

# PASSING THE TEST

*– the real  
cost of being  
a student*



***Almost one in five  
students – girls and  
boys – state that  
they have been  
abused by teachers  
or school staff***

# INTRODUCTION

Gender Based Violence (GBV) in and around schools is now widely recognized as a serious global phenomenon that is a fundamental violation of human rights and a major barrier to the realization of all children's rights to education<sup>1</sup>. Violence can be perpetrated by students or teachers in or around the school, or by out of school youths and adults who approach students on their way to and from school or demand sex in exchange for money or gifts. Acts of Gender Based Violence are disproportionately directed at girls, but boys and teachers can also be targets. Research carried out in 2012 highlights how School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) is also a significant problem in Liberia for both school boys and girls<sup>2</sup>.

Liberia has a progressive policy framework that aims to eliminate the marginalization of women and girls in Liberia by 2020 (The National Gender Policy 2009), as well as provide free and compulsory primary school for all children and support girls' access and retention in schools (National policy for Girls Education 2013). A Code of Conduct for Liberian Teachers and School Administrators has also been written and a curriculum is starting to be developed around Gender Based Violence. These policies are a good start and the challenge is now to ensure that they are effectively implemented.

## WHAT IS GENDER BASED VIOLENCE?

The Liberian 2006 Gender Based Violence National Action Plan recognizes the following as forms of Gender Based Violence:

- Rape and attempted rape including marital rape, statutory rape (i.e. sex with someone under the age of 18), of women and men.
- Incest
- Sexual exploitation: Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes. This includes sex between teachers and their students.
- Forced early marriage
- Domestic violence including sexual, physical, and psychological abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner or another family member.
- Physical violence directed against a person on the basis of their gender.
- Socio-economic violence including discrimination or denial of opportunities based on a person's sex or sexual orientation.
- Trafficking for sex.
- Female genital cutting

## THE LIBERIAN RESEARCH

In 2012, a consortium of government and non-government agencies, working in Liberian schools, commissioned research into School Related Gender Based Violence. This was carried out in Bong, Montserrado, Grand Bassa and Grand Gedeh Counties and surveyed 1,858 students aged 10-20 years and held 120 group discussions.

