

## **STOLEN CHILDHOOD, LOST LEARNING**

### **SAFE SCHOOLS EVERY GIRL'S RIGHT**

Schools are places for children to learn and grow. But many girls all over the world go to school fearing for their safety, dreading humiliating and violent treatment, simply hoping to get through another day.

Schools reflect wider society. The same forms of violence which women suffer throughout their lives – physical, sexual and psychological – are present in the lives of many girls in and around their schools.

Every day, girls face being assaulted on their way to school, pushed and hit in school grounds, teased and insulted by their classmates, humiliated by having rumours about them circulated through whisper campaigns, mobile phones or the Internet. Some are threatened with sexual assault by other students, offered higher marks by teachers in exchange for sexual favours, even raped in the staff room. Some are caned or beaten in school in the name of discipline.

In countries racked by war, some girls are seized by armed groups, and some are injured or killed on their journey to school or when schools are attacked. Sexual abuse and exploitation are particular problems for girls living in refugee or displaced people's camps.

### **EVERY GIRL HAS A RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

Violence against girls takes place in and around many educational institutions all over the world. It is inflicted not only by teachers, but also by administrators, other school employees, fellow students and outsiders. The result is that countless girls are kept out of school, drop out of school, or do not fully participate in school.

### **OFFICIALS FAIL TO TAKE ACTION**

All too often, authorities respond to violence in schools by choosing inaction. In many cases, they do so in breach of national law or school policies. When a girl reports an incident of violence, especially sexual violence, often her behaviour is judged rather than that of the person she has accused of the crime.

There is no justification for official inaction. The state, and by extension its public officials – including teachers and school authorities – must promptly investigate reports of abuse, impose appropriate punishments on offenders, support those who have suffered from violence to recover from its physical and emotional effects, and take steps to ensure that such abuses do not recur.

Education is a human right, and ensuring access to education free from violence is a state responsibility. Under international law, the state must ensure, at a minimum, universal access to primary education. That obligation cannot be satisfied if girls do not feel safe in school.

The failure to meet these obligations cannot be justified by lack of resources. When states fail to address violence against girls in schools, they do so through a failure of political will.

#### *Caption*

Two girls head home from an elementary school in Philadelphia, USA. The risk of violence means that many US schools are forced to use security measures such as cameras, police officers and metal detectors.  
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### **DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE**

Certain girls face an increased risk of violence at school because of who they are. Lesbian girls, for example, experience both sexism and homophobia, and are more frequently subjected to sexual harassment and threatened with sexual violence than their heterosexual peers. Girls with disabilities face both sexism and disability discrimination making them targets for teasing, physical abuse and sexual violence. They experience violence at higher rates than girls without disabilities, and the forms of violence they face may be more chronic and severe. Other aspects of girls' identity, including their status as migrants, orphans or

refugees, their HIV status, caste, ethnicity and race, also increase their risk of abuse and shape the nature of the violence they experience.

Violence against girls in schools is both a product of discriminatory attitudes and a consequence of letting less serious behaviour go unchecked. Early intervention is vital. Teachers must counter the hostile climate generated by verbal abuse – a climate that all too often escalates into physical attacks.

## **VIOLENCE STOPS GIRLS GOING TO SCHOOL**

Victims and survivors of violence, especially sexual violence, may be ostracized and excluded by their families, friends and communities. Those from marginalized groups, who are poor, lesbian or disabled, and those with special needs, may find it even harder to pursue a complaint or access support services than other girls.

## **ENDURING CONSEQUENCES**

Violence against girls causes not only fear and pain, but also lowered self-esteem, poor performance at school, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and depression. It damages both the mental and physical health of victims and survivors.

When violence disrupts or ends a girl's education, the implications for her future employment opportunities and financial independence are grave. Lack of education increases the likelihood that girls will enter into early marriage, which carries risks to their health and well-being; that they will be targeted for trafficking; and that they will die in childbirth from preventable causes.

### *Caption*

A young girl leaps through the ribbon as she wins a race at her school in Dhaka, Bangladesh.  
© 2004 Roobon/The Hunger Project-Bangladesh, Courtesy of Photoshare

Interrupting the education of large numbers of girls has devastating ramifications not only for those students but for society more broadly.

