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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights,  
civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Plan International, Inc., a non-governmental organization on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2010]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## Sexual violence against children in schools

“Our teachers should be there to teach us and not to touch us where we don’t want to be touched or to solicit lone favours from us girls.”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Violence in schools is a global problem. As per World Health Organization estimates, 150 million girls and 73 million boys have suffered from rape or other forms of sexual violence. Yet no reliable estimates exist regarding the degree to which this abuse occurs in schools.

In conjunction with its global *Learn Without Fear* campaign,<sup>2</sup> Plan<sup>3</sup> reviewed studies on school violence and confirmed that school violence is widespread and multi-faceted and sexual abuse and exploitation in schools a major problem for many students. Girls, in particular, are exposed to a double threat from male teachers *and* students.

The studies also revealed that school violence is embedded in violence in the family, the community, and on the national level and that gender heavily influences children’s vulnerability to various forms of school violence.

### Analysing and articulating gender-related sexual violence in schools

Schools are social spaces that reflect the wider society’s power relationships, domination, and discrimination practices. Violence against children in educational settings is embedded in the social and cultural norms around authority, hierarchy, gender discrimination, discipline, and conformity.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to address sexual violence against children without analyzing it from the gender perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Three types of gender-based violence and abuse occur in schools: sexual, physical, and psychological. Of these, sexual violence is most common and involves exploitation dished out by an adult or another child—via any form of forced or unwanted sexual activity. Here, authority and coercion are normally used to impose a sexual act. Sexual activity between a teacher and student is always abuse, regardless of the student’s age and society’s legal age

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Plan (2008) *Learn without fear: The Global Campaign to End Violence in Schools*. Working: Plan.

<sup>2</sup> The *Learn Without Fear* campaign focuses on 66 Plan working countries and also aims to create global momentum for change that will improve the lives of millions of children beyond Plan’s direct reach. Underpinned by the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals, the campaign has built its impetus created by the United Nations Secretary General’s Study on Violence against Children, published in 2006. It has also built on Plan’s expertise in quality education, school improvement and child protection. Visit [www.plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear](http://www.plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear) or contact [campaigns@plan-international.org](mailto:campaigns@plan-international.org) for more details.

<sup>3</sup> Plan is one of the oldest and largest international development agencies in the world. It operates in 48 developing countries across Africa, Asia, and the Americas and raises funds in 21 countries in Europe, the Americas, East Asia, and Oceania.

<sup>4</sup> Draft document by Plan, UNICEF, Save the Children, and Action Aid: *Violence in education, children’s right to education denied: evidence from west and central Africa*.

<sup>5</sup> Also the NGO working group on violence and children (WG-VAC) recommends that special attention must be given to sexual violence against children in schools and its gender dimension.

of consent, due to age differences and levels of power. Sexual violence and abuse involves direct physical contact such as unwanted touching or rape.

Sexual violence can also be verbal and involve sexually explicit language or unwanted sexual attention such as teasing or making fun of a person's physical traits or personal appearance.<sup>6</sup>

A comprehensive definition of sexual violence against children in schools must cover sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation in schools refers to any use of abuse for sexual ends with remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person, or social and political gain that results from the abuse. Sexual exploitation mainly includes transactions such as good reports or good marks in exchange for sexual acts *or* sexual relations as payment for school fees *or* supplies. This exploitation can also involve male students "offering" girls to teachers in return for lowered fees.<sup>7</sup>

## Understanding gender dynamics

Gender dynamics refer to relationships and interactions between and among boys, girls, women, and men. Socio-cultural notions about gender and power relationships form the foundation for defining these interactions. At school, gender dynamics shape relationships between students, teachers, and other school personnel of different sexes. Gender roles also affect punishment that is doled out in schools, for example, boys usually experiencing more corporal punishment and girls sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup>

Attitudes and culture-driven concepts about male and female sexuality and roles result in "gender scripting"<sup>9</sup> that supports and facilitates ongoing gender-related violence in schools. Gender scripting involves stereotyping. For example, boys must be strong and aggressive<sup>10</sup>, and girls must be weak and submissive, which promotes passivity among girls and leads people to believe that girls cause their own victimization. By accepting and not challenging traditional gender-related notions that promote sexual aggression in boys and submissiveness in girls, schools do harm to boys and girls.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is too simplistic to state that gender-based violence at school is solely perpetrated by adult males against young female victims. On the contrary, the perpetrator-

<sup>6</sup> The definition of school-related, gender-based violence and three types of violence are based on a conceptual framework that draws on internationally recognized definitions from education, child-rights, health, and child-protection sectors. The framework was developed for the *Safe schools* programme, which is implemented by DevTech Systems, Inc. and funded by USAID's Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade (EGAT) bureau and Office of Women in Development (WID).

<sup>7</sup> Definition of sexual exploitation from the draft document by Plan, UNICEF, Save the Children, and Action Aid: Violence in education, children's right to education denied: evidence from west and central Africa.

<sup>8</sup> USAID's Office of Women in Development. Equate technical brief: addressing school-related, gender-based violence.

<sup>9</sup> Gender scripting refers to a process by which a person is conditioned to adopt certain preferences, behaviours, and attitudes that are considered appropriate for one's sex. Such constructions of masculinity and femininity support predominant power dynamics, which contribute to school-related, gender-based violence.