### CONSORTIUM:

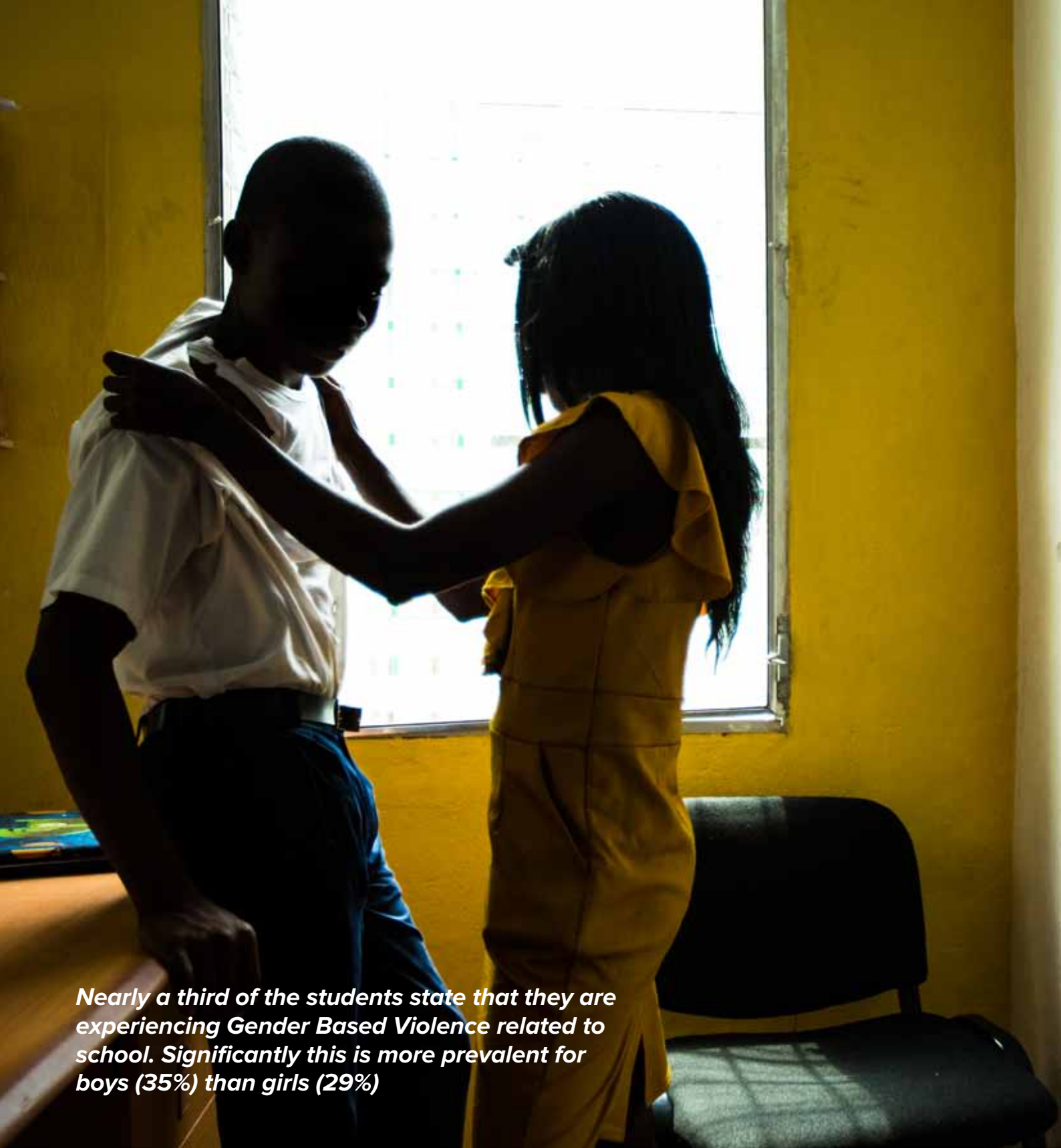
Ministry of Education  
Ministry of Gender and Development  
Association of Liberian Universities  
IBIS  
The Norwegian Refugee Council  
Save the Children  
Concern Worldwide

### RESEARCH TEAM:

Centre on Violence against Women and Children of Rutgers University, New Jersey  
Cuttington University, Monrovia

### METHODOLOGY:

Literature review  
11 expert interviews  
120 group discussions with students, parents, and community members  
Anonymous survey 1100 male & 758 female students aged 10- around 20 in 4 counties



***Nearly a third of the students state that they are experiencing Gender Based Violence related to school. Significantly this is more prevalent for boys (35%) than girls (29%)***

*“The child may be sleeping with the teacher; the families are not proud, but they may see this as a good connection for the child or a good source of cash... If the family is proud it’s because they think the teacher will marry their daughter.”*

(Key informant)

# THE EXPERIENCE OF LIBERIAN SCHOOL STUDENTS

The research indicates that experiencing or witnessing GBV is normal for Liberian school boys and girls. GBV can be found in all spheres of their life including their homes. Over 96% reported that they had experienced at least one form of abuse<sup>3</sup>, with this being similar for girls and boys. A quarter of the students asked reported that they had been forced to have sex when they didn't want to (30% girls and 22% boys).

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Schools should be safe spaces for development and could provide an opportunity to help to challenge these negative social norms. However, nearly a third of students report experiencing Gender Based Violence related to school<sup>4</sup>. Significantly this is more prevalent for boys (35%) than girls (29%)<sup>5</sup>. Abuse by class mates is reported most frequently by almost one in four boys and one in five girls. Almost one in five students - girls and boys - report abuse by teachers or school staff. These figures paint a concerning picture of the experience of Liberian school children.