Education is key to breaking the cycles of violence and poverty. But the lack of safety in and around schools is undermining attempts to empower girls so that they can escape violent situations and work their way out of poverty. Violence against girls in school reinforces gender stereotypes and entrenches gender discrimination in the next generation. It teaches that violence against girls and women is inevitable, and that quality, safe education for girls is not a priority.

## **GOVERNMENTS AND SCHOOLS HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO PROVIDE GIRLS WITH A SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Under international law, primary education should be available free to all. International law also obliges states to move towards free secondary education. Even so, schools around the world commonly charge fees and make families pay for transport, uniforms and school supplies. School fees and related costs may be an insurmountable obstacle to education, and girls are more likely to be excluded from school than boys when there isn't enough money to go round.

HIV/AIDS is compounding the problem of violence against girls. Sexual assault carries the additional danger of HIV infection, girls living with HIV face discrimination, and girls are the first to be taken out of school to care for sick family members. In many countries trained teachers are in short supply because of the heavy toll of AIDS-related illnesses. Education is a vital component of the drive to stop the transmission of HIV.

The Global Campaign for Education has estimated that universal primary education would prevent 700,000 new cases of HIV each year.

*Caption*

Three girls relax at the end of an Alternative Rites of Passage ritual at a safe house for girls escaping female genital cutting and forced marriage in the Southern Rift Valley, Kenya. Violence is one of the key factors preventing girls from getting an education, contributing to lower enrolment rates, higher drop-out rates, early marriages and pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. December 2005. © Paula Allen

## **NO EXCUSES, NO EXCEPTIONS AND NO DELAYS**

Amnesty International recognizes the determination of girls all over the world to gain an education. We demand that states take immediate action to fulfil their international commitments and make schools safe for girls. Amnesty International calls on government officials and schools, supported by parents, community leaders and non-governmental organizations, to take the following six steps:

**STEP 1: PROHIBIT ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS, including corporal punishment, verbal abuse, harassment, physical violence, emotional abuse, and sexual violence and exploitation. Enact and enforce appropriate laws, policies and procedures.**

**STEP 2: MAKE SCHOOLS SAFE FOR GIRLS through national plans of action to address school-related violence against girls. These should include guidelines for schools, compulsory training for teachers and students, a designated government official responsible and adequate public funding. Ensure that schools have sex-segregated toilets and washrooms, secure dormitories, and supervised playgrounds and sports fields.**

**STEP 3: RESPOND TO INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS through confidential and independent reporting mechanisms, effective investigations, criminal prosecutions when appropriate, and provide services for victims and survivors. Ensure that all incidents of violence against girls are reported and recorded, and that people convicted of rape, sexual assault or other criminal offences against children are not employed in schools.**

**STEP 4: PROVIDE SUPPORT SERVICES FOR GIRLS WHO HAVE SUFFERED VIOLENCE, including counselling; medical treatment; HIV/AIDS information, medication and support services; comprehensive information on sexual and reproductive rights; and support for reintegration into the school system of girls who are living with HIV or are pregnant, married or mothers.**

**STEP 5: REMOVE BARRIERS TO GIRLS' ACCESS TO SCHOOL by eliminating all fees, direct and indirect, for primary school, making secondary schools accessible to all, and developing programmes to ensure access for girls from marginalized groups.**

**STEP 6: PROTECT GIRLS FROM ABUSE by developing and enforcing codes of conduct for all school staff and students. Train school staff in early intervention strategies to address harassment and violence against girls in school.**

**EDUCATION IS BOTH A RIGHT  
IN ITSELF AND ALSO A  
PATHWAY TO THE ENJOYMENT  
OF OTHER RIGHTS**

### **OTHER INFORMATION SHEETS PRODUCED AS PART OF THIS CAMPAIGN:**

'Why can't I afford to go to school?'  
AI Index: ACT 77/011/2007

No to discrimination, harassment and violence  
AI Index: ACT 77/012/2007

Education key to addressing HIV  
AI Index: ACT 77/013/2007

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**STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories, who campaign on human rights. Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.

We research, campaign, advocate and mobilize to end abuses of human rights – civil, political, social, cultural and economic. From freedom of expression and association to physical and mental integrity, from protection from discrimination to the right to shelter – these rights are indivisible.

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