# Making Schools Safe for Girls: Combating Gender-Based Violence in Benin



By Brent Wible



### **Acknowledgements**

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Founded in 1961, the Academy for Educational Development (www.aed.org) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems and building the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to become more self-sufficient. AED works in all the major areas of human development, with a focus on improving education, health, and economic opportunities for the least advantaged in the United States and developing countries throughout the world.

### **Gender-based Violence:**

### A Problem in African Schools

At the World Education Forum in 2000, UNESCO's director for basic education emphasized that girls often face an "unsafe environment" in schools around the world, one that includes sexual harassment. Acknowledging this concern, the World Bank announced a new policy in 2002 to consider sexual harassment in its education projects. While not exclusively or even predominantly an African issue, evidence suggests that sexual harassment in schools is a growing problem across the continent. In response to these fears, Education International, an organization dedicated to social justice in education, organized a regional forum on education in Benin in 2002 to address abuse in African schools. This attention was provoked by a growing body of quantitative and qualitative evidence documenting gender-based violence in schools across the continent.

Gender-based violence is a global problem that causes more poor health and death than a host of other physical and psychological maladies combined, but it is only slowly being addressed by national public health policies and actions. Even more difficult to bring to the forefront is the issue of genderbased violence and sexual harassment in the one arena generally considered safe: the school. Both boys and girls are victims, but groping, bullying, verbal abuse, and rape are most often suffered by girls and young women. Girls are aggressively propositioned by male teachers and students in school and by "sugar daddies" outside of school. Sexual violence and harassment of girls is a direct cause of underachievement, dropout, damage to physical and psychological health, early and unintended pregnancies, and STI transmission, including HIV/AIDS. In developing countries, about 40 percent of girls who start school will drop out before completing five years. Frequently, the reason is gender-based violence or the fear of sexual violence. The consequences are loss of educational opportunity, stagnation of girls' school completion rates, and resulting loss of national productivity.

Research on this issue is yielding startling results. Sexual abuse of school-girls is institutionalized and pervasive. (Abuse of boys has received little research attention.) Girls in every country studied face harassment, violence, rape, and the threat of rape from male students and from teachers. Girls leave school out of fear, or do not participate in class in order not to attract

the teacher's attention. In South Africa, it is reported that over one-third of the rapes of school-age girls and young women are perpetrated by teachers. In Ethiopia, over 40 percent of students have said they repeated classes or dropped out because of school violence. In Kenya and Burkina Faso, it has been documented that sexual harassment in school leads to drop out, especially by girls. In Botswana, a survey reported that 67 percent of secondary students were sexually harassed by teachers, one-fifth had been propositioned by a teacher, and at least 11 percent consequently were considering dropping out. Often, as in Botswana, there are no Ministry of Education policies concerning teacher behavior, no procedures or channels for reporting abuse, and an overall acceptance by students that abuse is part of school. As violence goes unchallenged, both boys and girls learn that it is "normal." Gender-based violence thus both reflects and reinforces societal and cultural norms that view women as "belonging" to men and as having little value, status, or identity. Evidence from Benin buttresses these research findings, suggesting that gender-based violence in schools is a growing problem that must be addressed as part of efforts to promote girls' education.

### The Context in Benin

Benin provides an interesting case study of developments in girls' education during the last decade and a half. Historically, Benin has had one of the largest educational gender gaps in the world. Tackling this disparity was one of the primary motivating factors behind a wide-ranging education reform program begun in 1990. As a result of the reform, girls' enrollment in primary school has increased by 9 percent since 1997, but with a 0.5 ratio of girl to boy enrollment, the Beninese gender gap remains among the highest in the world. While this gap has not yet been erased, overall school enrollment at the primary level has increased in Benin from 49% in 1990-91 to 70% in 2000-01. Although bringing more girls into the classroom is important, it is not enough. Beninese girls face a number of obstacles and abuses once in the classroom, including gender-based violence, and these obstacles often result in poor retention of girls in school.

