

All over the world girls leave the relative security of their homes to attend school, where teachers take over from parents as daily caregivers. Too often, it appears, this trust is breached. Research in some settings shows high levels of sexual violence and harassment in schools, by teachers, headteachers and fellow students.

Unless indicated girls pictured in this chapter are not victims of sexual violence and/or harassment in schools.

Image: Brent Stirton

violence against girls in schools

“A teacher starts giving you more marks, invites you to his home and asks for [a] sexual favour.

If you refuse ... you get to be a victim in class.”¹

“I left school because I was raped by two guys in my class who were supposedly my friends.”²

“All the principal told him was, ‘Stop — if you’re beating girls already you’ll grow up to beat your wife.’ He didn’t get detention. Nothing. I don’t report anything anymore. I feel

it’s unnecessary. I’m just wasting my time.”³

“All the touching at school — in class, in the corridors, all day everyday — bothers me.

Boys touch your bum, your breasts.”⁴

“They say ‘You shagged the teacher,’ but I didn’t. He raped me.”⁵

A hostile learning environment

Gender-based violence is one dimension of the broader problem of violence in schools, and it manifests itself in a variety of ways. Whatever form it takes, violence against female students and teachers creates an atmosphere of intimidation and danger in an environment that should nurture and inspire.

While both boys and girls can be victimised at school, there are specific forms of gender-based violence to which girls most often are subjected. It may be verbal harassment — in the form of so-called teasing — or it may be of a more physical nature, such as unwanted touching and contact. It can also be more overtly violent, as in cases where girls are sexually assaulted or raped on or near school premises. Research in schools in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Malawi has shown that violence against girls also includes sexual propositions to girls by older male

students and teachers, as well as the use of sexually explicit language by teachers and students.⁶ Overtly sexual graffiti also can intimidate young women and create a hostile school atmosphere.

Girls are more susceptible to violence because of inequities of power and status in society. Boys who are abused, however, usually are victimised by other boys as punishment for not conforming to the prevailing norms about what constitutes suitable male behaviour or appearance. Their perceived weakness lowers their standing in the school hierarchy, making them vulnerable to taunting, bullying and other forms of aggression. One boy in the United States was scared to admit to his male friends that he disagreed with their harassment of female students: “Some of the boys that I considered my friends even began to do it [sexually taunt girls]. It felt awful to watch, but if I said anything, it would not stop them and would only hurt me.”⁷ While it is difficult enough for girls to

speak out about their experiences of violence, notions of appropriate masculine behaviour make it even harder for boys to admit that they, too, are targets of abuse.

Such oppressive control of sexuality in schools also pressures boys to follow certain models of masculine and heterosexual behaviour — which can result in greater acts of violence against girls. These notions are reinforced in many ways — formally through the curriculum and teaching materials, and informally, through the words and actions of teachers and other role models. Boys may feel the need to “prove” themselves, and one way of doing so is to sexually harass girls, either verbally or physically — and to do so publicly. In some circumstances this may go as far as gang rape. Human Rights Watch, for example, has documented cases in South Africa where girls as young as nine years of age were raped by two or more boys on the school campus.⁸

Girls, too, are under considerable peer pressure to conform to gender norms, such as making themselves physically attractive, tolerating harassment and allowing themselves to be the target of sexual jokes and innuendo. While there may be initiatives in place to make schools more “girl-friendly”, the underlying dynamic is one of gendered power imbalances, with boys and men — and their perspectives — dominant. In much of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, for example, girls who attend upper primary and secondary schools are a very small minority. In countries such as India, Chad, Malawi and Mozambique, less than 50 percent of girls who start school remain until Grade 5.⁹ Their institutions are dominated by male teachers and male students, and decision-making at all levels rests clearly in male hands. In Southern

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Sudan, for example, less than 7 percent of teachers are women, and in Bolivia only 16 percent of all head teachers are women. Women hold only 30 percent or less of teaching posts in 16 countries of sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ Female teachers usually are concentrated in urban settings, with far fewer in rural and remote areas.

Such male-dominated contexts make it very difficult for girls to assert themselves and to challenge male power. Doing so may mean ostracism and losing the support of friends and family. Reports from South Africa, for example, indicate that boys specifically target girls they perceive to

be arrogant or assertive, such as prefects, student leaders or girls who perform well at school.¹¹ Girls who are subjected to violence in school often have little recourse for complaint or even support — especially at the secondary level, where there are usually fewer girls compared with boys and very few female teachers. The majority of teachers are men, many of whom condone the behaviour of boys — or even worse, are perpetrators themselves. Girls may fear retaliation or negative consequences, such as exam failure or undue punishments, if they speak out and especially if they name the perpetrators.

