

“Empowering the Next Generation of Mothers: The Intersection between Gender-based Violence and Female Access to Education”

**Briefing organized by the Senate Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee
and the Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Washington, DC, 9 May 2008**

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I am honoured to be here today to participate in the briefing on the intersection between gender-based violence (or violence against women and girls) and girls’ access to education. I have been asked to discuss gender-based violence and how it affects girls’ ability to access education, as well as the effects that girls’ access to education has on attitudes/action towards violence. Since the two other speakers will provide detailed information on violence against women and on girls’ education. I will limit myself to a very brief introduction to provide the overall setting for the discussion on the inter-linkages.

Violence against women and girls is a complex and pervasive global phenomenon. It is now well-established that such violence stems from historically unequal power relations between men and women and pervasive discrimination against women, both in the private and public sphere. Violence against women occurs in all countries of the world, in different settings, and women are exposed to forms of violence across their life cycle: beginning from before birth to old age. On average, it is estimated that *one in three* women is subject to violence at some point in her lifetime.

Violence against women is a violation of women’s human rights with far-reaching consequences for the victims, their children and communities, and society as a whole. Women who experience violence suffer a range of health problems. Their ability to earn a living and to participate in public life is diminished, and their access to, or ability to get or further their education, is compromised.

The direct and indirect costs of violence against women to society as a whole include lowered economic production, reduced capital formation, the resources required for programmes for victims/survivors of violence, as well as costs associated with social instability through inter-generational transmission of violence. Serious efforts to assess these costs have only been made in some parts of the world to date.

Violence against women undermines the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, including those in the areas of poverty eradication, education, child health, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and overall sustainable development.

Efforts that aim to prevent, reduce and ultimately eliminate violence against women and girls need to address the root causes, namely gender inequality and

discrimination against women, and focus on the promotion and protection of women's human rights, their equality and their empowerment.

Education is key to women's empowerment. As was stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Investing in the education and training for girls and women has very high social and economic returns, and is a means for girls and women to know and demand their rights. It builds self-esteem and self-confidence, and provides girls and women with the tools to fulfil their aspirations and become driving forces for development as agents of change. Education also has significant potential to develop positive attitudes to gender equality and women's human rights among boys.

Discrimination of women and girls, including violence - a serious form of discrimination, limits their access to education. Although significant gains have been made on girls' education, in particular in relation to primary level, according to the most conservative estimates, as many as 55 million girls continue to be left out of the formal education system. The Millennium Development Goal 3 target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, has been missed. Around 76 countries have failed to achieve gender parity even in primary education. This is despite the fact that Heads of State at the United Nations 2005 World Summit reaffirmed their commitment to renew efforts to improve the education of girls.

A number of common characteristics have been identified around the world that perpetuate discrimination against girls in access to education. These include poverty, unsafe school environments, causes associated with discriminatory patriarchal attitudes and practices including parental unwillingness to invest or take an interest in girls' education, stereotyping in curricula, textbooks and teaching methods, child labour, restrictions on girls' freedom of movement and expression, and discriminatory social and cultural practices.

Violence against women and girls constitutes a significant obstacle to, and has a negative impact on, girls' access to education and their educational performance. This intersection can take place at three main points: girls can be witnesses to violence in the home; they can be victims of violence in the home or the community; and they can be victims of violence in educational environments.

Impact of gender-based violence on girls' access to education

Girls who witness violence in their homes or other contexts, or who are themselves victims of different forms of abuse or violence, can develop emotional and behavioral problems that adversely affect their educational performance. Violence against girls in educational institutions can similarly have significant impact on performance and act as a barrier to girls' access to education. Some forms of violence against girls, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, son preference, trafficking and forced prostitution can reduce or stop girls' access to education altogether.

Research indicates that the children of women victims of violence who *witness* such violence are affected in at least three ways: in terms of their health; their educational performance; and their use of violence in their own lives. They may exhibit more anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms and temperament problems than other children. Exposure to chronic violence is associated with lower cognitive functioning and poor school performance. A study in Nicaragua found that children of female victims of violence left school an average of four years earlier than other children.