While the Beninese government and donor projects have addressed external barriers to girls' education in Benin, focusing on things like school fees, the indirect or opportunity costs of education, and parental or societal attitudes, not enough attention has been given to the environment within schools that leads to daily abuses of girls' rights and negatively affects girls' academic performance. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in particular negatively impact the performance and retention of girls who do enroll and dissuade some parents from sending their daughters to school at all.

While student-student bullying and the harassment that many girls suffer on the way to and from school are troubling, widespread teacher-student abuse has a systemic impact on the school environment. It sends girls a pernicious message and provides a negative role model for boys. When a teacher abuses his position to extract sexual favors, he damages the social fabric of the school, potentially devalorizing the school in the community's estimation. This study thus focuses on teacher-student harassment, both because of the impact it has on schools and because Beninese students identified teachers as most often responsible for the harassment they experience in the school environment.

## **Defining Violence**

As defined in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a U.N. General Assembly resolution passed in 1993, gender-based violence (GBV) is a term that is not limited to physical or sexual violence, but also includes equally insidious forms of violence against girls such as economically coerced sex, sexual harassment, demeaning language that undermines self-esteem, and even assigning girls to perform domestic tasks at school while others study. GBV is thus a broadly-defined term encompassing an array of behavior that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm to women or girls.

The legal term "sexual harassment" is problematic when discussing teacher-student interactions. "Abuse" is perhaps a more apt description. Nonetheless, the term "sexual harassment" is widely used in Africa to describe teacher-student relationships, and much of the GBV that occurs in Beninese schools fits the classic definition of harassment. Sexual harassment is often classified into two basic types. The first is quid pro quo harassment, where something is offered in exchange for sex. Much of the GBV perpetrated by teachers against students in Benin is transactional. The second type involves the creation of an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment. The prevalence of quid pro quo harassment in Beninese schools may well contribute to the second type, encouraging teachers and male students alike to act out against girls in inappropriate ways.





**Primary school girls in southern Benin** *Joan Fiator* 

Benin, West Africa

Schoolgirls in Azové discuss what they would do to stop gender-based violence at school

 $Brent\ Wible$ 



While highlighting a phenomenon that undermines girls' education, this study does not seek to demonize schools or teachers. The majority of teachers in Benin and across the continent are serious, dedicated, and hard-working. Moreover, girls not in school remain more at risk of gender-based violence, pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS infection than those who are enrolled. This study seeks only to emphasize that schools are not always safe havens from gender-based violence and that gender-based violence at school undermines girls' academic enrollment, achievement, and retention. Until projects and policies targeting girls' education acknowledge the role gender-based violence plays in schools, the promise of girls' education may remain elusive.

### **Efforts to Address Gender-Based**

### Violence in Beninese Schools

Evidence suggests that Benin, like many of its neighbors, faces a phenomenon of gender-based violence in its schools. Since 1994, the World Bank, the Women in Development office of USAID-Benin, and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child have each recognized sexual harassment in schools to have a limiting effect on girls' enrollment and participation in Beninese schools. NGO efforts and policy developments in Benin have taken preliminary steps to target the problem.

Inappropriate sexual relationships between students and teachers were first addressed by a 1988 Ministry of Education policy. While the policy has been enforced only rarely, two of its provisions are striking. First, it set a tougher penalty for a teacher who attempted abortion on a student than for a teacher who had raped a student. Second, it is significant that the policy specifically addressed students who provoke teachers with "extravagant" hairstyles and perfumes. The policy thus seems to have been intended to preserve a particular conception of morality as much as to create a safe school environment, and it evinces a "blame the victim" understanding of sexual harassment.

