



## The Impact of Safety Audits

### Enhancing Safe Access to Education for Girls at Hai Kosti Primary School

Justine Jofiso Thomas is the headmistress of Hai Kosti Girls' Primary School, the head of the school's Parent Teach Association (PTA), and a long-time devoted educator in Wau Municipality.

Justine has long held serious concerns about the safety of her young female students traveling to school every day. Before the community-driven Enhancing Community Resilience and Local Governance Project (ECRP) constructed a wall around the school, motorists and pedestrians could pass through the school premises freely, exposing the girls to potential motor vehicle accidents, harassment, and many other risks. The Boma Development Committee (BDC) thoughtfully selected the wall for the school as their topmost priority after going through ECRP's prioritization and planning process to minimize these dangers and enhance the girls' ability to attend school. Justine noted that though the wall significantly reduces the risks to these girls, the safety audits (whereby community members came together to identify safety risks related to accessing the public infrastructure built by ECRP, as well as mitigatory actions for those risks) were instrumental to revealing to the community and school administrators the safety concerns that remained, particularly regarding the harassment and assault of these young girls.

Justine explained that when the community was mobilized at the school compound to conduct the ECRP initiated safety audit and men and women were broken into groups to discuss gaps in safety and security at the school, she came to understand that *"the fence alone will not ensure that the girls are safe. [The community] need[s] to take further steps to enable the girls to attend school safely. This is the same as if you built yourself a house, but don't check to make sure that gaps are not left in the structure that could allow a snake to enter and attack you. ECRP has given us the fence; now it is our responsibility to keep the children safe at school."*

She expanded up this assertion, articulating that risks of harassment



Handover of Hai Kosti school after rehabilitation and construction of perimeter wall © July 2022/ Juliano JUMA.



The headmistress of Hai Kosti Girls Primary School, Justine Jofiso Thomas, shows new ECRP-constructed perimeter wall and explains its positive impact in mitigation GBV risks to the young female students. Photographs taken by Elizabeth Jua, August 2022. © IOM 2022/ Elizabeth JUA

and assault, particularly by youth gangs, remain for the girls before they enter or after they leave the safe confines of the newly walled-in school. Furthermore, she stated, *"as a community, we have learned that we have the responsibility to identify risks and take action to address them before they happen."* To this end, the headmistress, PTA, BDC members, and other community representatives present at the safety audit determined to build a small new structure near the school for the storage of dignity kits and sanitary napkins for the girls' easy access, thus meaning girls will no longer be forced to leave school alone during abnormal hours to obtain resources or otherwise deal with the effects of menstruation at home.

Furthermore, the headmistress, PTA members, BDC members, and other community representatives identified another significant issue of concern – a mango tree nearby the school which stood in a semi-secluded area that was also partially enclosed by surrounding structures and which had previously proven to be a space where young girls could be more easily preyed upon. It was therefore communally decided that the tree should be uprooted because of the danger of its placement, but that five mango trees would be planted in its place within and nearby the school grounds in locations that do not create risky spaces for girls. Notably, these community members approached county officials for support removing the large tree and planting the new ones. This support was gladly given by county officials in the community-wide effort to combat Gender-Based Violence (GBV) at Hai Kosti Girls Primary School.

Justine emphasized that taking this action *"has created a safer place for the girls that allows them to report to school consistently and is more conducive for their learning because there is no longer a space for criminals to hide near the school."*

Justine believes that these joint efforts by the community to protect their young female students has already increased enrollment and attendance at the school and thereby improved the girls' access to education.