Girls are more likely than boys to be *victims* of sexual abuse, including incest. WHO has estimated that of the 150 million girls and 73 million boys worldwide who have experienced forced sexual intercourse, up to 56 percent of girl victims were abused by family members compared to 25 percent of boy victims. Such abuse can have a host of negative repercussions, including depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual dysfunction and substance abuse, HIV infection and reproductive health problems. These, in turn, impact access to and/or performance in schools.

Some discriminatory social and cultural practices that constitute acts of violence against girls also curtail or stop girls' access to education. For example, *son preference* - which commonly involves favouring the development and education of a male child over a female child - results in girls being forced to leave school in order to take care of domestic duties. *Early marriages*, in addition to harming girls' health, put them at greater risk of intimate partner violence especially when the age discrepancy with the husband is significant, and commonly put an end to girls' education. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that one out of every three girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is already married, and in specific countries the percentages are much higher.

The health complications of *female genital mutilation* - such as infections, chronic pain, urinary and menstrual problems, post traumatic stress and depression -- can keep girls out of schools. Up to 140 million women and girls today have undergone some form of FGM and a further 2 million are estimated to be at risk of undergoing the procedure each year. In addition, *trafficking and coercion into the sex trade* are other forms of violence that disproportionately affect girls and curtail their access to education.

Violence against girls in schools can negatively impact girls' educational performance and curtail girls' access to education. While schools are meant to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children, for many girls they represent a security threat. A common form of school-based violence is bullying which may include sexual harassment, and physical or sexual assault. Perpetrators may be male students or teachers. In research undertaken by the American Association of University Women, 83 percent of girls in grades 8 through 11 in public schools in the United States reported exposure to some form of harassment. In Malawi, 50 percent of school girls surveyed said that they had been touched in a sexual manner by teachers or schoolboys.

Girl students are exposed to violence in schools both as a result of, and to reinforce, their lower status in relation to boys and male teachers. Such violence impedes their educational performance and may limit their access to schools if parents are

unwilling to expose daughters to such risks. A crucial intervention for securing the safety and security of girls in school environments is providing adequate sanitation facilities. In some parts of the world, girls are kept out of school because the facilities provided are not safe.

Girls who engage in sport in schools or other community environments may face risk of gender-based violence, exploitation and harassment, from other athletes, coaches, managers and family or community members. A study has indicated that 25 per cent of sportswomen under the age of 18 in Denmark reported harassment or knowing someone close to them who had been harassed. The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women recently launched a publication “Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, Gender Equality And Sport” which raises the issue of violence against women and girls in sport contexts.

Turning education into an empowerment tool for combating gender-based violence

Education can be a tool to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls. The Beijing Platform for Action established a vision for achieving gender equality through the education system. Non-discriminatory education benefits both boys and girls and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Creation of an educational and social environment in which girls and boys are treated equally and encouraged to achieve their full potential, and where educational resources promote non-stereotyped images of women and men, is essential for the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls and inequalities between women and men.

A 2002 report by the European Union identified characteristics of good educational practice to combat violence against women, based on insights gained through experience of EU Member States in implementing the strategies set out in the Platform for Action. These include, among others:

- Teach youngsters to practice equality through fostering cooperation between girls and boys, based on mutual respect.
- Encourage cognitive, emotional and behavioural change, including through:
 - challenging the erroneous linking of biological differences between women and men with social or psychological differences that are a result of culture and upbringing;
 - incorporating the study of the history of discrimination and violence against women in the curriculum;
 - deconstructing the stereotypical approach to male identity building, which associates female values with weakness and submission and male values with strength, control, emotional stamina and use of violence.
- Develop appropriate educational procedures -- including through active student participation and use of the media -- to implement these objectives.
- Provide appropriate teacher training and incentives, and enable teachers to cooperate with other actors working on violence against women.

The EU report also identifies good practices in the education system to equip students with skills to detect and prevent domestic violence, sexual violence and gender-based violence in the workplace.

The response of the United Nations in addressing the link between violence against women and access to education, at different levels

The United Nations Girls Education Initiative, launched by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2000, is an example of a successful partnership for girls' education. In countries where this initiative is established, partners work together to strengthen interventions that promote girls' access to quality education, including those that accelerate and encourage the participation of girls and boys in their own empowerment. This initiative is emerging as an effective strategy which both prevents violence against girls and contributes to their empowerment.