While the policy response to sexual harassment in schools has proved ineffective, the problem has grown in Benin. Women in Law and Development

in Africa (WiLDAF) organized a nationwide series of workshops in 2002 that provided insight into the phenomenon. During these sessions, students throughout the country reported that harassment was common in their schools. They noted the high incidence of sexual relations between teachers and students and, as in "cross-generational" or "sugar-daddy" relationships more generally, identified a strong transactional element: the frequent exchange of money or grades for sex, as well as the threat of bad grades to coerce girls into sexual relationships.

Many participants in WiLDAF's seminars raised the issue of girls who "harass" teachers, but few seemed to understand teachers' responsibility to resist their students' advances. Generally speaking, the participants betrayed an understanding of women, students included, as seductresses—an attitude that likely contributes to the low reporting rate for sexual harassment. The dynamic is easy to imagine. If girls know they will be blamed for having invited the harassment, they will be unlikely to report what has happened to them. Reflecting this problem, students typically felt that no appropriate solution to the problem existed and that a student simply could not report a teacher to school or legal authorities. These students' pessimism is borne out in practice. The workshops showed that little punitive action is taken against a responsible teacher, other than the occasional transfer to a neighboring school where he is free to repeat his behavior.

Shortly after WiLDAF's workshops, the National Network for the Promotion of Girls' Education released a documentary on gender-based violence in Beninese schools, focusing in large part on teacher misconduct. Finally, in 2003, a group of activists alarmed by the growing incidence of harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in Beninese schools used the National Network's documentary to successfully lobby for the drafting of a new policy on sexual misconduct in the school environment. The policy has yet to be issued by the Ministry of Education.

### **Research Methods**

Two large provincial towns and their surroundings in the Mono/ Couffo region of southwestern Benin were identified for this case study, undertaken in partnership with the Center for Gender Equity at the Academy for Educational Development and World Learning's Community Action for Girls' Education (CAGE) project. The research was carried out in January and February of 2004, beginning with four half-day community workshops, each involving 15-20 participants. Two of the workshops included upper primary and lower secondary students, and two included parents with daughters enrolled in school. The workshops used Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) techniques to:

- Identify the problems at school that girls find most troubling.
- Articulate female students' perspectives on gender-based violence, discovering who perpetrates it, its frequency, and how it typically occurs.
- Explore the factors that contribute to abusive behavior in the school environment and consider possible strategies to address this problem.

After the workshops, a total of 70 girls, 30 from primary school and 40 from secondary school, were interviewed individually. Ages ranged from 11 to 19 due to high rates of over-age enrollment and frequent repetition of grades in Benin. Interview questions with girls covered: (a) their home background, including family members they live with; (b) their thoughts on the problems they have at school; (c) the types of GBV they had witnessed or experienced at school; and (d) how GBV at school affects girls as well as what normally is and should be done about it.

This case study, while not representative of the country as a whole, nonetheless provides a window into what happens in Beninese schools, suggesting that gender-based violence and teacher-student sex are more common than most schools care to admit.



Fathers discuss sexual harassment at school in Havou, outside Aplahoué, Benin

Brent Wible





Schoolgirls in Benin (above, left) © Jacob Silberberg/Panos Pictures

# **Research Findings**

During the girls' workshops, before sexual harassment had been introduced as the topic, the students were divided into two groups and asked to identify problems they face at school. "Teachers should focus on their work as teachers rather than pursuing their students for sex," the first group said. "School authorities," they continued, "should not