A violation of trust

In many instances, the very people who are in positions of trust in a school and responsible for the well-being of students are the perpetrators of gender-based violence. A number of studies highlight the prevalence of sexual misconduct by teachers and the extent to which they neglect their duty to care.

A male teacher in Kenya was accused of grading girls based on their looks after making them parade in front of him at the head of the class while he studied their figures.¹² In a study in Botswana, 20 percent of girl students said that they had been propositioned for sex by teachers.¹³ Ten out of 16 girls at a school in Ghana had been asked for sex by teachers, and five of them knew of a girl in their class who was having sex with a teacher.¹⁴ In a similar study in Zimbabwe, 19 percent of the girls interviewed had been propositioned by a teacher, and a much larger number of them (63 percent) knew other girls who had been approached. Girls reported that teachers were quite open about

their intentions, making advances on girls during class and sports activities. Some girls were thought to accept such propositions for financial benefit, to be favoured in class, to avoid punishment or to gain better marks.¹⁵ In South Africa, one teacher who

sexually abused a number of students offered a young woman high grades in exchange for sex:

“I went to his dorm and walked to the lounge. He gave me a hooch [an alcoholic drink]. I was lame. I knew what was happening to me, but I couldn’t move. He picked me up and took me to his room and started taking my clothes off. He took his clothes off. He’s twice my size and, like, five times my weight and has so many muscles. Then he penetrated me. When I came to, I got up and went to my dorm. ... I was scared to tell anyone because I was afraid no one would believe me. I had been

A young Rwandan girl attends HIV/AIDS awareness training in her school. The high incidence of sexual assault among school-aged girls has caused the Rwandan government to initiate these programmes as part of a nationwide campaign to sensitise the population about gender-based violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many women and girls in Rwanda suffered some form of violence during the 1994 genocide. It has been estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 were raped.

Image: Julie Pudlowski

Statistics reveal that far fewer girls have access to education than boys. Getting more girls to school is already a global challenge – one further hindered by the threat of sexual violence or harassment facing girls in educational settings.

Image: Brent Stirton

raped before, and no one believed me then. ... The next day he asked me to come back. I gave him back his key and said I didn't want to have anything to do with him. ... About a week later he asked me if I would come do Afrikaans with him, and that he would give me good marks."¹⁶

Students who were the subjects of a study in Pakistan reported that teachers forced them to perform sexual acts by threatening them with or inflicting corporal punishment.¹⁷ Physical punishment, with its sexual undertones, is another way in which male teachers assert their power over female students, and in which the sex-power-gender dynamics between men and women in society at large are played out in the school setting.

Where teachers are underpaid and lack access to professional support and development opportunities, sexual relations with students may be considered a "fringe benefit". This is especially true in remote areas, where there are rarely effective systems in place to supervise teacher conduct or prosecute incidences of violation. Girls and their families may think it is futile to seek justice. Furthermore, not all parents, teachers and students disapprove of such relationships. If a girl becomes pregnant by a teacher, parents may be reluctant to pursue prosecution. In some very poor communities — in Southern Sudan, for example — families actually may welcome the pregnancy, as it might compel the teacher to marry the girl or pay compensation. In other contexts, parents feel disempowered and are unaware of how to challenge a teacher's behaviour.

Leading by example

Even if they do not commit such acts against students personally, teachers who do nothing to combat verbal and physical harassment by other teachers and students (usually boys against girls) send out a clear message. Their failure to act is a tacit acceptance of the *status quo* and communicates to the students — especially boys — what behaviour is acceptable in school.

In the United States, a teacher refused to take action against a male student who was harassing a 14-year-old girl: "I was in class and the teacher was looking right at me when this guy grabbed my butt. The teacher saw it happen. I slapped the guy and told him not to do that. My teacher didn't say anything and looked away and went on with the lesson like nothing out of the ordinary had happened."¹⁸

One 13-year-old South African girl explained her disappointment with the inaction of her teachers after two male classmates raped her: "All the people who I thought were my friends had turned against me. And they [the rapists] were still there. I felt disappointed. ... If they [the teachers] had made the boys leave, I wouldn't have felt so bad about it." The girl stopped attending school because of the incident.¹⁹

Such dynamics allow abuse to become an integral aspect of school life. Teachers who challenge the behaviour of colleagues — by opposing acts of violence or questioning the judgement of those who tolerate it — also risk professional ostracism. Although it is less well-documented, anecdotal evidence suggests that in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa,

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female teachers also are intimidated by sexual violence and harassment. Female teachers in Pakistan who travel each day to work in villages away from their homes, for example, risk verbal harassment and even physical assault from men *en route*.²⁰

The perception of risk to female teachers may be a significant factor in discouraging women from pursuing careers in education. Fathers or husbands may forbid their daughters or wives from teaching because of the threat of sexual violence against female teachers. This can have a negative impact in cultures where girls' access to education depends on the presence of female teachers. There is also evidence of sexual violence against young women in teacher-education colleges. In one study in Ghana, women said they were intimidated by college lecturers and pressured for sex in exchange for good grades, but this phenomenon warrants much further study in different country contexts.²¹

It would be wrong to assume that the presence of female teachers alone would prevent violence against girl students. If female teachers are marginalised and oppressed by the prevailing gender dynamics of an institution, they may not be able to prevent sexual harassment and abuse or provide the support girls need.