It is clear from the data that one key concern within Liberian schools is the behavior between classmates. A factor often attributed to this is the wide age range in one grade, which can vary from 12 to 20 years of age, and is partly due to the interruption in schooling as a result of the civil war.

The Liberian research shows that many people think sex between teachers and girl students is quite common. Much of this will be transactional, i.e. the teacher will use their position of power to have sex with the student in return for something. This is usually instigated by the male teacher and in return the school girl might expect to pass tests she wouldn't otherwise pass, or gain other material benefits such as exam fees being waived. Some of the relationships might be considered romantic by both parties. These relationships may have the approval of parents who perceive them as a possible route to financial assistance for the household. Some liaisons are explicitly forced with the student threatened that they will fail the year or face punishment if they don't agree to sex<sup>6</sup>. Almost 18% of school girls and just over 13% of school boys reported having been asked for sex to get a better grade. All of these relationships are abusive given the power differentials and the students' age and all violate the Code of Conduct for Liberian Teachers and School Administrators.

## GENDER BASED VIOLENCE RELATED TO SCHOOL\*

	Overall	Girls	Boys
Reported any abuse by teachers, school staff or classmates	32%	29%	35%
Reported abuse by teachers	10%	12%	9%
Reported abuse by school staff	13%	11%	13%
Reported abuse by class mate	22%	19%	24%

\* The first row shows the percentage of students who have reported any kinds of abuse. Students might have reported abuse in more than one category which is reflected in the following three rows



# HOW ACCESSING SCHOOLS CAN PUT STUDENTS AT RISK

Since 2006, elementary school has been free in Liberia and the secondary school fees have been cut by 50%. However, students still need money for books, pens, uniforms and

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exam fees. Given the widespread poverty in Liberia this can be a challenge. If parents are not able to pay costs related to schooling, in order to stay in school students have to look elsewhere. At times a relative may help and in return may expect sexual favors. Where no help is forthcoming from relatives, families can put considerable pressure on girls to go out and find resources for both school fees and other expenses; and, as these girls have little to offer except their bodies, transactional sex is often the outcome. Being asked for transactional sex is a fairly common experience for Liberian school children with nearly a third of school girls and just over 17% of school boys reporting they had been asked for sex in return for being given money or help.



***Almost 18% of school girls and just over 13% of school boys reported having been asked for sex to get a better grade***

#### REQUESTS FOR TRANSACTIONAL SEX

	Yes	Girls	Boys
Has someone ever asked you for sex to give you money or help?	32%	29%	35%
Has someone ever asked you for sex to give you uniforms or food or something similar?	10%	12%	9%

# GENDER BASED VIOLENCE – NOT ONLY IN SCHOOLS

School Related Gender Based Violence must be understood against the wider background of Gender Based Violence in Liberia. During the civil war, which ended in 2003, not only was violence endemic but there are indications that rape was used as a weapon of war with those targeted often very young. Many of the current generation of school children, both girls and boys, will have themselves witnessed or experienced sexual violence during the war, and continue to witness violence in their homes and communities. Most children will not have received adequate support to cope with the ensuing trauma. Furthermore, many of the children are likely to have suffered displacement and possibly breakup of their families, leaving some children without parental guidance or support, and others living in households that are affected by trauma and violence. Likewise, many teachers and other school staff will have been exposed to extreme levels of violence over a protracted period.

***Three quarters of school boys thought that men were superior to women, as did a quarter of the girls.***

As a consequence of the civil war and widespread poverty there are very few possibilities for people to earn an income in Liberia. This might be one of the reasons why transactional sex has become a survival strategy for many Liberian women. The study suggests 'big men' with authority or a regular income such as police, religious leaders, NGO workers as well as teachers are commonly recorded as abusing those with limited power, particularly young women and girls. As in schools, a common abuse is transactional sex, with the man who has some level of authority able to offer gifts or favors that the girl or young woman is unable or unwilling to refuse. Other research has suggested that this high level of transactional sex is having an impact on how sex is viewed, with young men also seeing payment as the norm for entering a sexual relationship with a woman<sup>7</sup>.

