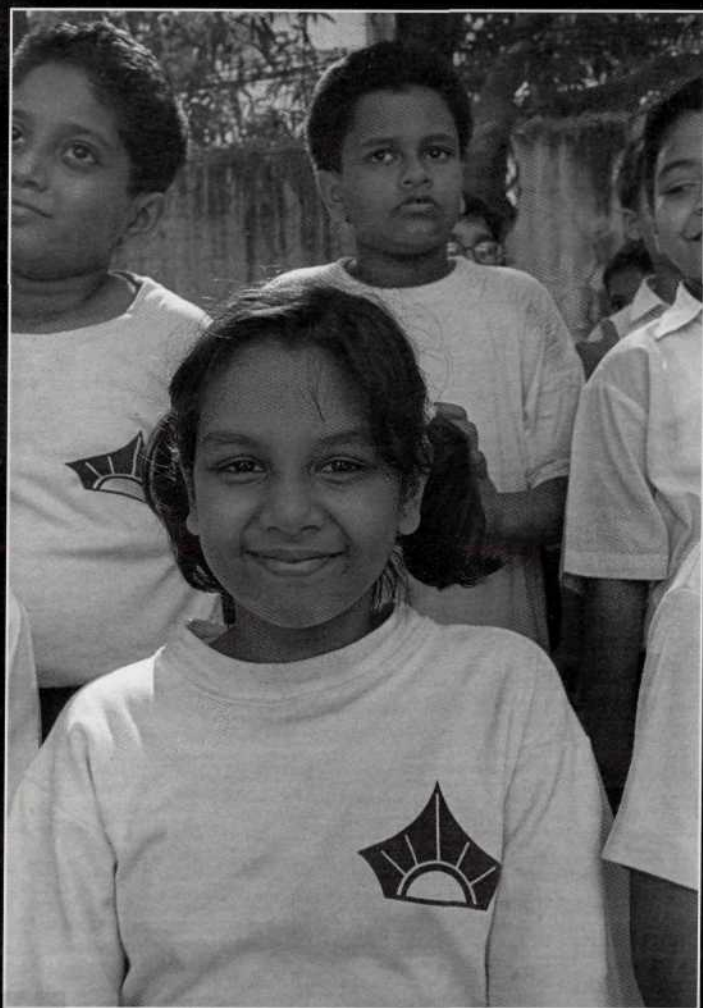


Beyond victims and villains

Addressing sexual violence in the education sector



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Contents

Executive Summary	1
1 The global context: the gender violence and human-rights movements	3
2 Sexual harassment	13
3 The extent of sexual violence in educational settings	16
4 The significance of sexual violence in educational settings	26
5 Beyond victims and villains: new models	33

Executive Summary

In the last 10 years, the issue of gender violence has moved steadily up the world's agenda. Sexual, physical and psychological violence causes as much of a burden of ill health and death among women aged 15 to 44 as cancer – and more than malaria and traffic accidents combined. But the fact that so many women are abused, mostly by men they know, is still something that most people don't want to think about – and which legislation and policy are only slowly addressing.

Sexual violence and harassment in schools, universities and higher education institutes, is even further from people's minds. Educational institutions are supposed to be places of growth and learning for students. As such, they are regarded as "safe". But this is not always the case. Recent research studies worldwide reveal that sexual violence in the education sector is an unaddressed problem.* It ranges from groping female students in the cafeteria queue, to rape. Often it involves peers, but teachers and other staff are also perpetrators. Male and female students are both affected, but there is a significant gender gap, with girls and young women experiencing much higher levels of violence, reflecting broader gender inequalities in society.

Sexual violence and harassment violates women's and girls' human rights and damages their physical and psychological health. It undermines the pursuit of internationally agreed public health goals to enable adolescents to deal in a positive way with their sexuality, and to reduce unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections including HIV infection. For girls and young women, it severely limits their ability to achieve their educational potential. For society, therefore, it undercuts the transformative power of education. Female education has been shown not only to contribute to improved family health but to be a major driver of social and economic development.

Increasingly, universities are drawing on the lessons of sexual violence research and activism and the experience of sexual harassment policies in the workplace to develop guidelines for students and staff. Addressing and preventing sexual violence in the secondary and primary educational sectors is complex, due to

* This report uses 'sexual violence' as an umbrella term which covers a range of behaviours from verbal sexual harassment, through physical sexual harassment, sexual assault, abuse and rape.

the age range of students and the professional responsibilities – and power – held by teachers. A wide range of strategies is required, from effective legislation and clear policy guidelines to age-appropriate educational initiatives incorporated in life skills, sexuality, HIV/AIDS education and the broader curricula. For younger students, issues need to be addressed in a way that is in keeping with their cognitive and emotional development. Concepts such as equality and rights can be raised within the context of promoting respectful, loving relationships, or within conflict-resolution and anti-bullying strategies.

If a school or university tolerates any form of sex discrimination, sexual harassment, coercion or violence, this is a powerful lesson which will travel with young men and women into the home and workplace.

Addressing sexual violence in the education sector lies at the intersection of human rights, public health and education agendas. Educational institutions are respected by the community. They are places where students learn values, as well as the information and skills they need to pass exams. As such, they can help break the cycle of violence. They need to address it vigorously where it happens, and ensure that curricular and extra-curricular opportunities equip young people to navigate their sexual lives without violence. In this way, they will set standards of conduct that will continue into the wider world.

Giacomo Picozzi / Panos Pictures



Girls learning French in Cameroon – female education is a major driver of social and economic development