



Centre for Health Ethics Law and Development



Becoming Allies:

*Engaging Secondary Boys as Allies and Bystanders
in the Fight Against Gender-Based Violence*

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Centre for Health Ethics Law and Development (CHELD) conducted a pivotal study to explore the role of men and boys in gender-based violence (GBV) interventions within Nigerian tertiary institutions. The research revealed a significant gap in the engagement strategies employed by Women's Rights Organizations (WROs). Specifically, it highlighted that men and boys were often treated as secondary targets rather than being actively involved in the design and implementation of GBV solutions. This passive engagement approach overlooked the critical role men and boys play in challenging harmful behaviours and attitudes that contribute to GBV.

A key recommendation from the study was to reframe male engagement strategies by involving men and boys more intentionally and at earlier stages of their social and educational development. The study emphasized the importance of targeting secondary schools, where young boys are still forming foundational attitudes toward gender roles, equality, and respect. This stage of development presents a unique opportunity to shape positive values and behaviours that can reduce the likelihood of harmful practices in adulthood.

The findings highlighted the need for a proactive approach, one that shifts from viewing men and boys solely as contributors to the problem to recognizing their potential as allies and co-creators of solutions. This transformative perspective positions male engagement as an integral part of GBV prevention, capable of breaking cycles of violence and fostering environments of mutual respect and equity. In response, CHELD has prioritized the inclusion of boys and young men in its educational outreach programs, starting at the secondary school level, to shift gender norms early and build a generation committed to combating GBV.

2. Linking Research to Action

Building on these findings, since 2021, CHELD has embarked on many outreach programmes to extend GBV education to secondary schools reaching over 1000 secondary students. The rationale for focusing on secondary schools included the following considerations:

1. **Early Intervention:** Adolescents are at a critical developmental stage where beliefs and attitudes toward gender roles are shaped. Intervening early can disrupt the cycle of socialization that perpetuates GBV.
2. **Foundation for Future Engagement:** Educating secondary school boys lays the groundwork for their continued involvement as allies in GBV prevention efforts at higher education levels and beyond.
3. **Potential for Community Impact:** Students serve as catalysts for change within their families and communities, spreading awareness and challenging harmful norms.

3. Programme Implementation

As part of the 2024 UNITE 16 Days of Activism Against GBV campaign, CHELD has continued its outreach. This initiative aligns with CHELD's commitment to combating GBV by incorporating the often-overlooked strategy of male engagement. This year, the program targeted students at Gbaja Boys Senior High School and Government College, Eric Moore Road.

The outreach took place on Friday, 29th November 2024, at two schools in Lagos State. At Gbaja Boys Senior High School, located on Modupe Johnson Crescent, sessions were conducted from 9:30 AM to 11:00 AM. The second session was held at Government College, situated on Eric Moore Road, from 11:30 AM to 1:00 PM. A total of 288 students participated in the program, with 70 and 50 students attending the two sessions at Gbaja Boys Senior High and 168 students at Government College. Additionally, 20 parents and staff including school administration attended the first session.

The primary objectives of the outreach were to:

1. Educate secondary school boys on the different forms and effects of GBV.
2. Dispel popular myths and misconceptions that perpetuate GBV.
3. Promote use of respectful and inclusive language and behaviour when interacting with women and girls.
4. Encourage students to act as allies and proactive bystanders in preventing GBV

4. Key Areas of Teaching During the Sessions

The outreach sessions focused on delivering a structured and engaging curriculum to help secondary school boys understand gender-based violence (GBV), dispel harmful myths, and recognize their roles as advocates and allies in prevention. Through interactive discussions, practical examples, and relatable scenarios, the teaching was designed to connect with the students on a personal level. Below are the focus areas during the sessions, supported by examples of questions and discussions.

- **Understanding Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** The sessions began by introducing the concept of GBV, providing clear definitions, and breaking it down into its various forms. Physical violence, such as hitting and slapping, was explained alongside emotional violence, which includes intimidation and constant belittling. Sexual violence was addressed with examples of inappropriate touching or coerced activities, while economic violence was illustrated through situations where women were denied access to financial resources. Facilitators explained that GBV is rooted in unequal power dynamics and social norms, helping students recognize its prevalence and impact across communities.



- **Dispelling Myths and Misconceptions:** A significant part of the outreach involved addressing and dispelling harmful myths about GBV. One pervasive myth was the belief that a woman's dress can provoke violence. Facilitators refuted this by emphasizing that violence is always the perpetrator's choice. Real-life examples of victims, including toddlers and elderly women, were shared to highlight that clothing is irrelevant. Another common misconception addressed was the idea that only women and girls experience GBV. Facilitators explained that men and boys could also be victims, emphasizing the universal nature of GBV.
- **Impact of GBV on individuals:** The sessions also explored the wide-ranging consequences of GBV, helping students empathize with survivors. Physical health consequences, such as injuries and long-term complications, were discussed alongside mental health impacts like trauma, anxiety, and depression. Economic consequences, including loss of education or employment opportunities due to stigma or abuse, were also highlighted. These discussions helped students understand how GBV harms individuals, disrupts families, and destabilizes communities.
- **Encouraging Appropriate Language and Behaviour:** Encouraging respectful communication with women and girls was another critical focus. The importance of using appropriate language was emphasized, and students were introduced to examples of harmful words and their impact. Facilitators reinforced that respectful interactions begin with everyday words and actions, shaping a culture of mutual respect.
- **Your role as an ally and bystander:** Students were also empowered to see themselves as active participants in preventing GBV. The role of bystanders was a key discussion point, with students encouraged to intervene safely and responsibly. They also addressed the misconception that avoiding violence personally absolves someone of the responsibility to act when others commit harm. Facilitators stressed the importance of speaking up, not just for the victim's safety but also to guide their peers toward better behaviour.