<sup>10</sup> Bannon, I and Correia, M., eds (2006). *The other half of gender: men's issues in development*. Washington DC. The World Bank.

<sup>11</sup> Leach, F. (2003). "Learning to be violent: The role of the school in developing adolescent gendered behaviour." *Compare* 33(3): 385-398.

victim relationships go beyond the limits of authority (teacher-student interactions) and sex (male-female interactions).<sup>12</sup>

### **Identifying and eliminating the consequences of gender-based sexual violence in schools**

School-related, gender-based violence has a twofold impact on children. This impact increases risk of educational failure and negative health consequences such as physical injury, unwanted pregnancy, pregnancy-related problems, sexually transmitted diseases, or emotional and psychological harm. The consequences include reduced motivation among students, weakening grades, non-attendance, and increased numbers of dropouts.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Plan's research in West Africa revealed that girls, who experienced sexual violence, are more likely to be engaged in transactional sex later in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Eliminating sexual violence is even more pressing when it comes to HIV and AIDS, because adolescents—particularly adolescent girls—have higher risk for infection than other age groups. Adolescent girls are biologically, culturally, economically, physiologically, and socially more vulnerable to HIV and AIDS than adolescent boys.<sup>15</sup>

### **Recommendations**

A wide range of findings, evidence, best practices, and recommendation are in Plan's global "Learn Without Fear"<sup>16</sup> campaign documentation. In light of factors identified in the documentation, Plan proposes that measures for preventing and responding to sexual violence in schools acknowledge the:

- (i) Importance of qualified teachers and gender balance in the teaching staff to positively influence school environments and better equip schools for preventing and responding to violence problems.
- (ii) Necessity to adopt multi-level measures to tackle the problem strategically and consistently, while aiming to transform systems and attitudes.
- (iii) Existence of a continuum of violence between the home and family, the school, and the community.
- (iv) Age, gender, and power hierarchies that reflect social norms and perpetrate violence.
- (v) Importance of early intervention in preschools to deal with gender disparities and gender-related discrimination.

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<sup>12</sup> USAID's Office of Women in Development. Equate technical brief: addressing school-related gender-based violence.

<sup>13</sup> *supra*.

<sup>14</sup> Decosas, J. (2009). Adolescent sexual health in West Africa: rights, realities, responses. A Plan publication.

<sup>15</sup> USAID's Office of Women in Development. Equate technical brief: addressing school-related gender-based violence.

<sup>16</sup> Learn Without Fear report can be read at <http://plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear/resources/publications/campaign-report>

Therefore Plan recommends the following:

For communities and families:

- Involve children in identifying, preventing, and addressing school violence and shaping the most effective response.
- Create safe, supportive environments for children and help them develop a strong sense of personal rights and boundaries, which in turn functions as protection against offenders' coercion and blame.
- Empower parents to speak up for their children, engage them into making schools safe, and help break the cycle of violence.

For schools:

- Create greater awareness of sexual violence via school curricula to generate better understanding of appropriate behaviour in the school environment. Encourage discussion of the issue, which is a critical success factor in a comprehensive effort to prevent sexual violence.<sup>17</sup>
- Link schools into community-based child protection systems and mechanisms and introduce mandatory frameworks for reporting sexual violence. Reported cases must be treated with sensitivity, confidentiality, and decisiveness. Representatives of children, parents, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders must be involved in this process.
- Involve boys as strategic partners in addressing sexual violence—to increase awareness among male students and to motivate boys to enable school safety.
- Include sexual violence among priorities of the comprehensive school prevention programme and link into issues of concern such as alcohol, drugs, violence prevention, bullying, and teen pregnancy prevention.
- Create safe physical spaces in schools and promote equal access to facilities.

For teacher training colleges, school staffs, and unions:

- Work together to address sexual violence. Establish and uphold an agreed-upon code of conduct for teachers and staff to remind authority figures of expectations regarding their conduct.
- Promote participatory, gender-sensitive, and inclusive school-management structures.
- Increase the number of female teachers, ensure adequate remuneration, reduce classroom sizes, and strengthen school management to create adequate conditions in schools and help to reduce violence.
- Enable teachers to confront their attitudes about and experiences with gender-related violence as part of teacher-training programmes.
- Provide parents with information and help them acquire skills for communicating with their children and supporting their sons and daughters so that the children can help prevent school violence and protect themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, C. Talking about “It”: Prevention and intervention of sexual violence in schools: Ramsey County.

For governments:

- Increase investments in quality education and capacity development of teachers, parents, and students to prevent, identify, and address school violence.
- Create better laws, policies, regulations, reporting systems and punishments for perpetrators as well as provide more effective support in implementing and enforcing existing policies in addressing school-related, gender-based violence.
- Promote systematic research, research methods, and indicators for school violence and children's protection at school, and operational research alongside ongoing initiatives that tackle school violence.
- Educate media representatives on ethical reporting and child-rights awareness, in collaboration with NGOs, and involve them as partners to encourage debate, educate the general public, and challenge social and cultural norms that lead to children being harmed.

And finally, for the Human Rights Council (HRC): Make sexual violence against children in schools a top priority on the HRC agenda and urge countries to reaffirm their commitment to take primary responsibility for eliminating sexual violence and ending impunity.

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