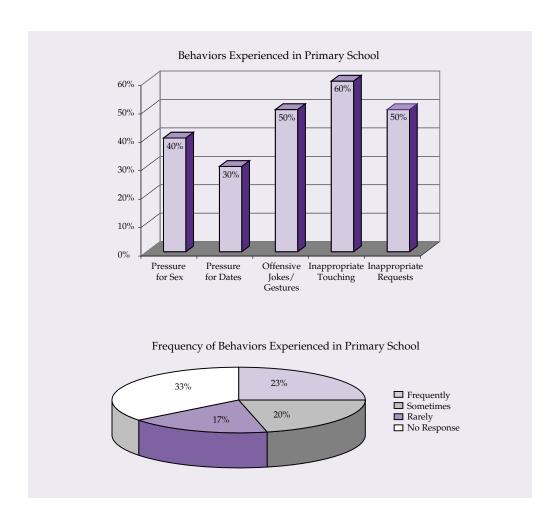
### **Problems Girls Face at School**

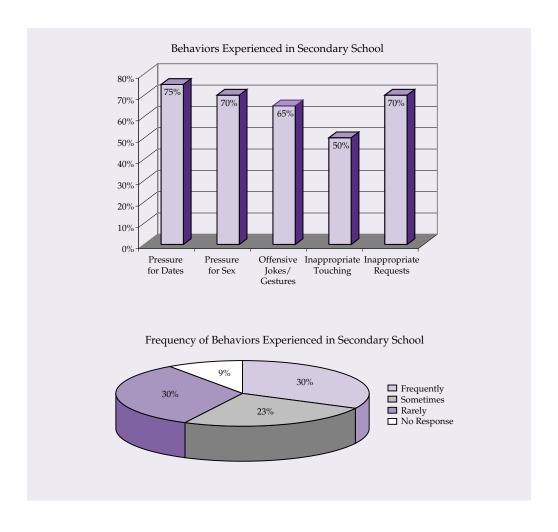
- Teachers should focus on their work as teachers rather than pursuing their students for sex.
- School authorities should not grope or 'bother' students in their offices.
- Students must not seduce teachers or "negotiate" grades with sex.
- Teachers must avoid pressuring their students after their advances have been refused.

grope or 'bother' students in their offices." The second group agreed, adding that girls should not seduce teachers or "negotiate" grades with sex. By confronting the subject without being prompted, the girls affirmed that coercive or transactional sex is a common aspect of their educational experience.

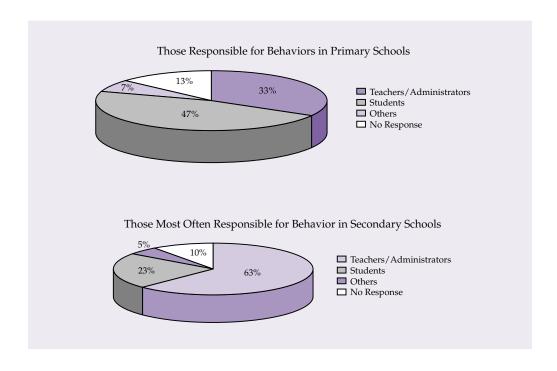
The interviews established more concretely that sexual harassment has become deeply embedded in the Beninese schools included in this survey. Much of the information culled from these interviews is conveyed as having been "witnessed or experienced" because students were typically more comfortable talking about other people than what may have happened to themselves. While the figures presented below are not statistically significant, they are nonetheless indicative of a profound problem.

What kinds of gender-based violence are common in schools? Students identified a number of behaviors that they had witnessed or experienced at school. Pressure for dates, pressure for sex, inappropriate touching, and offensive sexual jokes or gestures were each reported by a strong majority as having been witnessed or experienced at secondary school. Almost two-thirds of secondary students reported witnessing or experiencing these behaviors at least from time to time, with eight percent reporting that these behaviors occur daily. While primary school students reported less harassing or abusive behavior, gender-based violence is clearly a problem in primary school as well. Even if overstated, these figures are arresting, suggesting a widespread phenomenon of gender-based violence at school.

