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## **Sexual Harassment in School: An Invisible Issue for Girls and Young Women with Disabilities**

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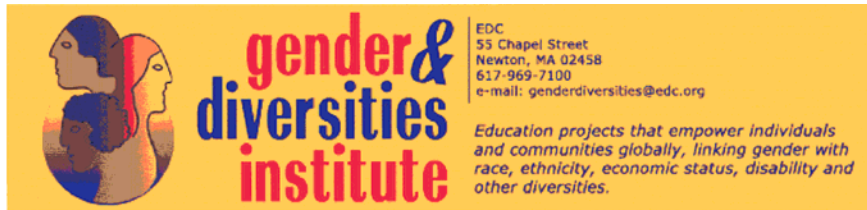
### **Introduction**

Girls and young women with disabilities are a large, diverse group, and include female youth with visible or invisible physical, sensory, learning, intellectual, emotional or health disabilities.<sup>1</sup> They live in all parts of the world, and belong to virtually all racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes. However, they are over-represented in poor regions and among poor families. Poverty is a risk factor for disability. So is gender, particularly in developing areas. When food, shelter and health care are scarce, boys and men are often given first preference. Also, women and girls usually experience higher rates of violence, and violence, in turn, can result in disability.

Girls and young women with disabilities are bound together by double discrimination based on gender and disability, a far greater barrier to their survival and success than any disability-based limitation. But these girls also have in common the creative and cultural aspects of being disabled combined with the particular vantage point of being female. Disabled girls are resilient and resistant. They would have to be to survive in such an unwelcoming world.

I want to focus on an invisible yet apparently widespread problem facing girls and young women with disabilities in the United States: violence, specifically, sexual harassment in school. However it is important to recognize that in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, most youth with disabilities, especially girls, do not attend school. Violence still permeates their lives, but it occurs elsewhere: at home, in the community, or in institutions.

Sexual harassment is any form of unwanted sexual attention, from verbal comments to touching to sexual acts. Sexual harassment in school is illegal in the United States yet according to several national studies, it is pervasive, with severe consequences. These



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studies, as well as the practices and programs that have evolved from them, have by and large excluded disabled students. Yet what little we know about sexual harassment and students with disabilities suggests they may be at particularly high risk; and girls may face some unique issues.

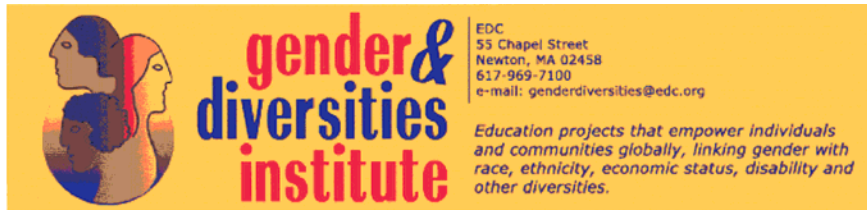
## **The statistics**

I know of only two studies on sexual harassment and students with disabilities, both conducted in New York City in the 1990s.

One, my own pilot study of sexual harassment of students with disabilities in several high schools and afterschool programs, revealed some troubling realities.<sup>2</sup> While there were not enough data to compare the harassment rates of disabled and nondisabled students, a majority of those educators and students interviewed believed that girls with disabilities were more likely to experience harassment than their disabled male or nondisabled female peers. While most of the targets of harassment were female and most of the perpetrators were male, boys also presented many examples of harassment, suggesting they too were at high risk. In addition, students with multiple disabilities were particularly likely to be harassed.

Unlike national studies of nondisabled students, in which peer harassment was far more common than adult to student harassment, in this study, there were almost as many examples of adult to student harassment as peer-to-peer harassment. Further, the adult harassers were most often paraprofessionals, health aides or van drivers, with whom disabled students have far more contacts than their nondisabled counterparts. School setting also made a difference. Peer sexual harassment was far more common in inclusive schools than segregated schools. In inclusive settings, the harassers were most likely nondisabled boys harassing disabled girls.

A second study conducted through the New York City Board of Education focused on documented cases of adult-to-student sexual abuse, the latter defined as criminal activity such as rape, sodomy or improper touching, and sexual relations.<sup>3</sup> The study encompassed the whole school system, and one key finding was that students receiving special education services were over-represented, that is, while they made up 7% of the student body as a whole, they made up twice that percentage of targets of abuse. Unfortunately, there was no breakdown by gender.



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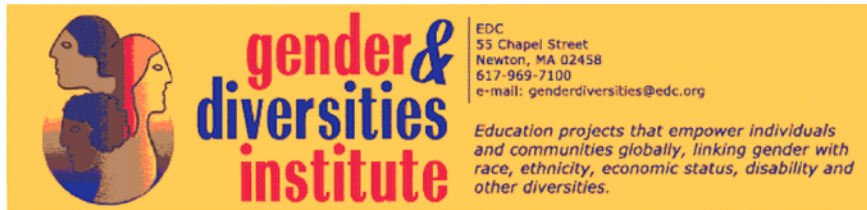
Another way to estimate sexual harassment is to extrapolate from the larger body of literature on violence against people with disabilities. Several studies suggest that children with disabilities in the United States are about twice as likely to be sexually abused as nondisabled youth.<sup>4</sup> Sobsey, in a review of the literature on sexual abuse of adults with diverse disabilities in Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, estimated that depending on the definitions used, the abuse rates of disabled adults were between 1.5 and 5 times the rate of nondisabled adults.<sup>5</sup> Those studies that offer a gender breakdown suggest that women and girls face higher rates of sexual abuse than men and boys; although males with disabilities may face higher rates of abuse than their nondisabled peers. Waxman Fiduccia, summarizing the few studies focused specifically on women with disabilities, reported that disabled women are assaulted, raped and abused at more than twice the rate of nondisabled women.<sup>6</sup>

Together, the various types of research strongly suggest that students with disabilities experience higher rates of sexual harassment than their nondisabled peers, and that young women with disabilities experience higher rates than young men.