In a 2001 study in Uganda, girls felt that female teachers ignored the very real issue of sexual harassment by boys and male teachers in the school: "The [female] teachers themselves do not challenge sexual harassment in school but just choose to tolerate it, thereby giving [sic] a helpless situation to the girls." But when female teachers also are subject

to sexual harassment by male teachers and students, there is little they can do to prevent it happening to their students.

A global problem

There is a correlation between a girl's age and the likelihood of her falling prey to violence at school. Adolescent girls are at greatest risk.²² Such abuses, however, are not culture-specific. Girls of every ethnic, social and economic group can be targets. Although most recent research has concentrated on schools in sub-Saharan Africa, the problem is not unique to this region. Studies and interventions in North America, Europe, South Asia and Latin America suggest that violence against girls is a problem in schools around the world.

In the United States, a 2001 survey of more than 2,000 students between 13 and 17 years of age found that 83 percent of the girls and 79 percent of the boys had experienced harassment.²³ In the United Kingdom, research conducted with children aged 10 to 11 and 14 to 15 indicated that sexualised teasing of girls by boys in mixed secondary schools is common. Girls explained that boys called them names such as "prossie" [prostitute], flicked their bra straps, looked up their skirts and grabbed or fondled them.²⁴

In refugee camps and other conflict-affected settings, abuse of power by men in positions of authority over vulnerable women and girls is also a major issue. Teachers may exploit their status within the community and

Sexual violence in schools can deter parents from educating their daughters in the first place, or cause them to pull girls out when they reach adolescence.

use their economic power, however slight, to manipulate students, which can jeopardise the future of entire families. Refugee children see education as a critical means to improve their families' financial situation. Their desperation to succeed in school makes them all the more susceptible to abuse.

In a 2001 survey of 560 secondary-school girls in Botswana, 67 percent said that they had experienced unwanted touching, pressure for dates and other forms of sexual harassment. For 25 percent of them, this was a regular occurrence.²⁵ A report in 2002 found that girls at refugee schools in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia were subjected to abuse and exploitation, often by their teachers.²⁶ The study revealed that in most cases good grades were exchanged for sex. The problem was widespread

and integrated into the culture of the schools, in part because there was no system of checks and balances to protect the girls.

Long-term losses

In addition to the immediate effects of intimidation, fear and physical suffering, violence against young women and girls in schools has some long-term ramifications, many of which are interconnected. Sexual violence in schools can deter parents from educating their daughters in the first place, or cause them to pull girls out of educational establishments when they reach adolescence. For parents who are concerned about protecting their daughters' — and their family's — honour, the perceived gains of attending school may not be as high as the perceived risks.

Girls who feel afraid of, intimidated and disrespected by their teachers and fellow students find it hard to concentrate in school and are unlikely to achieve high grades. South African girls who had been raped and sexually abused, for example, reported that after such incidents their concentration, motivation and school performance all declined significantly. Such feelings can lead to high drop-out rates among girl students, who leave school because of low self-esteem or a sense of not belonging — or because the violence has resulted in pregnancy. A 15-year-old South African girl who was raped by her teacher described how her experience had changed her opinion about school: "I feel less interested. I want to leave school. We were told that we could leave school after standard seven, so that's what I want to do. I want to leave and go. I just don't like it [school], the kids, the teachers."²⁷

Girls who finish school with poor results have limited higher-education and career opportunities. If there are few girls who successfully and enjoyably complete their education, there will be a very small pool of potential female teachers. And, as discussed above, schools where there are few women in positions of responsibility are more likely to have problems with violence against girl students.

Sexual intercourse with older male students and teachers also puts girls at risk of unwanted pregnancy and increases the likelihood of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Power imbalances in relationships, coercion and intimidation, as well as physical violence during sexual intercourse make it almost impossible for girls to protect themselves.

Three girls stand against the front wall of the school for the blind they attend with boys and adult men in Sierra Leone. Studies suggest that girls with disabilities may be at higher risk of sexual violence and harassment.

Image: Brent Stirton



Sibhale Puppeteers during a performance about HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse for children in Soweto, Johannesburg, in 2003. The risk of abuse in South Africa is so high that even primary-school children are targeted for programmes to raise their awareness.

