

# BREAK THE SILENCE

Prevent sexual exploitation and abuse  
in and around schools in Africa



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without fear.



# Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental right for all children, an important driver for any country's development. But a growing body of evidence suggests the price that some children must pay to go to school threatens this right as well as children's physical and psychological well-being.

In Africa, sexual exploitation and abuse in and around schools is a serious and pressing problem, mostly but not wholly for girls. Pattern of sexual abuse exist within established institutions, hidden by a veil of deep-seated cultural mores and attitudes towards children. It's time to break the silence on school-based sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

This document will present a brief overview of the various forms of sexual and abuse in and around schools, and recommend priority actions for children, families, aid agencies, and governments to help rid Africa of a major impediment to children's rights to protection, education and non-discrimination as set out in Convention of the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

**Sexual exploitation and abuse in or around schools is a serious and pressing problem that necessitates greater policy attention.**

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### What Is Sexual Exploitation at School?

Sexual exploitation and abuse comprises treating a child as a sexual and commercial object by an adult, and abused for remuneration in cash or kind to a child or a third party. In the context of school settings it involves sexual abuse in exchange for good grades as well as transactional sex, where the victim is coerced into sexual favors or sexual activity in return for educational benefits such as school fees and materials.

The prevalence of sexual exploitation and abuse in and around schools is sustained by social pressure on children to enter school by any means possible – often with the tacit sanction of family members – and compete favorably with other students for grades that permit the student to advance to the next level.

**Numerous studies have analysed the nature of sexual abuse and violence at school, but very few have discussed their exploitative nature.**

## Forms of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

In the African school context, children's experiences of sexual violence are highly gendered, overwhelmingly carried out against female students by male students, school officials, or others capable of providing financial resources or favours.

Sexual exploitation and abuse in and around schools can consist of:

- Female students trading sexual favours with school authorities or others in exchange for reduced school fees or supplies
- Male students 'pimping' girls to teachers as clients in return for reduced fees
- Teachers offering higher 'sexually transmissible grades' to girl students in exchange for sex, and
- Girls being lured into homes of school personnel for supplementary lessons or household chores with the intention to sexual abuse

**Male teachers often exploit the advantages of their gender and authority by offering good grades in exchange for sexual acts from girls under their supervision.**

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# The Scale of the Problem in Africa

In Africa, poverty, HIV, and family migration have resulted in economic and social instability leaving children especially susceptible to abuse. A combination of an ingrained societal 'culture of silence' and low status of females affords school teachers and administrators – often poorly-paid and far from home – the opportunity to take sexual advantage of students with impunity.

The true extent of the problem in Africa remains unclear, but research by Plan and its partners has uncovered alarmingly high levels of sexual exploitation and abuse in and around schools. It has also illuminated the link between this form of violence and school dropouts, which undermines national efforts to provide education for all children.

A spillover effect of sex exploitation at school reported by students is a crisis of confidence in the education system.

**Among respondents of a recent Plan survey of secondary school students, none believed that the grades they received at the end of the year reflect the quality of submitted work, but rather 'trade-offs' such as transactional sex or gender discrimination.**

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**Due to gender relations within households girls and women expect to be subject to sexual and other forms of violence**



## Links to Other Forms of Violence

Violence against children – including sexual violence, often originates within children’s homes and families. Such domestic circumstances sanction their extension into school settings.

Cultural dynamics in Africa imbue authoritarian and hierarchical structures into school systems, somewhat legitimizing violence as an acceptable means of discipline.

Widespread practice of corporal punishment in the region opens the door to more serious forms of abuse. Consequently, children who drop out of school to escape abuse receive little support, and are ironically put at higher risk for trafficking and other forms of exploitation and abuse. Victimized students may not report abuse from shame or acceptance of the long-established code of silence.



## Children's Point of View

Anecdotal evidence suggests that girls of school age in West Africa for example have an astonishingly casual regard for transactional sexual contact with male teachers.

Many view their bodies as economic assets, and dress or behave provocatively with the intention of providing sex in return for favoritism, thereby helping to justify the practice in the eyes of school officials.