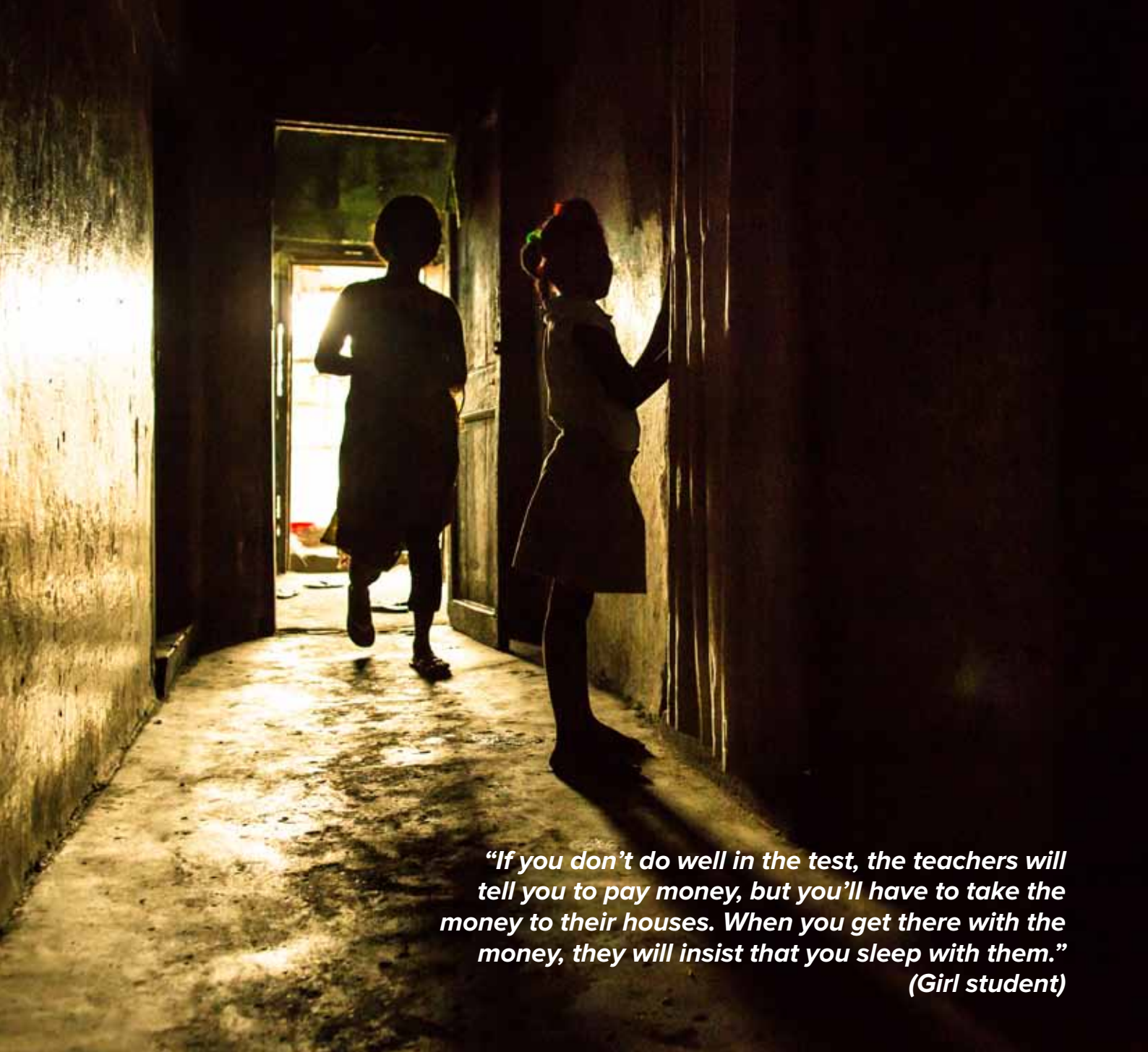
Besides abuse from those in positions of power outside the family, there are also reports of high rates of abuse within the family. In homes, in addition to spousal abuse, uncles, step-fathers or brothers are commonly mentioned as abusing their young women and girl relatives. In many cases abuse is accompanied with physical violence or the threat of it. Young men are mentioned as being particularly violent and aggressive and many women complain of being harassed, insulted and at times assaulted in public places by groups of young men.