Image: Mariella Furrer

The power to change

Schools have the power to either condone or condemn gender-based violence. There are many examples of promising work being carried out at international, national and local levels to protect girls and women in schools, create gender-safe learning environments and empower communities to be agents of change.

Two projects from South Africa focus on how teachers can make a difference. Part of a training programme at the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape asks primary school teachers to evaluate their own attitudes towards gender-based violence and reflect on the implicit messages conveyed through their words and actions.²⁸ Understanding the dynamics of gender-based violence in schools enables these teachers to incorporate activities to combat the problem into their daily routines. The manual “Opening Our Eyes: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in South African Schools” is also a tool for professional development and a starting point from which to develop whole-school approaches and policies. The module makes the very important link between gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS and also provides some very concrete strategies for creating safer schools.²⁹

Following reports of sexual abuse and exploitation of refugee girls in West Africa, the International Rescue Committee implemented programmes to train women classroom assistants (CAs) for upper-primary classes. Working alongside male teachers, they serve as role models, monitor risks of exploitation of students by teachers and document cases of abuse. Boys and girls in these refugee schools said

that their classrooms were more calm, organized and conducive to learning as a result of the initiative. Relations between teachers and students were more respectful, and because the CAs collected examination results directly from the teachers, there were fewer opportunities for exploitation related to grades. The girls especially appreciated having a “mother” or “big sister” figure in the classroom.

The work of the CAs is groundbreaking because they operate within the system to challenge entrenched gender patterns. Further development of the programme includes addressing some of the power imbalances between the CAs and the teachers and incorporating empowerment

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strategies for women and girls. Another important issue being explored is how to equip students themselves to handle the threat of sexual abuse and exploitation. This multipronged approach will ensure the immediate protection of girls in today’s classrooms and, in the long-term, empower them at school and in their communities.³⁰

Schools play a very powerful role in the development of individual gender identities and reflect and shape the dynamics within communities. Attitudes and behaviours learned in school set in place patterns which can continue throughout a person’s life. By addressing the problem of asymmetrical power relations, teachers and students have the capacity to break harmful cycles of discrimination and gender-based violence of all types. ■

"Rose", age 10, at her home in Nairobi, Kenya, just down the road from where she and her three girlfriends were raped in July 2005. It is Monday afternoon, and most children Rose's age are in class. But like many school-aged rape victims, Rose has refused to go to school since being assaulted two months earlier. "The teachers will beat me," she says. "They will beat me and laugh at me, and the other children will laugh at me. They know what happened.

"One afternoon, four of us were playing outside by the road, and a local vendor offered us some *mandazi* [fried dough]. We always saw him making and selling *mandazi*. He lives close to us, with his wife and kids. The man told us that he was not feeling well, that he was sick and couldn't eat any *mandazi* that day. He said that we could have them, and that we should go and eat them at his home.

"One of the girls went with him. Then he told us, 'I do not have any water in the house. Please go and get water for me.' We each took a Jerrican and went to get water. He asked us to take it into the house. When we were all inside, he locked the window and locked the door. Then he told us to take off our clothes. We started screaming. He went and got a knife. He said, 'Be quiet! Be quiet!' He said he would cut us if we did not stop screaming. We did not want to be killed, so we kept quiet. He undressed the first girl and told her to lay on the bed. He told us three to stand in front of the bed and watch. Then he slept with her. When he finished he picked the next girl, who refused to undress. When she refused, he told her he would stab her. So the man undressed her. He finished with the second girl, and she got dressed. I was the third person. ... When my turn came I started feeling afraid. I refused to take off my clothes. When he said he would stab me I was scared. ... He used force with the last girl. Afterwards, he opened the door and warned us that if he heard about what had happened from anyone in the community, he would kill us."

Rose did not return home until 9 p.m. that night, and her mother had been worried. When asked where she had been, Rose talked about the man, but was vague about what had occurred and reluctant to admit that she herself had been raped. At first, none of the girls disclosed exactly what had happened to them. When one of them was asked why she was walking funny, she said that she had been kicked in the leg. The mother of the fourth girl noticed some bleeding from her daughter, a result of the force the rapist used. Eventually, when their story was pieced together, the father of one of the girls took them to the police station to report the rapes and to identify the perpetrator, who admitted to "having the urge to have sex" but denied having penetrated the girls. The four girls were treated at Nairobi Women's Hospital, where they were underwent forensic examinations. The perpetrator was arrested and held in remand until the trial in October 2005.

In this photo, Rose holds the syringe she uses to take antiretroviral medication to reduce her chances of contracting HIV from the rape. The treatment will last four months. Before the assaults, one of the four girls already was enrolled in a community health programme for children who are HIV-positive.

Image: Leah Weinzimer