Emergence of a humorous, multi-lingual vernacular for teacher-student sexual interaction speaks volumes to the prevalence of the practice:

- 'Bush stipend' or "chalk allowance" – a coded term among teachers for the sexual compensation they exact from students
- 'BF' – refers to 'bordello fatigue' experienced by a girl involved in multiple sexual relationships with teachers, punning on a common brand of soap
- 'Africell' – a pun on a mobile telephone service provider, 'a free sell' refers to girl students coming to class without undergarments to sexually titillate teachers.

## Roles of Teachers, Parents, Students, and Government

Evidence indicates that many students have come to accept sexual violence as an unavoidable aspect of schooling. Parents without means and often low education levels tend to let their children get through their school by their wits, and cultural mores may cloud consideration of precisely how their children might get along. Teachers may take advantage of students with impunity in the absence of accountability mechanisms such as national codes of conduct.

Politicians too – who hold the real power to inculcate an accountable educational system – are likewise influenced by the cultural norms of their respective societies and may be unwilling to risk upsetting important constituencies such as teachers and school authorities by introducing legislation to reform school systems to protect the rights of children. Giving policy priority to access versus quality of education in the run up to reaching the Millennium Development goals has proven to be a dangerous trade-off, increasing student numbers per classroom without increasing numbers of adequately trained teachers, and addressing gender imbalances in the teacher corps.

**Because of the relative silence surrounding the problem of sexual abuse at school and school-related violence, increased investments in collection of quantitative data in this area is urgently needed**



# African Recommendations

In response to the problem, the Pan-African Preparatory Conference for the World Congress on Sexual Exploitation (Rio, 2008) made the following recommendations:

- **Improve methods of data collection and dissemination** so that national governments and the international community can better understand the scope of the problem
- **Encourage greater inter-departmental and cross-agency coordination** to facilitate establishment of national frameworks for professional codes of conduct for teachers, integrating child protection services, and better monitoring and evaluation, and
- **Develop strategies to tackle the multidimensional impacts of sexual exploitation and abuse**, with particular emphasis on the intersection between sexual exploitation and abuse of children and poverty and social exclusion within communities.

# Plan Recommendations

## Better cooperation between development partners

Plan believes that to address sexual exploitation and abuse in schools effectively, collaboration between government agencies, school authorities, and the nongovernmental and United Nations systems must be improved.

## Involving families and communities

Recent research by Plan and its partners indicates that addressing school-based sexual exploitation and violence requires a holistic approach. This must engage families and communities to identify links between violence in school and in the home, and treat school-based violence as an institutional problem reinforced by social factors in and outside the school setting. Components of the entire system, including compliant parents and

## Advocates for the Rights of the Child must create momentum for change from international governments and donors to meaningfully tackle violence in African schools

an inadequate justice system must be addressed as well as school personnel at all levels.

### Empower Children:

Efforts must empower children stand up to and report violence, and build self-esteem of girls and encourage their economic self-sufficiency to minimise the risk of transactional sex. Children themselves must become agents of change to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse in schools.

## Improving Legal Frameworks and Aid Focus:

Given the high profile that universal primary education has garnered in Africa, framing advocacy efforts to stem sexual exploitation and abuse as an important but still largely invisible part of this broader effort might serve to raise the issue's profile in a legal context. In addition, efforts should be made to ensure inclusion of sexual exploitation and abuse at school in national periodic reporting on child rights, women's rights and torture, and conduct a thorough review of legal frameworks and national policies that ensures that laws and policies meet international standards, are socially adapted and consistent.

**National legislation must be in place and existing laws enforced to render all sexual relationships between teachers and students illegal.**

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**Plan West Africa**  
[www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)

Written by: Richard Taylor,  
Stefanie Conrad

Photos : Mark Read  
Bruno Demeocq





**Plan West Africa**

Amitié II, n° 4023

Dakar, Senegal

Tel: +221 33 869 74 30

Fax: +221 33 860 29 51

[www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)