Ministry of Education to Reduce the Incidence of Sexual Harassment and Violence Among Girls Attending High Schools in Kenya by 2015\(^1\)

**Opening Statement**

Nearly a quarter of all girls below 15 years of age are forced into their first sexual encounter, according to the 2008-2009 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS). In a case study involving two schools in Nairobi, almost all of the 20 girls (95%) who were part of the in-school sample had experienced some form of sexual harassment and violence (SHV) in school. This is against the backdrop of the Sexual Offences Act of 2006 which seeks to “…make provisions about sexual offences, their definition, prevention and protection of all persons from harm, from unlawful sexual acts, and for connected purposes.”\(^2\)

Figure 1: Percentage of first sexual intercourse that was forced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age/timing of first sexual intercourse</th>
<th>Percentage of first sexual intercourse that was forced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 15</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent / missing</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INTRODUCTION**

Sexual violence and harassment in schools is a public health problem. It is detrimental to girls’ psychosomatic health;\(^3\) a fact that has been expressed by students, educators, and community officials throughout the last decade.\(^4\) Sexual violence is “…any sexual act, attempted sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts of trafficking women's sexuality using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the survivor, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”\(^5\)

School violence is defined as "...a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools; which inhibits development and learning, as well as harming the school’s learning climate." Majority of girls aged 15-19 who are exposed to sexual harassment and violence are in secondary school. (See Figure 1). Policy makers should work to keep girls safe from sexual violence and harassment because it exposes girls to STIs and negates their ability to perform well in school.

Our Girls are not Safe

As a response to the incidences of sexual harassment and violence, the Sexual Offences Act was enacted in 2006. Despite this move, girls continue to be sexually abused in schools across Kenya. Over the past two years, over 1,000 teachers have been relieved of their duties in Kenya for sexually abusing girls who were aged 12 to 15 years in Kenyan primary schools (all voices.org, 2010). These are the teachers who would otherwise be considered the custodians of the girls while in school. Two in every 10 teachers believe that pupils who are sexually harassed by their teachers or fellow pupils are to blame for the incidences (Daily Nation, January 28th 2011). SHV has a negative impact on girls:

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First, the very fact that young women and girls experience much higher levels of violence reflects broader gender inequalities in society. Secondly, sexual violence is a violation of girls and women’s human rights and is detrimental to their physical and psychological health. Thirdly, sexual violence limits the ability of girls and young women to achieve their educational potential, reduces opportunities to enhance family health and limits their social and economic development.

Moving Beyond Dismissals

The MoE should seek to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment and violence among girls attending high schools in Kenya by 2015. In so doing, the MoE can liaise with the TSC and other organs of government to ensure full implementation of the Act to stop violence against girls. This is because:

Recently, the TSC sacked teachers who sexually preyed on pupils. However, sacking the teachers is inadequate as they are only one group in the community who are perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence on school girls. Within the community, SHV occurs along the way; to and from school and at home. Along the way to school, girls are harassed by idlers, strangers, matatu touts/makangas (young men who collects passenger fares in a matatu – public taxi). Sexual harassment and violence experienced by the girls include name calling and insults, aggressive pushing and touching, blocked pathways on the way to school, transactional sex, and even rape. Aggy, one of the girls who has experienced SHV on the way to school, observes,

“... the men always disturb me, call out to me, push me back, touch me as I am walking. If you refuse, they abuse you. Yes, they abuse you and laugh at you…”

Even though the MoE and the TSC emphasize the need to have guidance and counseling teachers in almost every school, the teachers’ training does not include the specifics of post-trauma counseling. Teachers need to be sensitive to the needs of the children that they teach so that they can detect instances when pupils may have a problem such as having been sexually harassed. Adoption of the relevant curricula that tackles gender and sexual education would go a long way to strengthen messages on gender relations among boys and girls in schools. This is where the MoE and KIE should work in partnership to ensure the relevance of curricula in schools.

The law is rarely applied to cover the sexual offenders who prey on girls. Even with the sacking of the school teachers, little remains known if they were ever convicted in a court of law. In addition, as long as the burden of proof is left on the victims, little will be achieved in terms of getting the victims to speak up and get help. There is need for a collaborative effort between the MoE, School Principals, the Ministry of Justice, National Cohesion and Constitutional Affairs and the Police Department to work together on effective ways of apprehending sexual offenders and their subsequent prosecution.

13 Ibid
Principals of schools with the help of community members should initiate a "walking school bus" where girls from neighborhoods that have high risk of sexual harassment are escorted to and from schools.

Principals, with the help of community ombudswomen, should encourage girls to walk in groups and the MoE can monitor its effect through periodic visits to schools by Ministry officials. This can go a long way to thwart the efforts of potential predators.

The MoE with assistance from the Kenya Institute of Education, and support of the Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture, and Social Services should examine ways to strengthen gender sensitive curricula within the school syllabi.

Reconsider the introduction of comprehensive sex education in all schools — especially schools in the urban slums, to enable girls to learn communication and interpersonal skills and explore their goals, values, and options. It is noted that communication skills, in addition to a successful high school education, might enable these young women to improve their negotiation skills when faced with difficult and dangerous situations that characterize transactional sex or rape.

The potential benefits of sex education would be enhanced by starting it in primary schools as a way to equip girls with life skills to handle sex-related issues.

Through the Teachers Service Commission, strengthen the expertise of the teachers in the GCD for effective student counseling. Counseling will help girls traumatized by SHV to come to terms with the trauma, and thereby start the healing process. Counseling will also help boys become more accommodating to the girls in and out of class, and refrain from sexual harassing girls. Furthermore, counseling will offer teachers opportunities to talk to all the other students in class about academic and social issues.

Push for full implementation of the sexual offences Act to provide a legal framework for stepping up the crackdown on sexual offenders

- Principals and community ombudsmen to liaise and establish confidential mechanisms by which girls can report the sexual violence complaints.
- The police department should always be in the forefront to apprehend the sexual offenders who prey on school girls and liaise with the judiciary to ensure justice is handed to the victims.