These dynamics are set in a culture where men are seen as superior and having authority over women— particularly younger women. Three quarters of school boys thought that men were superior to women, as did a quarter of the girls. Other social attitudes underpinning the violence include a widespread belief that sexual violence and abuse is a normal part of 'man-

**The following responses from a group of school girls to the question 'Who are the people doing GBV?' show how vulnerable they are in all locations:**

- "At home, their uncle gets drunk and assaults them.
- Their brother gets drunk and forces them to have sex.
- Father forces his step-daughter to have sex with him.
- On the street the boys group together and beat up women that pass by them.
- At school some of the teachers seize the students' phones and tell them to come for it at night and tell the student to come alone or else the student will fail (their school tests)."





***“If you don’t do well in the test, the teachers will tell you to pay money, but you’ll have to take the money to their houses. When you get there with the money, they will insist that you sleep with them.”  
(Girl student)***

woman relationships’ and that is a natural expression of men’s sexual urges (see textbox). Whereas the legal age of consent and marriage is 18, the norm is for girls to be married much younger than this. According to the Poverty Reduction Strategy of Liberia the majority of Liberian girls have their first child before reaching the age of eighteen due to forced marriages and rape.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a general trend seems to be that communities do not see pregnancy of girls under the legal age of consent as an issue of concern.

#### **SOCIAL ATTITUDES BEHIND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE**

Out of 1,100 school boys and 758 school girls:

- 75% boys and 22% girls agreed with the statement ‘men are superior to women’.
- 46% of boys and 34% of girls agreed that ‘sexual violence and abuse is a normal part of a man-woman relationship’.
- 39% boys and 30% girls agreed that ‘sexual abuse and violence against women and girls is a natural expression of male sexual urges’



*“Most families create or give permission for violence to occur. They re-victimize the girl by not considering her position; she does not participate in decision making about whether or not to go to court, to call or not call the police. Parents decide, they don’t consider her feelings; so girls are abused and re-victimized again; her feelings are not considered. Sometimes parents talk to one another to compromise and resolve it. The victim is not talked to and is left out of it”. (Key stakeholder)*

# A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

There is a general sense that a 'culture of impunity' for the perpetrators of Gender Based Violence, including that related to schools, exists in Liberia. Whilst many people consider Gender Based Violence to be inappropriate it is also seen as normal and there is little expectation that there will be any serious consequences for the perpetrator except in some of the most aggregated cases of rape. Research has shown a reluctance to get involved in the formal justice system which may at times prevent survivors getting the medical care they need. Even when cases are reported to the police, those interviewed have little faith in the case being seen through with alleged perpetrators being reported as often let out of prison after a few days and police also being cited as potential abusers. Indeed there are a whole range of barriers preventing justice being done in these cases<sup>9</sup>.

***The Liberian research shows that most people think sex between teachers and girl students is quite common.***

As a result, a significant amount of abuse is not reported to authorities. If a school girl becomes pregnant it is common for the situation to be handled between the families, generally including traditional leaders, with at times reparation being paid or support for the baby being agreed. The school girl is unlikely to have any voice in this process. There are particular disincentives against taking action on sexual abuse within the family, because prosecuting any breadwinner would be seen as negatively impacting the socio-economic situation of the whole family, including the abused child.

This lack of reporting abuses to authorities has a number of major negative consequences: it contributes to the concept of a 'culture of impunity' and the sense of Gender Based Violence being normal; it leaves those suffering abuse without justice or psycho-social support which can compound their trauma; and it leads to a lack of data on the real extent of the problem which means it may not be treated with the urgency it deserves.