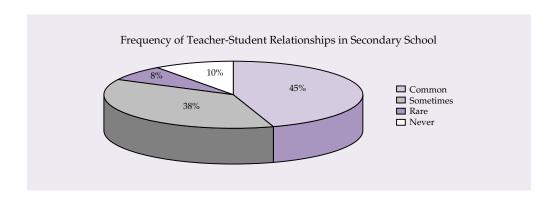


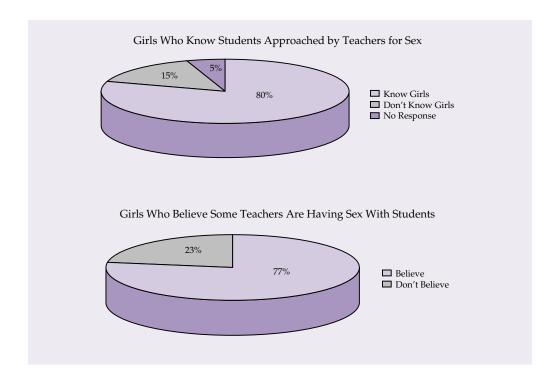


Who is typically responsible for these behaviors? A strong majority of secondary school respondents indicated that teachers and administrators are most often responsible for these behaviors, although fellow students also reportedly act in these ways. Primary school students, by contrast, identified other students, primarily older boys and high school students, as most responsible for this kind of behavior. Nonetheless, a third of primary school students reported that teachers harass students, and, in one school, most respondents had been propositioned or abused by a particularly notorious teacher. As one primary student said, "A teacher in my school put pressure on many of the girls in my class to go to bed with him."

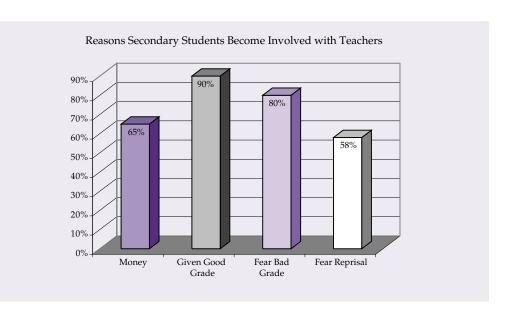


How common are teacher-student sexual relationships? Most students reported that teacher-student sexual relationships are either common or happen sometimes in their schools. Over three-fourths reported knowing girls who had been approached by teachers for sex, and another three-quarters believe that at least some teachers in their school are having sex with students, suggesting that much of the harassment in the Beninese schools included in this study is perpetrated openly, without regard for possible disciplinary repercussions.

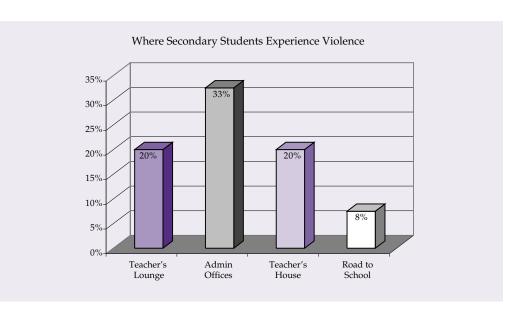




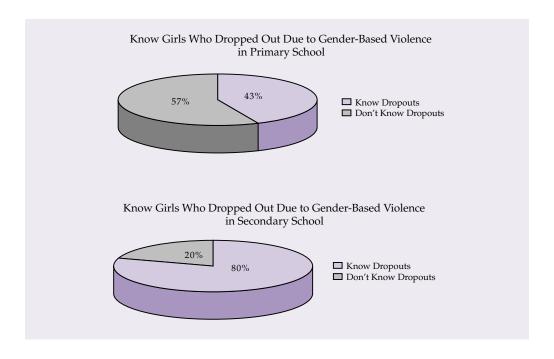
Why do girls become involved with teachers? Girls underscored the transactional dimension that is characteristic of much teacher-student sex. They identified the promise of good grades, the fear of bad grades, and the exchange of money as the top three reasons for these relationships. Other motivations, such as liking the teacher or feeling important, were reported much less commonly. While several students spoke euphemistically of academic coercion, complaining that teachers often give girls "arbitrary grades," some identified the problem more directly. "I have a teacher who harasses us girls and sometimes even threatens to give us bad grades if we don't accept his advances," a secondary student explained. Another student offered an alternative explanation. "Teachers take advantage of girls' financial situation and court them. It is because parents support their girls very little at school," she said.



