

Gender Equity Strategies for South Sudan Series

Women Mentors for Girls in School

Very few of the girls currently in school in South Sudan will have the opportunity to learn with a woman teacher. Only approximately 6% of teachers are female and in some regions, such as Upper Nile and Bahr El Ghazal, the percentage drops to 2% and 5 % respectively. For girls who are studying in male dominated schools, the impact of this lack of women teachers may be multi-faceted. Although the male teachers may encourage the girls in the school, the presence of a woman teacher is particularly important for girls, as she can, for example:

- Act as a role model to inspire and encourage girls to continue their studies
- Discuss personal issues such as sexuality, menstruation or family concerns with girls
- Be particularly attune to the learning styles and needs of girls
- Be particularly attune to girls' personal safety and other needs
- Advocate for girls and for gender equality in general within school decision-making processes
- Connect and communicate easily with mothers during home visits or community meetings

Various long-term strategies are being used to increase the numbers of women teachers in schools, but in the short term, measures are being taken by individual schools to address the lack of women's participation in the school. Where it is, at least for the foreseeable future, impossible to recruit a women teacher, schools can hire a so-called 'mentor' to come in to school on a regular basis to lead particular activities with female students. Furthermore, this mentor can play the important role of being a friendly, female face who girls can trust and can talk to about any of their personal or academic concerns. In brief, a mentor can fulfill some of the roles listed above that a woman teacher might play in the promotion of girls' education.

Although she may not have the same formal, professional qualifications as the male teachers, it is important that a mentor is a woman who is respected as an important member of the school community. It may not be possible for her to be present all day every day, but it would seem important that she be present at all school functions, meetings (including staff meetings) and activities, in addition to her regular activities with girls. These may include individual meetings, small group and whole group activities, depending on the needs and interests of the girls.

Other pointers provided to schools by the GESP about the job description for a mentor include:

- A mentor works with the girls on strategies to address their problems
- She can represent girls' perspectives and needs at school and community meetings
- She is energetic, encouraging and inspiring girls to complete their studies and to fulfill their potential.
- She gives specific information and advice to girls, for example on menstruation, family planning, HIV/AIDS.

Whilst a mentor-recruitment strategy seems promising, it nonetheless raises some also raise a number of conceptual and programming challenges and questions for further consideration and impact analysis:

- What is the actual short and long-term impact of mentors on girls' attendance and performance in school?
- What sort of relationships develop between the male staff members and a non-teaching, woman mentor? Is it possible for her to be respected and integrated into the school community?
- Is the role of mentor in a school one that can empower women to consider becoming teachers and can pathways be created for that to be possible?