



## **Economic and Social Council**

Distr.: General  
29 November 2012

Original: English

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

**Fifty-seventh session**

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by American Association of University Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## **Statement**

One of the worldwide barriers to women's and girls' equal participation in society is gender violence, which may occur at home, in school, at work and/or in public spaces.

### **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**

One of the strategic objectives that came out of the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women was to eradicate violence against the girl child. The key recommendations were that Governments and, as appropriate, international and non-governmental organizations:

1. Take effective actions and measures to enact and enforce legislation to protect the safety and security of girls from all forms of violence at work, including training programmes and support programmes, and take measures to eliminate incidents of sexual harassment of girls in educational and other institutions;

2. Take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the girl child, in the household and in society, from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse;

3. Undertake gender-sensitization training for those involved in healing and rehabilitation and other assistance programmes for girls who are victims of violence, and promote programmes of information, support and training for such girls;

4. Enact and enforce legislation protecting girls from all forms of violence, including female infanticide and prenatal sex selection, genital mutilation, incest, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and child prostitution and child pornography, and develop age-appropriate safe and confidential programmes and medical, social and psychological support services to assist girls who are subjected to violence.

Nearly 20 years later, sexual violence remains a major problem facing girls. Sexual violence in schools continues to hinder girls' educational opportunities. In many countries, including the United States of America, existing law and policies on sexual violence that are inadequate to the task are reinforced. Appropriate measures are not in place to prevent it, existing legislation is often not enforced, and few support systems exist to help victimized girls. This situation must change. A society where girls cannot safely receive an education due to sexual violence is a society that fails them, and it is a society that will fail long-term by losing out on girls' knowledge and input.

### **The problem**

In the United States, a 2011 national study by the American Association of University Women was released to widespread acclaim. "Crossing the line: sexual harassment at school" found that 48 per cent of students in grades 7 to 12 had experienced sexual harassment during the previous school year. Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed (52 per cent versus 35 per cent), and they were more likely to experience physical forms of harassment, such as unwanted sexual touching and being forced to do something sexual against their will. More

girls than boys also reported that they had witnessed sexual harassment (33 per cent versus 24 per cent), which can make them feel less safe at school.

The students reported that sexual harassment that they experienced during the school year had a negative effect on them, especially on girls. Girls were more likely than boys to say that sexual harassment caused them to have trouble sleeping (22 per cent of girls versus 14 per cent of boys), not want to go to school (37 per cent of girls versus 25 per cent of boys) or change the way they went to or from school (10 per cent of girls versus 6 per cent of boys).

A significant number of students in the study said they stayed home because of sexual harassment (14 per cent of girls and 9 per cent of boys), and some students ended up leaving their school as a result of sexual harassment (5 per cent of girls and 2 per cent of boys). Girls were also more likely than boys to say not only that were they negatively affected by the sexual harassment they had experienced but also that they had felt that way for quite a while. Too often, these negative emotional effects take a toll on students' — and especially girls' — education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school.

The study found that most students who were harassers had been harassed themselves, showing that sexual harassment is a vicious cycle that is not adequately addressed at school. Further, the student harassers explained their behaviour by saying it was no big deal, it was part of school life or they were just being funny.

Few schools take action to stop sexual harassment. They may not realize that it is happening, since only 9 per cent of harassed students tell an adult at school when it happens. Schools may not know what to do, or they may fail to take action because they think it's no big deal or the problem is too big to address. However, they must do something. The education of girls depends on it. Government agencies must also do more. The laws in place to protect girls against sexual violence are inadequate and rarely enforced. Pressuring schools to enforce laws is often time-consuming and expensive for girls and their families and is not a realistic solution.

### **Recommendations**

- Schools must have a sexual violence policy that is created with input from students; that is well-publicized to students, teachers and parents; and that is enforced.
- Students need a way to report incidents anonymously. Many students do not report because they fear retaliation or being blamed for asking for it.
- Schools should ensure that students are aware of and educated about sexual harassment and sexual violence, their rights and how to respond if they experience or witness it.
- Schools must train their staff and faculty to recognize and respond to sexual violence, to know how to help students who come to them and to know their obligations if they witness it.
- Schools must work to create a culture of respect and gender equality as well as a culture of acceptance and tolerance for all, without regard to gender presentation or sexual orientation, and must reinforce that culture by the attitudes, words and actions of school officials, faculty and staff.

- Schools must recognize and address how the intersections of race, class, gender and sexual orientation can cause some students to fare worse than others when they experience sexual harassment.
- Schools and local governments need more programmes in place to help students who experience sexual harassment. Few of them know what to do and may drop out of school or become harassers in order to cope.
- Governments should consider passing better laws against sexual violence in schools, ones that are more enforceable than current laws.
- Governments and schools can work with the media on programming and initiatives targeting youth that focus on issues of respect, consent and appropriate joking.

### **Case studies**

- Sexual violence must be discussed in the classroom and addressed school-wide. *Shifting Boundaries* is a curriculum focused on ending gender violence in middle schools. It includes six age-appropriate lesson plans for each grade and school-wide intervention initiatives that have proven to be successful based on testing in schools that use them and schools that do not. One of the school-wide interventions involves having the students indicate on a map of the school the places where they feel unsafe and having teachers monitor areas that many students identified as unsafe places.
- All prevention initiatives must especially focus on boys because they are the main perpetrators of sexual violence. *Men Can Stop Rape* works with boys in middle and high schools through their *Men of Strength Clubs*. They discuss healthy masculinity issues, how to be a strong man without hurting others and how to stand up to stop sexual violence.
- Prevention initiatives must include youth input. *Girls for Gender Equity* works with teenage girls to create workshops and public service announcements on the topic of sexual violence. The girls do peer-to-peer workshops in local schools and help to educate other students about topics related to the prevention of violence against women and girls.