LEGON CENTRE FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH AND POLICY

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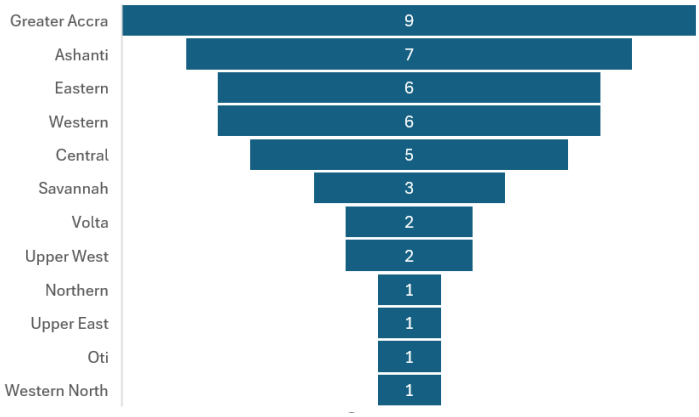
PROTECTING OUR GIRLS: CONFRONTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

Introduction



Schools are meant to be safe spaces for learning where students are expected to learn without fear of intimidation, discrimination, and harassment. Creating such an environment is a shared responsibility of teachers, parents, school authorities, students, and indeed all stakeholders involved in education. The essence of a safe learning environment is to promote learning, growth, and students' well-being free from harassment and abuse.

Instead, persistent patterns of sexual harassment and abuse perpetrated by teachers and school heads have turned many school campuses into environments of fear and insecurity, with female students accounting for a substantial proportion of reported victims. A report on issues affecting girls' progression in education produced by Girls Excellent Movement (GEM) reported that approximately 52% of female Senior High School (SHS) students in Ghana experienced sexual assault between 2019 and 2021, with teachers among the perpetrators[1]. A recent documentary by Joy News on sexual harassment shows that at least 44 cases involving 53 teachers and school heads have been accused of sexually abusing students between January 2015 and mid-October 2026 from basic to senior high school[2]. Of these, 26 cases occurred in basic schools and 18 in senior high schools. This involves 82% of teachers and 18% school heads. The report shows that the problem is nationwide. With the exception of Bono, Bono East, Ahafo and North East regions, every region in Ghana has recorded at least one case. Greater Accra recorded the highest number (9), followed by Ashanti (7), Eastern (6), Western (6), Central (5), Savannah (3), Volta (2), Upper West (2), with Northern, Upper East, Oti and Western North each recorded one case.



Source: Joynews Desk Report (2026/10/16)

[1] Girls Excellence Movement (GEM) (2022). Sheltered yet exposed. A report on issues affecting girls' progression in education in Ghana. SHELTERED-YET-EXPOSED.pdf

[2] JoyNews Research. (2026, October 15). *44 teacher sexual abuse cases tracked since 2015; school heads feature in 40% of recent cases*. MyJoyOnline. https://www.myjoyonline.com/44-teacher-sexual-abuse-cases-tracked-since-2015-school-heads-feature-in-40-of-recent-cases-joynews-research/

Recent high-profile cases, including allegations involving the headmaster and several students at Obuasi Senior High Technical School, have once again raised serious concerns about systemic failures in protecting students from sexual harassment and abuse. These incidents underscore the need to confront the problem decisively. However, addressing this persistent phenomenon requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the factors that enable it to persist. Is its persistence attributable to weaknesses in the existing punishment regime, failures in institutional accountability, or broader systemic deficiencies in safeguarding students' welfare? Understanding these underlying factors is essential to developing effective and sustainable responses

Why the abuse persists?

The rules exist, but enforcement is weak-

Section 103 of Ghana's Criminal Offences Act 1960 (Act 29) states that a person who indecently assaults another person by forcibly making a sexual bodily contact with the other person or sexually violating the body of the other person in any manner not amounting to carnal knowledge or unnatural carnal knowledge, is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment of not less than six months[3]. The Ghana Education Service Code of Professional Conduct clearly prohibits sexual harassment and any sexual relationship (consensual or not) between staff and students. The *Ministry of Education 2023 Guideline for Addressing Sexual Harassment in Secondary Education Institutions* requires schools to appoint Safe Space Focal Persons, establish reporting mechanisms and refer serious cases to the police[4]. *The question that arises is whether teachers are unaware of the Code of Ethics and related laws, or whether they are aware but choose to ignore them.*

In practice, punishment is often rare. Of the 44 tracked cases, only 12 (27.3%) ended in a conviction and 8 (18.2%) in an administrative dismissal. The remaining 24 (54.5%) have unresolved outcomes or no public verdict[5]. For years, the Ghana Education Service has relied mainly on interdiction, transfers, and other internal disciplinary procedures as the primary remedies. However, these measures have failed to protect students, deter offenders or deliver criminal justice.

