

## Addressing Violence against Women within the Education Sector

*...Safety and security don't just happen: they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in any society – a life free from violence and fear.*

*Nelson Mandela, World Report on Violence and Health, 2002*

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During the last decade, violence against women and girls has gained international recognition as a grave social and human rights concern affecting virtually all societies. Estimations on the prevalence of violence against women vary depending on the type of violence in question. A study of 10 countries found that between 13 and 62 percent of women have experienced physical violence by a partner over the course of their lifetime and between 3 and 29 percent of women reported violence within the past year (Bott, Morrison and Ellsberg, 2005). International studies have shown that between eight and 26 percent of women and girls have been sexually abused, either as children or adults. In all cases these figures are likely to be under-estimates of the true prevalence of abuse, as many women are reluctant to disclose violence due to shame and fear of reprisals. A survey of female adolescents that have had sex found that between seven and 48 percent of their first sexual experiences had been forced (Figure 1). In most cases, the offender is someone known to the woman; a family member, friend, school-mate or teacher.

Epidemiological research has demonstrated that VAW is a major cause of ill health among women and girls. Its impact can be seen directly through death and disability due to injuries, as well as indirectly through increased vulnerability to a host of physical and mental health problems. Girls who have been sexually abused in childhood are more likely to drop out of school; to have unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS; to engage in high risk sexual practices; and to suffer from depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts and behavior (Heise, Ellsberg, Gottemoeller, 1999; Gazmararian et al., 1995).

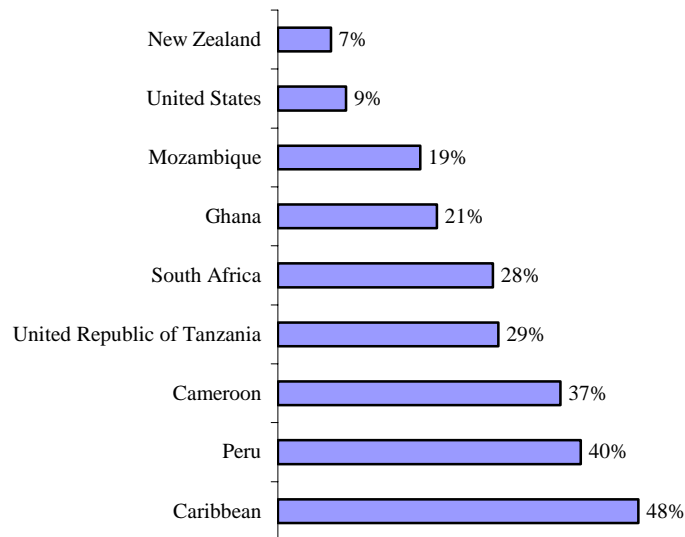


Figure 1. Female adolescents reporting forced sexual initiation, as a percent of those reporting having had sex (population-based surveys 1993-1999)

Source: Jewkes, Sen, and Garcia Moreno. 2002.

## Addressing VAW within Schools

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Educational reforms can play an important role in preventing violence against women by increasing school safety, by empowering women through education, and by promoting better attitudes and practices among students with regard to women's human rights. International studies have reliably shown that women with higher levels of education have a lower risk of being physically or sexually abused, though the link between education and violence is not necessarily linear (Jewkes et. al., 2002). Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence suggests that sexual harassment is widespread in educational settings in many parts of the world (see Box 1). In South Africa and Zambia, researchers documented a pattern in which schools dismissed girls' reports of sexual violence and harassment and failed to respond with any seriousness. Similar reports have emerged from other continents.

### **Box 1** **Sexual violence in schools**

- According to recent studies in six African countries, between 16% and 47% of girls in primary and secondary schools report sexual abuse or harassment, with both male fellow students and male teachers responsible for the abuse.
- In Botswana, 20% of female students reported having being asked by teachers for sexual relations.
- In Cameroon, 8% of sexual abuse of girls was committed by teachers
- A South African DHS found that 37.7% of all rape victims identified a teacher or principal as the rapist.
- A school-based study in Ecuador found that 22% of adolescent girls reported being victims of sexual abuse.
- A recent study of violence in Brazilian schools found that 8% of students from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade had witnessed sexual violence within the school environment.

Addressing VAW in schools is an important topic in its own right, because of its potential impact on girls' enrollment in schools. An unsafe environment in school may dissuade parents from enrolling girls or may lead to increased rates of school abandonment.

