



# A girl's right to learn without fear:

Working to end gender-based violence at school

Executive summary



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
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because **I am a  
Girl**

# Executive summary

Since 2000 there has been a focus on achieving universal access to primary education and gender parity as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet as we approach 2015, which was the target for achieving the MDGs, many girls are failing to undertake and complete a quality lower secondary education. Even though, in the words of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls”, 66 million girls are missing out on the education that could transform their own lives and the world around them.<sup>1</sup>

Adolescent girls in particular have much to gain from education. Those who complete primary and secondary education are likely to earn a greater income over their lifetimes, to have fewer unwanted pregnancies, to marry later, and to break cycles of poverty within families and communities. Plan’s *Because I am a Girl* campaign aims to eliminate barriers preventing girls from successfully moving beyond primary to secondary education.

Beyond merely ensuring access to schools, however, the challenge is to ensure children’s access to *quality* education. Plan believes that quality education must include learning relevant to the needs, rights and aspirations of girls—and this learning must be delivered in safe school environments that are free from gender bias and promote gender equality.



## Violence is a major barrier to girls' education

**A major barrier to the achievement of quality education is the existence of gender-based violence in and around schools.**

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) refers to acts of sexual, physical or psychological violence inflicted on children in and around schools because of stereotypes and roles or norms attributed to or expected of them because of their sex or gendered identity. It also refers to the differences between girls' and boys' experience of and vulnerabilities to violence.

In most societies, unequal power relations between adults and children and the gender stereotypes and roles attributed to girls and boys leave schoolgirls especially vulnerable to sexual harassment, rape, coercion, exploitation and discrimination from teachers, staff and peers. Boys and girls who do not conform to dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity or femininity are also vulnerable to sexual violence and bullying.

## Long-term implications

While children's vulnerabilities and experiences vary across and within countries, SRGBV is a global phenomenon. No school is immune to the attitudes and beliefs within the broader community that promote harmful gender norms and condone acts of gender-based violence.

The failure to protect children from all forms of violence, including in their school lives, is a violation of their rights, compromising their development and well-being. SRGBV is correlated with lower academic achievement and economic security, as well as greater long-term health risks. It perpetuates cycles of violence across generations. Without addressing it, many countries will not only fall short of meeting their international human rights commitments, but will also compromise the world's capacity to achieve the development goals we have set for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

## The prevalence of gender-based violence experienced by school children is unacceptable.

- Between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience violence every year,<sup>3</sup> many within schools.<sup>4</sup>
- Worldwide, an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys have experienced sexual violence.<sup>5</sup>
- Nearly half of all sexual assaults are committed against girls younger than 16 years of age.<sup>6</sup> Reports indicate that children as young as six are victims of rape.<sup>7</sup>
- Bullying is also pervasive: surveys show that between one-fifth (China) and two-thirds (Zambia) of children reported being victims of verbal or physical bullying.<sup>8</sup>
- Millions more children live in fear of being physically abused under the guise of discipline; more than 80 per cent of students in some countries suffer corporal punishment at school.<sup>9</sup>

**66 million girls are missing an education at a time when it not only has the power to transform their own lives, but also the world around them.**

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## The eight key principles for framing effective government action against SRGBV are:

### **1. Comprehensive and integrated action**

Governments must adopt a comprehensive, integrated and multi-sectoral action plan to prevent and respond to violence. The plan should be gender-responsive, take into account the diversity of experiences and needs of marginalised girls and boys, and look specifically at the school context.

### **2. Effective legislation and regulation**

Laws must explicitly protect children from violence, ensure accountability, and treat all children equally.

### **3. Safe and effective reporting and response**

Reporting and response mechanisms must be clear, proportionate and consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **4. Evidence-based policy**

Policy interventions must be supported by sufficient and credible data on the nature and scope of SRGBV.

### **5. Well-supported, well-trained personnel**

Teachers and school administrators must be well-trained, equipped and supported to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in and around schools.