***“If a teacher asks for money for grades, they could get up to 6 months in jail”***

# UNFAIRLY BLAMING THOSE THAT SUFFER VIOLENCE

Whilst perpetrators might largely continue their abusive behavior without fear of the consequences, the same is not true for those suffering the abuse. In many cases it is said that they keep quiet through shame, or fear of being blamed or stigmatized. Only around a third of the students who said they had experienced Gender Based Violence also said that they had reported it (34% girls and 37% boys). For both girls and boys they are most likely to tell a friend, followed by a family member, a response that needs to be remembered when designing any referral mechanisms.

Data shows that being unfairly blamed for suffering abuse is quite likely with nearly all students believing that girls sometimes do things to cause the abuse and over half believing that

***Those that suffer violence should never be considered even partly responsible for the illegal acts of others; it is important that they receive unqualified sympathy and support.***

sometimes men and boys have a good reason to use violence against women and girls. Abuse that has taken place is also seen as something for the whole family to be ashamed about. Perceptions from the study indicate that many people consider a key to reducing Gender Based Violence is to enforce a more modest dress code on young women; thus again blaming the person suffering violence and somehow justifying the act. Those that suffer violence should never be considered even partly responsible for the illegal acts of others; it is important that they receive unqualified sympathy and support.

## WHO DID YOU TELL?

Out of those who said they had reported GBV the following answered the question;  
*If you told anyone who did you tell?*

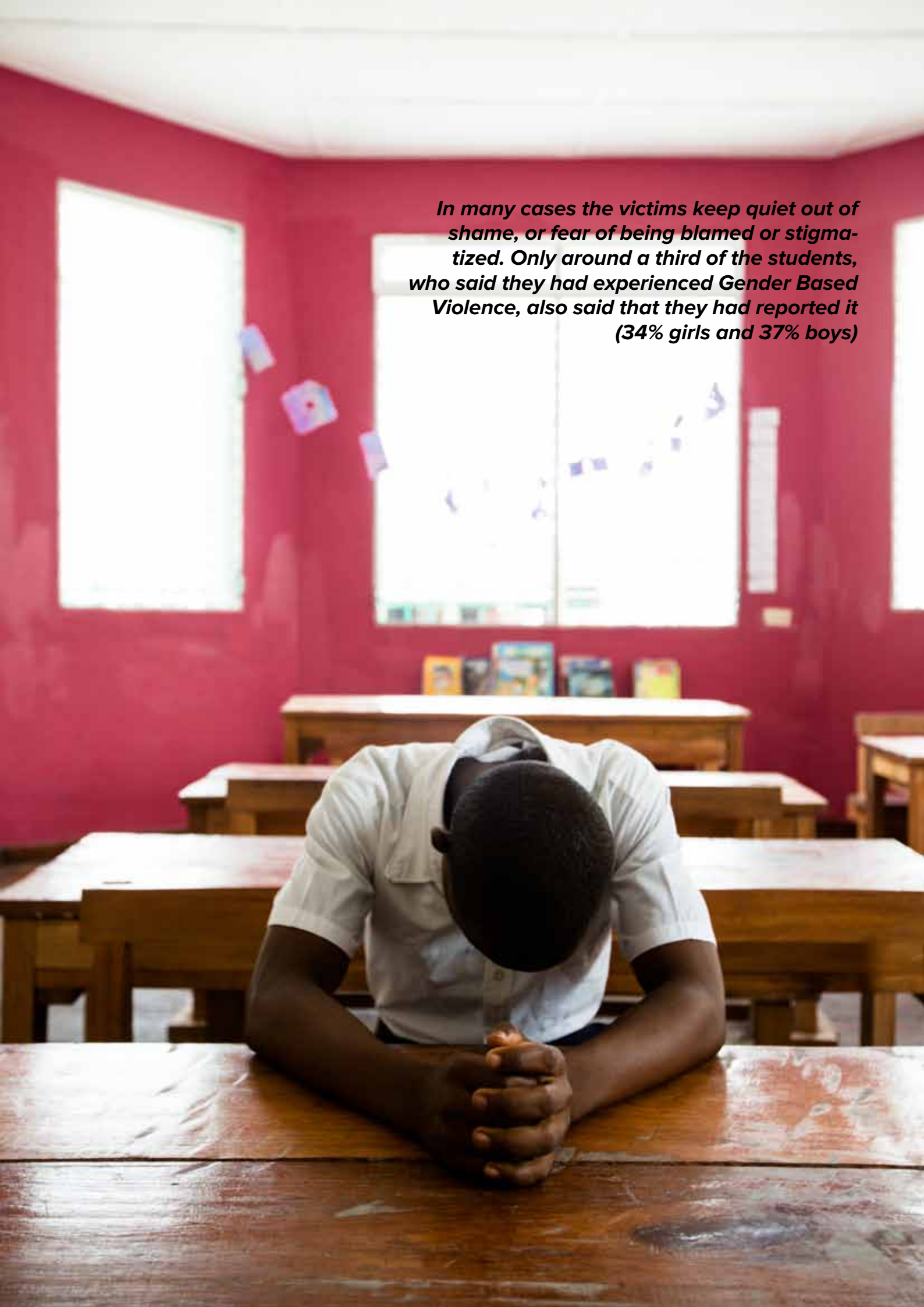
	Overall	Girls	Boys
Friend	55%	55%	55%
Family member	39%	42%	37%
Teacher	31%	34%	29%
Town chief, community head, zone leader	29%	31%	28%
Minister or religious leader	27%	28%	26%
School staff	26%	29%	25%

