Violence against Girls who are Blind and Visually Impaired in Schools in Malawi

Abigail Suka
Country Representative
Sight Savers International
Private Bag A 197
Lilongwe
Malawi
abigailsuka@malawi.net

Introduction
In Malawi violence against girls (VAG) is rampant. Research work commissioned between recently by DFID, Action Aid and its partners shows that out of all the incidences of violence in schools 65% of these affect girls while 35% affect boys.¹ None of this research has looked at how violence in school affects girls with disabilities in general and visual impairment in particular.

Sight Savers International (SSI) in Malawi is a member of the Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSQBE) which recently conducted a study on Violence Against Girls. SSI collaborated with Malawi Union of the Blind to also gather some information from this study and extrapolate it to attempt to establish how the girl who is blind is affected by such violence. This paper reports issues raised in discussions held by the writer with MUB Girl Guide members using the CSQBE study report as a guide, and some key informants, mainly blind young women who have defied the odds and passed through an unsafe school system. It also draws on literature available on the subject.

What is Gender Based Violence (GBV)?
The Fourth World Conference of Women, held in Beijing, China in 1995, reported the continued exploitation and abuse of girls in spite of the ratification of various UN conventions notably the Convention of the Rights of the Child of 1989. Specific issues raised included the violence directed at girls in the form of female genital mutilation, forced and early marriages, sexual exploitation, unequal access to education and health care. GBV recognizes that violence directed at girls and women is expressive of patriarchal power and authority²

¹ CSCQBE report 2005
² The Girl Child: Having to Fit by Yasmin Jiwani 19998.
What is School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV)?
SRGBV comes in various forms such as sexual, physical, verbal, emotional and psychological and occurs in and out of school. Perpetrators of VAG are many but most of the VAG is committed by male pupils and male teachers thereby making schools unsafe for girls. This problem came into the limelight because in most schools enrolment for girls in upper primary school and secondary schools in much lower than boys. Moreover in most schools girls perform poorly during classroom exercises, tests and examinations. This problem is partly attributed to violence and is of concern because they cause high drop out and low education attainment for girls.

The Global Statistics on Violence Against Girls with Disabilities
The FREDA Research Centre on VAG, based in Canada, reports that³

- 53% of women with disabilities from birth have been raped, abused, or assaulted (Lynn & O'Neill 1995:278)
- The rate of sexual abuse for girls with disabilities is quadruple that of the national average (Razack 1994)

Another study conducted through the New York City Board of Education who documented cases of adult to student sexual abuse found that whilst students receiving special education made up only 7% of the student body as a whole, they made up twice that percentage of targets of abuse.⁴ A report by Waxman Fiduccia summarizing a few studies that offer a gender breakdown suggests that women and girls face higher rates of abuse than men and boys, often at the rate of more than twice the rate of non disabled girls⁵

Perceptions about Violence Against Girls
Centre for Social Research in Malawi found the following perceptions about acts that constitute violence against girls at school⁶:

- Corporal punishments like digging pits, molding bricks during class time
- Teasing, bullying and beating by boys and teachers
- Forced to have relationships and sex with boys and teachers
- Verbal abuse
- Sexually harassment i.e. touching their breasts and other private parts.
- Rape
- Impregnation
- Discrimination by teachers.

³ The FREDA Centre for Research on Violence Against Girls and Women
⁴ Sexual Harassment in School, An invisible issue for Girls and Young Women with Disabilities, Harilyn Rouso
⁵ Disabled Women and violence Fact sheet, B.F. Waxman Fiduccia
⁶ Study Report: Violence Against Girls in School by University of Malawi, Centre for Social Research
- Suspending and expelling girls without warnings.
- Not giving girls chance to voice out their views.