### **6. Partnership**

Law enforcement, the judiciary, child protection authorities, the transportation sector and civil society organisations must be partners in addressing the vulnerability of children en route to and from school grounds.

### **7. Inclusiveness**

Whole communities, including men and boys, must be involved to change harmful attitudes and shift social norms. Emphasis should be placed on issues of sexual health and sexual rights.

### **8. Participation**

Girls and boys must be recognised as key participants in developing solutions to address SRGBV.

**In adopting and applying these principles, governments can bring a strong national focus to tackling gender-based violence in schools. They can be champions of girls' rights by ensuring girls' access to the schooling that enables them to realise their full potential.**

## Working together to end gender-based violence

Government action is a fundamental part of the solution to protecting children from SRGBV. A concerted national commitment to adopt, implement and monitor an integrated framework for action can empower schools, communities, parents, and children jointly to confront the violence and discrimination limiting so many lives. Effective national laws, policies and programmes can help transform schools and communities into safer, more equitable and inclusive spaces.

Plan's report *A girl's right to learn without fear: Working to end gender-based violence in school* presents solutions aimed at preventing and responding to SRGBV against girls and boys. The solutions draw from existing policy examples, as well as global civil society campaigns, international instruments and the voices of girls themselves. Plan calls on governments to prioritise actions tied to eight key principles to ensure that all children can learn free from violence, and that girls benefit from their equal right to education.

**For a copy of the full report, go to  
[plan-international.org/girls](http://plan-international.org/girls)  
or contact us: [publishing@plan-international.org](mailto:publishing@plan-international.org)**

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1 This number is Plan's best estimate based on the available data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Available from [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org)

2 In 2000, 189 nations made a promise to free people from extreme poverty and multiple deprivations. This pledge turned into the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG 2 is to achieve universal primary education and MDG 3 is to promote gender equality and to empower women. A target date of 2015 has been set to meet these goals. Available from <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview/> Accessed 26 July 2012.

3 UNICEF (2009). *Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse*. Available from [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_45451.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45451.html) Accessed 27 June 2012.

4 Plan estimates that at least 246 million boys and girls suffer from school-related violence every year. Plan's estimate is based on the following calculation: the 2006 UN Study on Violence against Children reported that 20-65% of schoolchildren are affected by verbal bullying—the most prevalent form of violence in schools. Based on UNESCO's 2011 *Global Education Digest* report, 1.23 billion children are in primary or secondary school on any given day, and Plan estimates that 20% of the global student population is 246 million children. Therefore, Plan estimates that at least 246 million boys and girls suffer from SRGBV every year. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011). *Global Education Digest 2011: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World*. Montreal, UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

5 World Health Organization (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva, WHO. / United Nations Secretary General (2006). *Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children*, p. 12. New York, United Nations.

6 World Health Organization (2005). *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes, and Women's Responses*. Geneva, WHO.

7 Chinyama, V. and Mwabe, J. (2007). *Kenya: Sexual Violence Afflicts the Lives of Children at a School in Central Kenya*. Available from [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/kenya\\_39054.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/kenya_39054.html). Accessed 31 July 2012.

8 World Health Organization (2012). *Global School-Based Student Health Survey*. Available from <http://www.who.int/chp/gshs/en> Accessed 24 July 2012.

9 NGO Advisory Council for Follow-up to the UN Study on Violence against Children (2011). *Five Years On—A Global Update on Violence Against Children*. Available from [http://www.crin.org/docs/Five\\_Years\\_On.pdf](http://www.crin.org/docs/Five_Years_On.pdf) Accessed 2 August 2012.

*Because I am a Girl* is Plan's global initiative to end gender inequality, promote girls' rights and lift millions of girls out of poverty. We aim to support girls to get the education, skills and support they need to transform their lives and the world around them. Plan's 75 years of experience has shown that real change can take place when girls are valued. We are working with girls, communities, traditional leaders, governments, global institutions and the private sector to address the barriers that prevent girls from completing their education. Supporting girls' education is the right, fair and smart thing to do. It is one of the single best investments we can make to help end poverty for generations to come.

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