## **Unique issues for girls and young women with disabilities**

How can we understand the higher rates of harassment faced by girls and young women with disabilities? Part of the explanation may be the disability-related limitations themselves. It may be more difficult for girls with certain disabilities to detect and fully understand the harassing nature of perpetrators' behaviors. And some disabilities may limit a young woman's ability to defend herself or move away from perpetrators, and to report incidents of violence.

However, far more of the explanation lies in the negative attitudes that disabled girls and young women face in many areas of their lives. They are often perceived as sick, helpless, incompetent and asexual, and are relegated to a powerless position – a license to perpetrators, who view girls and young women with disabilities as easy targets. Stereotypes also deprive disabled girls of the information, skills and opportunities they need to recognize and address violence. For example, parents may be overprotective and exclude their disabled daughters from social opportunities outside the home because they view these young women as too vulnerable to sexual attack or too sexually immature to need peer contact. Thus girls lack opportunities to learn the social skills needed to assess danger. Stereotypes about sexuality may also deprive disabled girls of adequate sex



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education. While parents may provide information about biology, they often fail to address social aspects of sexuality, such as dating, marriage and parenting, so that girls with disabilities may lack a context for understanding harassment.

In school, sex education is often unavailable or inadequate for students with disabilities, as if it were unnecessary. In fact, school-based sex education may be more critical for disabled students, particularly girls, who often have more limited access to informal sources of sex information.

Finally, stereotypical attitudes undermine the ability of educators and police to respond appropriately to incidents of violence against girls and young women with disabilities when they occur; for example, they may doubt the credibility of the reporter. According one young woman, when she tried to report an attempted rape, her counselor said “Who would want to rape YOU?”

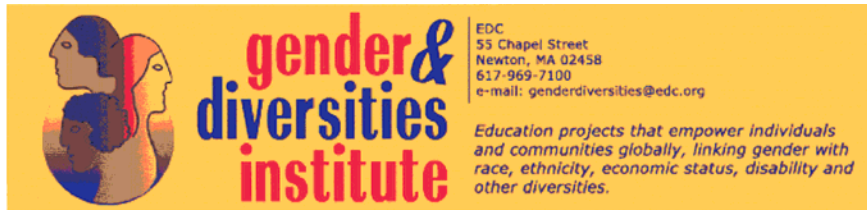
## **The solutions: How education can help**

To stop sexual harassment in school, we must start by acknowledging that this is a significant problem for students with disabilities, particularly girls and young women, a problem with severe consequences that include academic failure and adolescent pregnancy.. Part of our acknowledgment of the problem must include a commitment to document this problem.

We also need to insure that our schools develop, widely disseminate and strictly enforce a policy prohibiting sexual harassment. This policy must include students with disabilities; be available in accessible formats, such as Braille and audiotape, and have reporting procedures and investigative methods that accommodate disability-related needs.

Student, parent and teacher training on sexual harassment needs to be inclusive and accessible, with disability-related issues incorporated into the training curricula. Also, there is need for careful screening, training and supervision of service employees, especially those involved in the bodily care of students with disabilities.

Finally, students with disabilities need to be provided with comprehensive sexuality education. Parents need to recognize that sex education not only promotes healthy development, but also provides the best possible protection against violence, particularly



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when it is coupled with access to social experiences where young people can learn much-needed social skills.

Let me add that whatever research we do have indicates that girls and young women with disabilities are not passive victims in the face of harassment. They tend to fight back, to protest and to report. Too often their efforts go unheeded. It is up to us to ensure their safety and protect their rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this presentation comes from the following sources: (1) E. Linn and H. Rousso (2001). Stopping sexual harassment in schools. In H. Rousso and M. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *Double Jeopardy. Addressing Gender Equity in Special Education*. Albany: State University of New York Press. (2) H. Rousso (2000). *Girls and Women with Disabilities: An International Overview and Summary of Research*. Oakland: World Institute on Disability/Rehabilitation International.

<sup>2</sup> H. Rousso (1996), cited in Linn and Rousso (2001, p. 198).

<sup>3</sup> Joint Commission of the Chancellor and the Special Commissioner for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (1994). Final Report of the Joint Commission of the Chancellor and the Special Commissioner for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. New York: Author.

<sup>4</sup> J. Petersilia (1998). Report by the California Senate Public Safety Committee hearings on persons with developmental disabilities in the criminal justice system. Irvine, Calif.: Author. S. Crosse, E. Kaye, & A. Ratnofsky (1993). A report on the maltreatment of children with disabilities. Washington, D.C.: National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Administration on Child, Youth, and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health.

<sup>5</sup> D. Sobsey (1994). *Violence and abuse in the lives of people with disabilities. The end of silent acceptance?* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

<sup>6</sup> B.F. Waxman Fiduccia (1998). *Disabled women and violence fact sheet*. Unpublished position paper developed for the National Task Force on Violence against Women of the National Organization for Women (NOW) Legal Defense and Education Fund, Washington, D.C.