5. Findings and Observations

- **Awareness and Understanding:** The sessions revealed that many students were unfamiliar with the term "gender-based violence" and other forms of GBV aside from physical violence.
- **Dispelling Myths:** One of the most challenging myths to address was the belief that a person who dresses 'indecently' is to blame for provoking violence. This view was not only prevalent among students but was also expressed by at least one parent who remarked, "A person who dresses indecently has assaulted the man first" and a staff who had asked "What then should we do when we see a woman not 'properly dressed'". The facilitators worked to dismantle these harmful narratives by emphasizing that violence is never justified and is the sole responsibility of the perpetrator.
- **Bystander Intervention and Reporting GBV:** Some students expressed concerns about being bystanders to GBV and the risks involved in reporting it. To address these fears, the facilitators shared practical strategies for safe intervention and anonymous reporting.
- **Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes:** The students actively participated in discussions and demonstrated a clear understanding of the topics by the end of the sessions. During the Q&A, many articulated what they had learned, showing progress in their comprehension of GBV and their role in preventing it.
- **Role of Parents and Staff:** Parents and school staff played an important role in the programme at Gbaja Boys. The parents and school administrators were proactive and committed to continuing educational interventions on GBV. Their cooperation was instrumental in the success of the programme.

6. Impact and Achievements

The outreach program achieved notable successes in its mission to educate and inspire change. Students demonstrated significant growth in their understanding of GBV, moving from unfamiliarity to articulating its forms and consequences. Many expressed their commitment to adopting respectful behaviours and challenging harmful stereotypes in their schools and communities.

School administrators expressed gratitude for the program and pledged to explore ways to integrate GBV education into their ongoing activities. The outreach also highlighted the importance of engaging parents and staff to ensure a unified approach to tackling GBV.



7. Recommendations

To build on the successes of this outreach, CHELD proposes the following:

- **Sustained Engagement:** One of the key recommendations is to expand the program to include more schools across Lagos State and potentially beyond, ensuring that a larger number of students are reached with this critical intervention. While the current outreach has made significant strides, there is still a wide gap in the understanding of GBV among secondary school students.
- **Parental Workshops:** Given that parents play a pivotal role in shaping the beliefs and behaviours of their children, it is crucial to engage them in the conversation around GBV. It is recommended to develop dedicated workshops for parents to address harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about GBV. These workshops should focus on educating parents about the different forms of GBV, its impact on individuals and society, and the importance of fostering healthy relationships.
- **Curriculum Integration:** To ensure the long-term sustainability and impact of the program, it is vital to advocate for the inclusion of GBV education as part of the school curriculum and activities. This integration would provide a structured approach to learning, ensuring that every student, regardless of their school, receives essential knowledge about GBV and their role in its prevention. Moreover, including GBV education in the curriculum and activities would institutionalize the message, making it an ongoing part of the school culture and empowering students to continue spreading awareness and advocating for change.

- **Educator Training:** Teachers and school administrators are on the front lines of student interaction and have a significant influence on shaping the school culture. To effectively address GBV, it is crucial to provide training for educators, equipping them with the knowledge and tools needed to address GBV-related topics in the classroom and beyond. Educator training should focus on understanding the signs of GBV, how to respond appropriately to disclosures of violence, and how to engage in meaningful conversations with students about consent, respect, and equality. Furthermore, educators should be trained in how to manage sensitive topics within the school environment, ensuring that students feel safe and supported when discussing GBV.
- **Peer Education Programmes:** Another important recommendation is the establishment of peer education programs in schools. Peer educators can be trained to lead discussions and awareness campaigns among their peers, creating a more relatable and peer-driven approach to GBV education. Peer-led initiatives often resonate more deeply with students, as they feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics with their fellow classmates. Peer educators could also act as trusted allies for students who may feel uncomfortable speaking with teachers or adults, thus providing additional support channels for students in need.





8. Conclusion

The 2024 UNITE 16 Days of Activism outreach program marked an important step in engaging young males in the fight against GBV. While challenges remain, the program succeeded in raising awareness, dispelling misconceptions, and inspiring students to take on active roles as allies and advocates. CHELD remains committed to continuing this vital work, ensuring that young men and boys are equipped with the knowledge and skills to foster a more equitable and violence-free society.



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