Where does school-related gender-based violence typically occur? More primary and secondary school students identified the classroom as a site where gender-based violence occurs more than any other place. While students reported that gender-based violence is perpetrated at the latrines and on the sports fields, many identified the school administrative offices as well. A significant number of both primary and secondary students also noted that such misconduct happens at teachers' homes. "These kinds of things happen at teachers' houses. They ask a student to come help with the housework and then begin to court the student," a secondary student explained. As several students noted, girls frequently help their teachers at home. "Teachers who are bachelors or living without their wives seek out students because they benefit from the girls' help with the housework." Other times, teachers offer study help, inviting students to visit them at home. "Sometimes teachers invite the class to his house to copy an old test for review, and he courts certain girls," a student said.



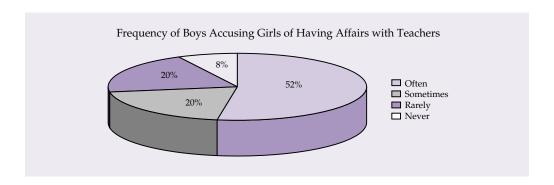
What are the effects of gender-based violence at school? Girls identified a number of effects of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence at school. Some reported being fearful on campus. Others said that avoiding teachers' advances made their grades suffer. "Girls who are harassed by their teachers don't perform well at school anymore. This behavior prevents them from studying well and from evolving like their parents want," one student said. "When a teacher pursues a girl, she finds it difficult to succeed. The pressure on her is too much, and she is constantly stressed in class," another student explained. Several reported losing the desire to go to school altogether. "I had a friend who told her teacher to stop harassing her, but he insisted and continued," a student said. "Finally, she stayed home often, missing his class." Significantly, many secondary and primary school students reported knowing girls who had dropped out of school altogether due to harassment or gender-based violence. Parents are particularly sensitive to their daughters' safety at school and sometimes withdraw them for fear of sexual violence. "The problem with teachers who do this [harass girls] is that fewer girls go to school as a result. When parents hear of this, they refuse to send their daughters to school," one student complained.



Pregnancy is also a serious effect of sexual harassment at school. Of those students who reported knowing at least one classmate who had become pregnant, over three quarters (78 percent) believed a teacher to be the father in at least one case. These responses show that, based on the sample of students in this study, Beninese students at least perceive gender-based violence to be a serious problem in their schools.

What are the spillover effects of school-based gender violence on girls generally? Many respondents complained that teacher-student sexual relationships create the impression that all girls are the same, breeding resentment in boys and exposing other girls to harassment at school. One student put it particularly well. "Because some girls go out with teachers to get good grades, this hurts the rest of us. The boys risk confounding all the other girls in the class, especially those who do well in school, with those who are

friends with teachers." Girls also reported that boys often accuse them of sleeping with teachers, suggesting that some boys balk at believing a girl can do well at school, surpassing their own performance. "Boys sometimes accuse girls of being 'friends' with the teacher when they see that a girl has taken what they think is their place among the passing grades," one student said. Such accusations implicitly assert a lack of equality between boys and girls, and girls' academic successes are characterized as sexual rather than intellectual.



How are cases of gender-based violence at school addressed? If the wide-spread harassment and gender violence in schools were not disturbing enough, the way cases are handled reveals that school authorities fail to take it seriously. Few students believe that punitive measures are ever taken in cases where a student or family complains of teacher misconduct. While almost 80 percent of girls reported that teachers who pursue relationships with students should be fired, and that mediation by the school authorities should also occur, most students reported that, especially in cases of student pregnancy, the implicated student often drops out, the teacher apologizes to the family, or nothing happens at all. In some cases, the teacher is transferred to another school.

