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## **Governments must take action to end violence against schoolgirls**

On the eve of International Women's Day, Amnesty International called on governments and school officials around the world to take concrete action to end violence against girls, particularly inside schools, in a new report published today.

"Governments are failing girls at the most basic level. Their failure to address violence against girls in schools is unacceptable," said Widney Brown, Senior Director at Amnesty International.

"Virtually every government claims to abhor violence against women and girls. Schools are a place where governments have direct responsibility and can start backing up their words with concrete actions."

The report *Safe Schools: Every Girl's Right*, shows how violence in and around educational institutions remains pervasive. From Mexico to China, girls continuously face the risk of being sexually assaulted, harassed or intimidated on their way to school or once inside school premises.

Some girls suffer violence more than others. Particular groups, such as ethnic minorities, lesbians or girls with disabilities, are at higher risk than their peers.

At school, many girls face psychological violence, bullying and humiliation. Some are caned or beaten in school in the name of discipline. Girls are threatened with sexual assault by other students, offered higher marks by teachers in exchange for sexual favours, and even raped in the staff room.

A 2006 study of schoolgirls in Malawi found that 50 percent of girls said they had been touched in a sexual manner without permission by either their teachers or a fellow student.

Equally, a study in the USA found that 83 percent of girls in grades 8 to 11 (aged around 12 to 16) in public schools experienced some form of sexual harassment.

Attacks against girls in schools have both immediate and long-term impacts.

Not only do girls suffer from the impact of violence on their physical and mental health, but in the context of education, the violence may cause girls to drop out and lose any hope of escaping poverty and political marginalization.

"Ensuring that girls have meaningful access to education is widely recognized as key to women's empowerment. Being denied an education will follow a woman all her life," said Brown.

Very often, aggressive and inappropriate sexual advances by boys in schools are dismissed as "just boys being boys". Such behaviour often goes unreported and unpunished, sending out the message that violence against women and girls is acceptable and that male aggression is the norm.

People interviewed by Amnesty International in Haiti, for example, agreed that violence was widespread

in schools but was rarely reported. Corporal punishment, the use of whips, beatings with electric cables, forcing children to kneel in the sun, food deprivation, sexual abuse, insults and psychological abuse of girls was common by teachers and administrative staff.

Schools in conflict zones represent a particular threat to the lives of girls attending them.

The provision of education is also disrupted in many ways where schools, teachers and students are targets of armed violence. In Afghanistan, the burning down of schools, particularly girls' schools, and threats or assaults against girls who attend school have become increasingly common in recent years.

Although international law requires universal primary education to be free of charge, many schools continue to levy charges. School fees and other charges are an insurmountable obstacle for many children, and girls are more likely to be excluded from school than boys when there aren't enough resources in the family.

Amnesty International has drawn up a six-point plan aimed at government officials and bodies, including school officials, which includes, amongst other recommendations:

- Enacting and enforcing appropriate laws, policies and procedures prohibiting all forms of violence against girls, including corporal punishment, verbal abuse, harassment, physical violence, emotional abuse, and sexual violence and exploitation.
- Creating national plans of action in order to create a safe environment for girls. Those should include guidelines for schools and compulsory training for teachers and students.
- Teachers, school authorities and other state officials must promptly respond to reports of violence and ensure that a proper follow up mechanism is in place. That must include effective investigations and criminal prosecutions when appropriate and providing support services, including medical treatment, for victims and survivors.

Finally, Amnesty International is calling on governments working to achieve the 2000 Millennium Development Goals to address violence and discrimination against girls. The goals, which aim to eradicate poverty, include calls for universal primary education and gender equality, but they measure progress by the number of girls in class, without seeking to address violence and discrimination that keeps or pushes girls out of school.

“While supporting efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, Amnesty International believes that achieving gender equality in education requires increased commitment and an immediate effort to stop violence against schoolgirls. It’s difficult to learn when every school day is a struggle against violence,” said Widney Brown.

[Safe Schools: Every Girl's Right \(report, 7 March 2008\)](#)