## UNFAIRLY BLAMING WOMEN AND GIRLS

The responses of students show how women and girls are often unfairly blamed for the violence they suffer:

- 93% boys and 88% girls agreed that 'sometimes girls do things that make sexual violence and abuse happen'.
- 59% boys and 63% girls agreed that 'men and boys sometimes have a good reason to use violence against women and girls'.
- 75% of boys and 80% of girls agreed that 'rape brings shame to the whole family of the person who experienced sexual violence'.

***In many cases the victims keep quiet out of shame, or fear of being blamed or stigmatized. Only around a third of the students, who said they had experienced Gender Based Violence, also said that they had reported it (34% girls and 37% boys)***



# THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL RELATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

*The wide belief in the prevalence of 'sex for grades' is leading to a lack of faith by students that the marks they receive reflect the quality of their work. It also leads to lack of respect for teachers*

School Related Gender Based Violence, as with all Gender Based Violence, has major impacts on the lives of those suffering it, including stigma and a whole range of physical and psychological health issues such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, risk of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV&AIDS, sterility and, for girls, unwanted pregnancy. At times, those suffering abuse may have to leave the community, and a few are said to commit suicide.

In addition, Gender Based Violence can have a significant impact on students' educational achievements through an inability to concentrate, absenteeism or dropping out. For girls abuse can lead to pregnancy and as a result often expulsion from school. At times parental concern about girls' safety at school can lead them to choose to withdraw the child from school before puberty.

There are also broader impacts on the school environment. The wide belief in the prevalence of 'sex for grades' is leading to a lack of faith by students that the marks they receive reflect the quality of their work. It also leads to lack of respect for teachers. Furthermore, school boys can perceive girls as being favored by teachers<sup>10</sup> and this can increase the perception of a gender bias which can contribute to violence being perpetrated by boys against girl class mates.

Rather than school being an opportunity to challenge negative behavioral norms, if Gender Based Violence is ignored, then schooling becomes another factor that normalizes abuse of power within relationships and schools can be forums where boys are pressurized by their peers to act in aggressive and abusive ways towards girls.