Students themselves often say nothing to authorities, feeling that to report a teacher would be futile. "Who would I tell in the school administration if it is a teacher who has harassed me? They will protect their teachers and tell

me to be serious in my studies and to stop bothering teachers," one student said. Another student echoed this fear that complaints would fall on deaf ears. "I have a friend who reported what a teacher had done. She told the principal, but nothing ever happened."

Some of the inaction may be attributable to parents, who reportedly prefer private negotiated settlements to public condemnation of a culpable teacher, not wishing to display their daughter's, and by implication their family's, shame. Several students also suggested that parents' responses to teacher-student sex may reflect their income level. As one student explained, "Parents react differently depending on whether they are rich or poor. A parent with no money may say nothing because he doesn't want to create problems and may hope that his daughter will get something in return." While a few students' parents had made official complaints about sexual misconduct at school, the following story was more typical.

My teacher last year scared me because he put pressure on me to have sexual relations with him...When I told my parents, they didn't do anything against the teacher. They didn't even tell the principal. They are scared of teachers. They think they are inferior to teachers. Now I am scared at school, and I miss class often.

While their daughters suffer harassment at school, some parents look the other way simply because they fear teachers, feeling powerless to confront these men who are educated, relatively well-off, and potentially well-connected government functionaries.

# Looking Ahead —

# Strategies to Make Schools Safer for Girls

The parents and students who participated in the workshops discussed several possible actions to address gender-based violence in schools. Parents wanted more information, particularly how the problem has been addressed elsewhere. While parents recognized the need for policies to combat gender-based violence at school, they expressed little faith in school and legal authorities, who they felt were either corrupt or unwilling to act. Significantly, several parents accepted some of the blame for the way girls are treated at school. Acknowledging that the widespread practice of forced marriage and, as one parent put it, "a culture that does not emphasize consenting relationships" likely created a permissive environment at school, they recognized that they would have to question their own cultural practices if GBV at school were to be seriously addressed.

Like their parents, girls recognized the need for a policy addressing gender-based violence. They wanted girls to feel comfortable speaking out about what happens to them at school rather than feeling ashamed. Many expressed interest in creating a student group that would work with school authorities to ensure that girls no longer experience gender-based violence at school.

A few preliminary strategies, in addition to those just mentioned, merit consideration:

- First, that so few students and parents are aware of any relevant laws or policies highlights the need for community education about children's and youth's rights through community meetings and mobilization campaigns.
- Second, NGOs should advocate for policy developments and disciplinary structures covering the school environment to supplement existing laws in order to ensure that schools become safer learning environments.
- Third, an essential step to improve enforcement of existing laws is the establishment of a confidential, effective complaint procedure. Without this, sexual harassment and gender-based violence in schools will remain a

largely unreported offense. This could be as simple as posting a complaint box on campus, outside the mayor's office, or in the market, where complaints could be made anonymously. Alternatively, a trusted PTA member or student representative, perhaps a senior prefect, could volunteer to receive complaints from students, serving as a mediator between aggrieved students and the school administration.

- Fourth, a number of important but uncoordinated efforts to address harassment in Beninese schools, as well as creative strategies attempted in other countries, point to the need for information-sharing among groups working on this issue. Sharing strategies and successes should lead to more effective advocacy.
- Fifth, establishing a means of openly discussing the issues, through community meetings, community theater, student clubs, popular radio or television programs, or other media has been an important first step toward addressing the problem in southern Africa, particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Successful programs have allowed girls to speak freely, sharing their experiences with sexual harassment at school in order that students, parents, and teachers can be vigilant about preventing similar abuses in the future.
- Finally, the most pressing task may involve changing attitudes. Despite efforts to condemn violence against women in Benin, sexual harassment remains generally acceptable, even at school. Many students see harassment as an inevitable part of school life and some teachers seem to believe they can act with impunity. Only when such behaviors are generally understood to be unacceptable, and particularly harmful when perpetrated by teachers against students, will schools become safe places that nurture girls, encouraging their participation and achievement.

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