A focus group discussion undertaken with Malawi Union of the Blind – Youth Wing girls when they were undergoing Girl Guide training, identified all the above as factors affecting them and added some more as:

- Threats and actual sexual abuse from specialist teachers, class room (contact) teachers and blind boys
- Promises to marry from blind adults in leadership positions in the organization of the Blind
- Extensive teasing, such as leading them to a wrong classroom, hiding their white cane and their writing materials (Primary Education Pack)
- Not escorting them to the toilet
- Name Calling: For girls with albinism and low vision they face ridiculing name calling such as Zigoma: after the name of a singer with albinism or Mzungu or whitey
- Verbal abuse: belittling them suggesting no one would be interested in an affair with a blind girl

The Face of SRGBV: Low Enrolment of Visually Impaired Girls in School
There are more women with visual impairment than men, however enrolment figures obtained from an integrated education programme that Sightsavers International supports consistently show a lower enrolment of girls in primary schools. Data from 8 project districts is tabulated below:

MALAWI INTEGRATED EDUCATION PROGRAMME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>IT's</th>
<th>VIC BOYS</th>
<th>VIC GIRLS</th>
<th>VIC TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blantyre</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilongwe</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumphi</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chikwawa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zomba</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salima</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balaka</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinga</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td><strong>556</strong></td>
<td><strong>484</strong></td>
<td><strong>1040</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

53% 47%
The Basic Education Statistics 2005, reported national enrollment of visually impaired children in schools in 2005 to be 15490\(^7\), of which 7412 (47\%) are girls and 8078 (53\%) are boys, as in the project districts supported.

Analysis of the Basic Education Statistics published for 2005 demonstrates that of the number of visually impaired girls who would have started off primary school in Standard 1, only 15\% make it to the final class in primary school (Standard 8) indicating an unacceptably high level of drop outs. Although ‘lack of interest’ is indicated as the major reason contributing to high drop out, this consultation and other evidence suggests that violence against these visually impaired girls in school is a key factor in this high drop out rate. Or at least violence in schools is a major cause of the lack of interest, in other words, girls simply stop going to school because of the unsafe environment and this is interpreted as ‘a lack of interest’ Compared to sighted girls, 25\% reach the final primary school class. Compared to visually impaired boys, 31\% would reach Standard 8, even beating the sighted pupils demonstrating that girls in general occupy a lower place in society. This also accentuates the fact that when a girl, is not only a girl but is also blind, the odds of her finishing her education are even more limited.

Sadly continuation to secondary school is even more dismal. Of 607 girls with visual impairment who would have completed Standard 8 in 2005, only 217 (35\%) would make it to secondary school and not all of these will complete secondary school.

**Factors affecting their propensity to Violence**

The first obvious factor has to be the limitation caused by the disability itself that may make it more difficult for a girl with visual impairment to detect or even discern the behavior of her perpetrator. Harilyn Rousso in her paper on ‘Sexual harassment in Schools’ intimates that ‘disability – related limitations make it difficult for girls with certain disabilities, to detect and fully understand the nature of the perpetrators behaviour, and some disabilities may limit her ability to defend herself or move away from perpetrators and to report incidents of violence\(^8\).

The more underlying reasons however lie in the negative attitudes that girls with disability face in their day to day lives. The focus group discussion undertaken with MUB girl guides indicate that many suffer from low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence which makes them portray a sense of helpless which in turn licenses perpetrators. For many girls such abuses start from their homes and extend to their trusted mentors such as a specialist teacher. There is no data to quantify the extent to which people in position of trust such as specialist teachers and classroom teacher, guides etc. This is mainly because the girls will lack the courage to report. Those who can talk about it are no longer in the school system.

---

\(^7\) Education Basic Statistics Malawi 2005, ME&HRD Statistics Unit, Page 33  
\(^8\) Harilyn Rousso, Sexual Harassment in Schools: An invisible Issue for Girls and Young Women with Disabilities
In her paper, The Girl Child: Having to ‘Fit’, Yasmin Jiwani, Ph.D. states that ‘girls with disabilities experience higher rates of sexual abuse (at 4 times the national average) because of their dependent status, isolation, and the negative stereotypes that prevail in the dominant society. Afraid to report the abuse because of the fear of not being believed, many of these girls continue to lead lives that are jeopardized by threats and actual incidents of violence’ They are often stereotyped, thereby undermining for actors to deal with unique and specific issue different to each girl. Harilyn Rousso reports of an extreme example of a stereotypical attitude in an incident of a young woman with disability who tried to report an attempted rape, her counselor said ‘Who would want to rape YOU?’ Furthermore, it is unbelievable that in some countries some courts will not entertain allegations of sexual violence brought by blind women or girls, because of supposed difficulties in identifying the perpetrator.

Why should we address Violence against Visually Impaired girls NOW?