Within the United Nations, two pathbreaking studies, the *Secretary-General's in-depth study on violence against women* and the *Secretary-General's study on violence against children*, were launched in 2006. Both studies noted that girls were at higher risk than boys for several forms of violence. The study on violence against children called on States to take into account the different risks facing girls and boys with respect to violence.

Since the launch of the Secretary-General's study on violence against women, the momentum for action on violence against women and girls has accelerated significantly. The *General Assembly* recognized the linkage between education and eliminating violence against women when it called upon States to ensure that men and women and boys and girls have equal access to education and literacy programmes, and are educated on gender equality and human rights, particularly women's rights, and their responsibility to respect the rights of others. The General Assembly also called for States to integrate women's rights into curricula and to develop gender-sensitive teaching materials and classroom practices, especially for early childhood.

In 2007, the *Commission on the Status of Women*, which is the central intergovernmental body of the United Nations for the promotion of gender equality, focused on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. It recognized that the prevailing negative socio-cultural attitudes and gender stereotypes contribute to the de facto and de jure discrimination and violence against the girl child. It highlighted that empowerment of girls is key to breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence.

The Commission provided detailed and comprehensive guidance for action by Member States in areas of legislation, policy development, budget allocation, education and health to eliminate discrimination and violence against the girl child. It highlighted the link between education and violence, and called on States and other relevant actors to ensure safe and supportive school environments for girls and girl-friendly school premises. Measures recommended included action against sexual harassment in schools, efforts to achieve gender balance at all levels of the education sector, and provision of

appropriate sanitation and recreational facilities, boarding facilities, school transport and secure safe routes to and from school.

The Commission called for specific programmes to reach girls not enrolled in formal education programmes because of, for example, extreme poverty, child labour, abuse or exploitation, trafficking, prostitution, armed conflict and displacement, migration, early and forced marriage, pregnancy, motherhood and disability. The Commission also recommended steps to promote gender-sensitive and empowering educational and training processes and materials; integrate girls' rights into curricula at all levels; and increase girls' ability to attend school by investing in public infrastructure projects.

The Commission provided detailed guidance on preventing and eliminating different forms of violence against girls, including advocacy programmes that involve educational institutions. These included changing behaviour, stereotyped attitudes and harmful practices, and training among teachers and health service providers in identifying acts of violence against girls. (Details of the recommendations are found in the brochure distributed at the meeting: "Agreed Conclusions of the 52nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child". These are also available on the website of the Division for the Advancement of Women – www.un.org/womenwatch)

On 25 February 2008, the *Secretary-General* of the United Nations launched his *global campaign* to end violence against women and girls. This campaign, which will continue until 2015, the target date for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The campaign provides an excellent opportunity for using the educational system to help stop violence against women and girls. The Secretary-General's campaign is focused on three key areas: heightened global awareness and advocacy, strengthened efforts and partnerships, involving all stakeholders, at the national and regional levels, and United Nations leadership by example.

In his campaign, the Secretary-General will engage world leaders; he will form a global network to mobilize men and boys; he will encourage the involvement of the media and private sector. Importantly, the Secretary-General recognized the critical efforts of the women's movement and said he would work hand-in-hand with women's groups worldwide. He noted "The progress over the past century has happened thanks to them and they will be our chief standard bearer in the future too". The Secretary-General will organize a high-level event on violence against women and girls in 2010. Entities across the entire UN system will increase their support to the efforts of Member States at the national level.

Events such as today's panel make an important contribution to raising awareness of the global nature of the pandemic of violence against women and girls, by demonstrating the impact of such violence on the ability of women and girls to enjoy their rights, such as the right to education, and uniting people to take action. This panel has specifically aimed to show how violence can impede enjoyment of the right to education and how education of girls can contribute to ending violence against women and girls.

While work on violence against women and girls has gained momentum world-wide, it is up to all of us to find ways to creatively build on the gains made, to scale up efforts and ensure sustained positive impact on the lives of women and girls. I would like to close by posing a challenge to all participants today – whether focused on violence against women and girls or on education of girls, or perhaps both. We need to find ways to work together, in the context of the Secretary-General’s campaign on violence against women, to make the links between violence and education more visible and to identify concrete ways to ensure the development of education systems around the world that are both safe and secure for girls and contribute to a world free from violence by empowering girls.

Thank you.