality.

Sexual violence is also a common form of GBV and this ranges from sexual harassment, insertion of objects into genital openings, sexual intercourse without consent, to child defilement and forced prostitution. Among these forms of sexual violence, rape is most prevalent. The figures for South Africa alone stand at one million cases every year. This simplifies to one incident occurring every minute. According to the Population Reference Bureau, only one out of every 35 cases of rape is reported. Over 60% of the victims are between the ages of 14 and 19 years. Globally, it has been said that most rapists attack victims that are under the age of 15. The rapists are usually familiar people and not total strangers. Rape is considered as an act of immorality in certain cultures and some families insist on girls marrying the perpetrators to restore family honour.

During wars and conflicts, rape is taken as a symbol of subjugation and humiliation of the enemy. In such contexts, female refugees and street children are more susceptible to rape than during peace times. Children, in general, are vulnerable to sexual abuse because of their ignorance and trustfulness.

GBV occurs everywhere, be it in the home, school, workplace or wider society. The major reason for its widespread nature is embedded in certain patriarchal values that regard women as mere sex objects to be conquered and satisfy the desire of men. Certain myths also see women as accomplices in the rape cases and men as having animalist desires which cannot be controlled. In the absence of limited institutional mechanisms to address GBV and a deliberate culture of silence around issues of sexuality and abuse, GBV will continue to thrive.
Effects of GBV

The effects of GBV on girls are costly, intense and long lasting. These can be physical, psychological, social or economic in nature.

- **Physical effects** – According to the UNHCR, physical effects of sexual violence include pain, contracting of STIs and HIV in cases where the assailant is infected, mutilated genitalia, unintended pregnancy, abortion or infanticide, unwanted children, and even death.

- **Psychological effects** – Psychological trauma is also known to result from GBV and this ranges from paralysis and terror to emotional pain; sense of denial, depression, mental disorder, and sometimes suicide. The victim can also experience nightmares and be haunted by fear and feelings of shame or guilt.

- **Social effects** – Social costs to survivors of GBV include rejection, stigmatization, further sexual exploitation and severe punishment. The development and well-being of children and families is also affected. Boys who witness battery are likely to be of violent disposition while girls grow into victims. GBV inhibits girls’ access to schooling, may result in poor performance at school and deprives society of the full participation of women in development. Research confirms that: “Early sexual victimisation may leave women less skilled in protecting themselves, less sure of their worth and their personal boundaries, and more apt to accept victimisation as part of being female, these may increase the chances of future victimisation like battery, rape, domestic violence, high risk behaviour in adolescence and adulthood like unprotected sex with multiple partners, alcohol and substance abuse, teen pregnancy, prostitution.”

- **Economic effects** – Victims bear enormous financial costs in accessing justice and health services. States also bear costs when they commit resources to provision of legal and health services to survivors.

Efforts to address GBV will remain reactive and less successful if we continue to keep silent about it and believe that equality of the sexes is a myth.

Research, advocacy and hotline management are strategies that have been combined successfully by the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre in Beijing, China (www.maple.org.cn). The centre opened the first women’s hotline in China in 1992 and has since then added special anti-domestic violence hotlines, carried out researches and public awareness activities that have led to law reform, e.g., prohibition of domestic violence and legal responsibility of the.
Gender-based violence in schools

- In an educational setting in Ecuador, 22% of adolescent girls reported being sexually abused at school.¹ A Human Rights Watch study of violence in eight South African schools found that sexual abuse and harassment of girls were rampant in many schools. Girls were raped in school lavatories, dormitories and empty classrooms.²

- Perpetrators of gender-based school violence are generally older male classmates, but teachers are also offenders. A 2003 study in Dodowa, Ghana, found that teachers were responsible for 5% of these assaults on students. Additionally, one third of the 50 teachers interviewed said that they knew of at least one teacher who had sex with students.³

Education is an important tool in the fight against HIV and AIDS. However, some schools fail to provide the necessary protection for children and may expose young people — especially girls — to violence. School cultures can contribute to gender violence. Often, gender stereotypes and inequities abound in the classroom, where different behaviours and roles are expected from girls and boys. Gender-based violence in schools takes many forms, e.g., sexual harassment, aggressive or unsolicited sexual advances, touching, groping, intimidation, verbal abuse or sexual assaults. Schools that are not safe or that promote gender disparity breed the inequality that lasts a lifetime. HIV-prevention education is undermined in these hostile environments because the curriculum teaches one thing and the atmosphere models the opposite.

While access to, and the availability of, life skills classes are important to stopping the spread of HIV, so too is a school environment that is child-friendly, and protects the rights of all children. According to UNICEF, a child-friendly school:
- is gender-sensitive for both girls and boys;
- protects children (there is no corporal punishment, no child labour and no physical, sexual or mental harassment);
- involves children in active and participatory learning;
- involves all children, families and communities (and is particularly sensitive to and protective of the most vulnerable children);
- is healthy, has safe water and adequate sanitation, with separate toilet facilities for girls and boys;
- teaches children about life skills and HIV/AIDS.

Adapted from: Girls, HIV/AIDS and education, UNICEF, 2004 (32 p.):
www.unicef.org/publications/index_25047.html (English/French/Spanish)

www.hrw.org/reports/2001/safrica

Conclusion

That GBV is pervasive is well known. Efforts to address it will remain reactive and less successful if we continue to keep silent about it and believe that equality of the sexes is a myth. All those who are concerned about GBV should therefore seek ways to be proactive and more effective by addressing the gender issues in their settings and programming to break the culture of silence on the issue.

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Grace Osakue

Co-founder of Girls’ Power Initiative (GPI)
Nigeria, GPI Coordinator in Edo State and guest editor of this issue

Correspondence:
GPI Edo State Centre
7 Eguadese Street, Off Akpakpava Street
Former NYSC Secretariat Building
PO Box 7400, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
tel: +234 52 255162, fax: +234 52 252497
e-mail: mumysygee@yahoo.com
web: www.gpinigeria.org

1. For reasons of space, we have omitted the references. They can be found in the online version of this article: www.kit.nl/fis/exchange_content/html/2006-2_contents.asp.