Given the persistence of the practice, it suggests that the problem lies primarily in weak enforcement rather than a lack of awareness. While some teachers may claim ignorance of the professional Code of Conduct or relevant laws, one does not need to read these provisions to recognise that sexually harassing or abusing students is inherently wrong. Others may simply disregard the rules, believing that their misconduct will go undetected or that their personal or institutional connections will shield them from sanctions. Whatever the explanation, the persistence of sexual harassment and abuse in schools suggests that the problem may lie less in the absence of rules than in their weak enforcement and the failure of institutional accountability mechanisms.

[3]Criminal Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29)

[4] https://curriculumresources.edu.gh/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/GES-Guideline-on-Tackling-Sexual-Harassment-in-SEIs-Version-1.pdf

[5] JoyNews Research. (2026, October 15). *44 teacher sexual abuse cases tracked since 2015; school heads feature in 40% of recent cases*. MyJoyOnline.

Reporting structures are flawed -
Although GES has a Code of Conduct and Guidance & Counselling units, where sexual assault cases are supposed to be reported to focal persons, the reporting mechanisms are fundamentally compromised.

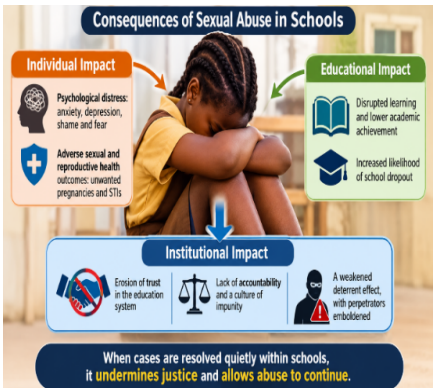
- *Reporting routes can lead back to the abuser* - Students are expected to report abuse to teachers, housemasters, or Guidance and Counselling Coordinators, some of whom may be or closer to perpetrators. When perpetrators are senior staff or headteachers, students face intimidation or fear of dismissal.
- *Students who speak up are blamed* - Anecdotal evidence suggest that in most cases, students are blamed and stigmatized. In that, female students who attempt to report sexual harassment are frequently branded as "bad girls," "provocative," or "troublemakers." This creates a strong disincentive for others to speak up when they are abused. The current system prioritize institutional risk management over victim care.

Internal resolution and criminal justice -
The current management model relies heavily on administrative handling of cases. When an allegation is made, school authorities or district directorates often set up internal committees. These committees, however, lack the legal authority, forensic capability and independence required to investigate criminal acts such as defilement (under Section 101 of the Criminal Offences Act) or indecent assault (Section 103). In most instances, committee members are drawn from the same school and are therefore investigating their own colleague. The resulting reports rarely provide a neutral assessment. Consequently, offenders are most often transferred to other schools or suspended temporarily, shifting the risk to a new group of students rather than controlling the threat entirely.

Decision-makers must confront the problem, its root causes and make the urgent reforms required. Committees investigating such offences should be constituted at the district level by GES in collaboration with Ghana Police Service and should not be composed mainly of staff from the school involved.

Bungalow duties create opportunities for abuse -
A significant risk factor in senior high schools, particularly boarding schools, is the practice of assigning students' domestic chores in teachers' private residences, including fetching water, cleaning, cooking, and running personal errands. Such arrangements place students in potentially vulnerable situations, given the unequal power relationship between teachers and students. Teachers exercise considerable authority over students through academic assessment, discipline, and recommendations, which may be exploited. The risk is compounded by students' limited awareness of their rights and the failure of school orientation programmes to adequately address consent, appropriate teacher–student boundaries, and students' right to decline non-academic duties in staff residences. These circumstances may enable some teachers to exploit their authority to initiate inappropriate sexual relationships or perpetrate sexual abuse, while fear of other consequences and inadequate protective mechanisms may discourage victims from reporting such incidents.