Paradoxically, schools - much like households - are therefore both the place where a significant amount of VAW occurs, and key players to engage in efforts to prevent VAW. Schools are uniquely positioned to detect which female pupils are suffering or are vulnerable to experiencing violence and to play a central role in the prevention of violence against girls both at school and at home. The challenge for schools is therefore two-fold: to reduce discrimination and VAW within the school setting; and to strengthen the capacity of schools to promote non-violence in families and communities. Schools—and more broadly the educational system and communities—can promote the prevention of VAW, by: reforming policies within the education sector; improving the institutional responses at the school-level to VAW; and promoting community mobilization in support of girls' safety and rights.

## Promising Practices

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### *Reforming policy within the education sector*

The first and most important step toward eliminating sexual abuse of girls in schools is to develop a strong and unequivocal policy statement that sexual violence and harassment are unacceptable in educational institutions and will not be tolerated, accompanied by clear definitions about what constitutes harassment and sexual violence. South Africa stands out as



Since male teachers are likely to be part of the problem, training must be accompanied by detection and enforcement mechanisms. Such mechanisms must involve parents and the wider community as well as the education ministry. Few comparable efforts exist in Latin America and the Caribbean, although Costa Rica is modifying the teacher-training curricula in the hope that graduates will promote gender equality in the classroom.

### ***Expanding school-based counseling and referral***

In Tanzania, the TANESA *Mlezi* (Guardian) project promoted girls' safety in schools by designating one teacher in each of 185 primary schools to counsel girls who had experienced sexual violence or who needed advice about other sexual and reproductive health matters. The impact of the program on stated willingness of girls to report sexual harassment by a teacher was impressive: in schools with a *mlezi*, 52 percent of girls said they would report harassment, compared to 0 percent in schools without a *mlezi*. The program, however, failed to change teachers' negative attitudes towards girls who became pregnant or contracted sexually transmitted infections.

Beyond providing basic services to girls, counselors must also be able to detect and prevent family violence against female pupils, and then refer them to the appropriate services when necessary. This involves both training of counselors and organization of a network of service providers who can offer more intensive or longer-term services than the counselors—an option that may be available only in larger urban areas.

### ***Including prevention of VAW in sexual and reproductive health programs***

Largely because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, primary and secondary schools worldwide now offer some kind of reproductive health education -- often in the form of “life skills” or “family life education.” Sexual and reproductive health programs should also teach life skills, including how to avoid risky or threatening situations --- related to such things as violence, sex or drugs --- and how to negotiate safe sexual behavior. These programs offer an excellent opportunity to address issues of violence and sexual coercion. A 2002 comparative study of HIV/AIDS education in three African countries showed that awareness and responsiveness to sexual harassment in Uganda, where explicit efforts had been made to include VAW, scored well above those of Botswana and Malawi, where no such initiatives existed. Moreover, studies have shown that failure to address gender imbalances can reinforce negative practices and put girls at greater risk of violence. For example, a program evaluation in Zimbabwe concluded that an HIV/AIDS peer education initiative had increased bullying of girls by peer educators' and also encouraged other boys to pressure girls for early and frequent sex.

### ***Improving girls' safety at, and en route to, school***

There are a number of initiatives that ensure situational violence prevention, or, in other words, remove the physical conditions and improve the infrastructure needed to prevent VAW. The UNICEF African Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI) – combining approaches also used in South Asia and the Middle East – establishes single sex schools, hires more female teachers, builds

separate latrines and canteens for girls, reduces the distance girls must travel to school, and/or provides in-service gender sensitivity training to teachers, principals, and inspectors. The expectation is that these initiatives will increase school enrollment of girls by increasing parents' willingness to send girls to school.

The prevalence and use of guns and drugs at school also is closely related to high levels of VAW. In 1992, the mayor of Cali, Colombia initiated a program against bearing guns called *Desarrollo, Seguridad, Paz* (development, security, peace) which involved a range of cultural and educational projects for schools and families in collaboration with local nongovernmental organizations. The objective was to promote discussions on violence and help resolve interpersonal conflicts. There were restrictions on the sale of alcohol, and the carrying of handguns was banned on weekends and special occasions. An evaluation found that the incidence of homicide was lower during periods when the ban on carrying firearms was in effect (World Health Organization, 2002).

### ***Community mobilization***

Some recent experiences demonstrate the importance of mobilizing parents and community members to monitor school safety. In Ghana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, researchers followed up their documentation of sexual violence and harassment in schools with seminars and workshops targeting students, parents, and teachers; workshops with government officials; and community theatre in the context of a traditional meeting of community stakeholders aimed at examining problems and finding solutions. These efforts not only raised awareness and increased the willingness of parents to report abuse, but also allowed the community to confront the problem without putting individual girls at risk for retaliation.

### **Further Reading**

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