# WHAT CAN BE DONE TO DEVELOP SAFER LIBERIAN SCHOOLS?

Addressing the problem of School Related Gender Based Violence in Liberia is challenging, as women and girls are exposed to violence in almost all aspects of their lives, as are many boys. However, this wide prevalence of abuse makes it all the more urgent. For there to be long term changes it will require shifts in social attitudes and enforcement of laws in relation to abuse. At the very least Liberian school girls and boys should expect to be safe whilst they are in school, and should not be dropping out of school because they are not. Schools also have a role to play in the development of individual gender identities and can play a part in shaping wider dynamics. There is wide evidence that attitudes and behaviours learned in school can continue throughout a person's life. All stakeholders working in the education sector in Liberia have a role to play in making a positive change. Though the issue is challenging, there is much more that can be done:

## Address the gap between policies and practice

Action must be taken by all those involved in education in Liberia to address the gaps between policies and practice. Immediate steps could include:

- Strengthen the use of the teachers' Code of Conduct and the report mechanisms for Gender Based Violence in schools.
- Develop and disseminate guidelines on how schools should prevent and respond to Gender Based Violence.
- Improve capacity of teachers and school administrators to create child friendly environments.

## In the longer run:

- Train selected teachers on basic guidance and counseling for students.
- Ensure violators are not re-employed and criminalize teachers' sexual abuse of students.
- Include School Related Gender Based Violence indicators

in the regular Ministry of Education monitoring system (e.g. the Education Management Information System (EMIS)), adhering to ethical standards and guidelines.

- Ensure Gender Based Violence cases among children are effectively prosecuted.

## Develop and implement comprehensive education and prevention programs

- Work with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and community leaders to promote the role of parents in prevention and response to School Related Gender Based Violence.
- Work with girls and boys in school as key participants in any Gender Based Violence intervention.
- Reduce drivers of transactional sex by minimizing the cost of attending school.

## Further research

This research highlights some areas where not enough is understood about the experience of Liberian school children. In particular further research might be required on:

- School boys: to fully understand the nature of abuse that school boys are suffering in school, particularly from classmates, and how to respond to this.
- Students who have dropped out of school: to understand linkages with Gender Based Violence among those who have already dropped out of school and whether there are initiatives that could help them back to school.
- Minority groups: to understand the experience of minority groups such as male and female students with disabilities, or who are living with HIV&AIDS.

If the wide pervasiveness of Gender Based Violence in Liberia is to change, it is important that investment is made now in the next generation of citizens to ensure their safety and guide them on how to develop positive relationships with others!

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> University of Sussex, Centre for International Education (CIE) <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cie/projects/completed/genderviolence>

<sup>2</sup> Examining Gender Based Violence and Abuse among Liberian School Students in Four Counties: An Exploratory Study (2012), Postmus et al. This summary paper prepared by Jennifer Chapman October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> 'Abuse' here ranges from 'peeping', touching breasts or penis, asking for sex in exchange for something through to rape.

<sup>4</sup> 'Related to school' in that it was reported to be perpetrated by teachers, school staff or class mates.

<sup>5</sup> More research would be needed to understand the details of the school related abuse that male students are experiencing, or the age at which this is occurring.

<sup>6</sup> Studies in Kenya have suggested that underpaid government male teachers can look upon their behavior with their female students as part of their 'fringe-benefits'. Integration Regional Information Networks (IRIN). (2005). Broken Bodies Broken Dreams: Violence against women exposed. Kenya, United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), p. 77. cited in CCF-Liberia Survey Report on SEA in Liberian Schools and Communities (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Transactional Sex among Youths in Post-conflict Liberia, J Health Popul Nutr. 2011 April; 29(2): 113-122. Katwood et al.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Liberia (2008) Lift Liberia: Poverty Reduction Strategy of Liberia

<sup>9</sup> From Incident to Conviction, Concern Liberia (2011) Stacey Dunne

<sup>10</sup> However this research suggests the picture is more complex than this with male students also being vulnerable to gender based violence whilst at school.

*In many cases the victims keep quiet out of shame, or fear of being blamed or stigmatized. Only around a third of the students, who state that they have experienced Gender Based Violence, also state that they have reported it*

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This document is based on the study *Examining Gender Based Violence & Abuse in Liberian Schools* (2012) conducted by Judy L. Postmus and Rebecca Davis

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