1) MDGs and EFA
One of the UN Millennium Development Goals adopted by the Heads of State and Government is to ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, should be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. In order to achieve this goal, there is need for a 100% net enrolment and completion rates for school age children, including those with disabilities. There are far too few girls with disabilities completing school (15%). If this phenomenon is not addressed, it threatens to derailed efforts by governments and other stakeholders to promote girls education and achieve 2015 Education for All (EFA) goals. Without visually impaired girls attaining an education, MDG and EFA will not be a reality for Malawi.

Girls with Disabilities are bound together by double discrimination based on gender and disability. Statistics tell us that females with disabilities are achieving less in terms of employment and socialization into the mainstream of life than men with disabilities, with the vast majority of women living in dependent and comparatively impoverished circumstances. In many developing countries, there are few educational opportunities for girls with disability. When there are opportunities for education, in special schools, boys usually receive them. Therefore it is necessary to ensure that where visually impaired girls are managing to go to school as is the case in Malawi where at least 400 girls with visual impairment were attending an integrated education in 2004, concerted effort should be made by stakeholders in their education to make sure that they stay in school.

______________________________

9 Having a Daughter With a Disability: Is it Different For Girls? An extract from news Digest
2) The time is right
There is sufficient platform provided by Women’s Rights Activism, Women Disability Rights and the UN Charter on Disabilities. These international instruments will help to accelerate the effort to address and advocate for safe environment for girls who are blind and visually impaired to go to school.

3) HIV/AIDS
In Malawi, we are racing against the deadly HIV/AIDS pandemic. Not only is the rate of HIV/AIDS among people with disabilities threatening to scourge, on account of poverty related socio economic factors and attitudes, but sadly also due to prevalent cultural beliefs that having sex with a person with a disabilities will cure or ‘cleanse’ you of AIDS. Grace Massa, chairperson of Albinism Fellowship in Malawi intimates it is a common belief that girls with albinism are the best ‘cleansers’.  

According to the World Bank funded Global Survey of HIV/AIDS among disabled populations, HIV/AIDS is a significant and almost wholly unrecognized problem among disabled populations worldwide. A growing body of literature and experience supports the notion that HIV/AIDS educational, testing and clinical programs around the world are largely inaccessible to individuals with disability.

Continued low literacy rates among disabled individuals, particularly girls present real challenges to prevention efforts. It is therefore imperative that we address the issue of a safe environment for a girl who is blind to stay in school so that she can have higher literacy rates.

What strategies can we employ?

Concrete information: Obtaining information and data is the first step towards developing appropriate responses and services. It has been acknowledge that there is insufficient information in this important area. We need to undertake studies specifically addressing Violence against Girls with Disabilities and specifically with visual impairment because there are unique aspects to visual impairment.

Challenging stereotypes: through community education, youth projects and media campaigns. In particular challenging “the almost universal belief that disabled people cannot be a reliable witness on their own behalf”

---

10 Newspaper article, Grace Massa, Chairperson of Albino Association in Malawi
**Raising awareness:** of the adverse effect SRGBV has on a girl who is blind to the various audiences that we have access to.

**Empowerment Programmes** specifically designed to empower girls who are blind and visually impaired. Many state that they fail to report incidents of violence because they were shy. Therefore, programmes to improve the assertiveness of girls are necessary. However, shyness sometimes comes about because the reporting procedures themselves are not conducive. Therefore, advocating for the establishment of 'safe pathways' or procedures that encourages girls who are blind to report incidents of violence.

**Advocacy & Coalition Building** – by remaining alert on SRGBV issues and participating in the wider advocacy arena, we can influence changes in legislation, school practice and curricula aimed at stopping violence against girls and we will have opportunity to add a voice regarding the girl who is blind. Joining established ‘voices’ or platforms such as the Civil Society Coalition will add credibility and muscle to our voice. Going it alone is unnecessary and expensive. However for us to participate in this advocacy effort we need to bring a body of evidence to the table, hence the need for professional research in this area.

**Motivation & Role Models** - What would be the point of going to school if there no hope of you getting employment or engaging in meaningful pursuits? There is a role that role models can play. In this regards, the few girls who are blind and have completed their education and are participating meaningfully and interdependently in society need to be involved in programmes to reach the younger blind girls and talk to them about what career options they have. In this regard most of the key informants to this interview are in that category. They have demonstrated that they are not passive victims of harassment and violence. Theirs are stories that also need to be told.