

LESOTHO

Toilets at school ensure privacy and safety

Going to a school lacking proper basic facilities, like toilets, could be one of the most frustrating situations for many children in the rural schools of Lesotho. For some, relieving oneself means going behind a bush, or up the hill or jumping into a gully. Children do not only risk being attacked by wild animals, but they are also deprived of the necessary privacy and exposed to health hazards.

The situation is as bad for teachers and also more inconvenient. “You have to do everything before you leave home and just hope nothing will be too pressing before you get back home again.” For the girls at school, it is even worse, explains Litlhaka Sefeane, a nine-year-old standard five pupil at Kanana Primary School in Mokhotlong District. It is very common for boys not only to intimidate and make fun of girls, but also attack and beat them up. Going off alone makes one a prime candidate for such bullying. There is no specific reason for being attacked, it just happens.

Litlhaka still remembers how boys would chase her and her friends and throw stones at them. Some would get hit and sustain injuries. The punishment would be for the teachers to whip the boys or just tongue lash them, but that did not change much. This meant a lot of girls ended up not relieving themselves at all.

As explained by Kanana Primary School's Head Teacher Mrs. Mapesela, “We have had a number of incidences of young girls, especially the very shy ones, ending up wetting themselves in class. Mishaps like this one don't just affect the child's self-esteem but also his/her performance in class. Some may even drop out of school or transfer to schools with better facilities, which could mean a few extra kilometres to walk, exposing particularly girls to more security risks.”

There are also eminent health hazards with the children relieving themselves all over the place. Litlhaka knows the risk of contracting diseases, not only because she was taught it in class by her teachers, but because she experienced it firsthand. During a typhoid outbreak at her school, she was one of the victims.

Her school now has new toilets. Thanks to UNICEF's contribution to the schools' infrastructure project, gender-responsive toilets for girls and boys as well as for their teachers have been constructed and safe drinking water provided in 19 schools in Mokhotlong District.

However, there is still a lot of education to be done. Many of the children are not comfortable to use the toilets. Others do not know about the benefits of handwashing. But for the girls, that doesn't compare with being attacked by schoolboys or herdboys while in the bush.

The teachers at school have already started with the education campaign to encourage children to use the toilets and keep healthy and clean. What is even more encouraging is that – unlike in the past when there was only one toilet block for both girls and boys – the toilet blocks have now been placed at different locations, reducing the chances of girls being intimidated by boys.

The building of toilets in schools has not only brought about a change at the school compounds. With the teachers, the children and public health workers spreading the message of sanitation and good health and hygiene, many of the rural communities are now beginning to see the importance of having and using toilets.

About 50 per cent of schools in Lesotho do not have access to water and sanitation facilities. The situation is aggravated by the recurrent drought, one of the worst in the past thirty years. With water tables receding and up to 30 per cent of water points in populated rural areas having dried up, water and sanitation have been core issues in primary health care. UNICEF is working closely with the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Health in providing safe drinking water and gender-responsive sanitation facilities in schools, communities and health centres.

For Litlhaka and her friends, the toilets don't just guarantee them privacy, but also safety and dignity while taking care of their bodily needs. And, as Litlhaka observes, more and more children are feeling comfortable using this basic facility at school.