Health and psychosocial consequences:



The consequences for students who are abused extend far beyond academic disruption. Some victims are exposed to Sexually Transmitted Infections and unplanned pregnancies, which often lead to abortion. Evidence from the 44 cases shows that alleged pregnancies were reported in three cases involving head teachers and four cases involving classroom teachers[6]. Institutional responses rarely provide immediate, confidential medical care or post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). Survivors may experience lasting psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, shame and fear. These experiences can disrupt their education, contribute to lower academic achievement and increase the likelihood of school dropout. Beyond individual survivors, mishandling cases or quietly resolving them within schools undermine trust in the education system and reinforce a culture of impunity by allowing perpetrators to evade accountability, weakening the deterrent effect of institutional responses.

What needs to be done

1. The Ghana Education Service must move beyond interdiction and transfers as the default response. They should avoid appointing individuals in the same school to serve on committees investigating alleged sexual abuse. Instead,

- GES must establish clear and independent reporting channels through which cases can be reported to focal persons outside the school, or through a dedicated toll-free number that parents and students can call.
- When such cases are reported, there should be concurrent investigation by GES and the Ghana Police Service, particularly the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU). GES disciplinary processes and criminal investigations must run in parallel, not sequentially.
- To earn public trust and protect students, clear timelines, public accountability for case outcomes, and strong protection for whistleblowers and complainants are essential.

2. The Ghana Police Service needs to treat sexual abuse cases involving students and school authorities as a serious criminal matter rather than an internal school issue. DOVVSU must respond promptly to reports from schools. Officers should receive specialised training on handling cases involving minors, including trauma-informed interviewing, evidence preservation, and child protection protocols. Delays in investigation and prosecution weaken deterrence and deepen survivors' trauma. The Police Service must therefore ensure speedy, professional, and survivor-centred investigations, while working closely with GES, the Attorney General's Department, and Social Welfare Department to secure justice and protect children.

[6] https://www.myjoyonline.com/44-teacher-sexual-abuse-cases-tracked-since-2015-school-heads-feature-in-40-of-recent-cases-joynews-research/

3. Teacher Training and Professional development programmes must embed the Code of Conduct, professional boundaries, and child safeguarding as core, examinable components of pre-service training. Every trainee teacher should leave college with a clear understanding of appropriate professional conduct, the legal consequences of sexual misconduct, and their duty to protect learners. For teachers already in service, regular and mandatory refresher training on safeguarding, professional ethics, and reporting obligations is essential. These must then feature in teacher licensure and promotion examinations.

4. Student Orientation at the start of every academic year should explicitly cover personal boundaries, the right to refuse inappropriate requests (including work in teachers' bungalows), how and where to report safely, and the unacceptability of any sexual advances by staff. These sessions must be practical, age-appropriate, and repeated, not treated as a one-off formality. Parents and community leaders should also be included in these conversations so that the responsibility for protecting children is shared beyond the school.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment and abuse in schools is a systemic failure that demands systemic solutions. Policies and codes of conduct already exist; what is lacking is consistent enforcement, and genuine prioritisation of student safety. Decisionmakers at the Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Service, and the Police Service must act decisively. Every delayed investigation, every quietly transferred teacher, and every silenced student deepens the harm.

A critical part of the solution lies in equipping teachers with basic knowledge of the legal frameworks that govern their profession. As Larry K. Agbador argued in the *Daily Graphic* (October 2026), teacher education has emphasized pedagogy while neglecting legal education. Yet teachers make decisions daily that carry legal consequences ranging from disciplinary actions and the handling of confidential information to professional boundaries and the protection of learners. Integrating legal education into both pre-service and in-service training is therefore no longer optional; it is essential.

LECERP's Response

In this regard, LECERP's ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes and short courses on legal education for teachers offer a practical and timely response. Such training can help teachers understand the code of conduct, child protection laws, professional boundaries, and their duties as agents of change within schools, as well as strengthen their capacity to respond appropriately to sexual harassment and abuse.

Our girls deserve schools that protect them, not places where they must live in fear. The time to act is now.

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