

Understanding policies and practices that make schools safer for adolescents at high risk of gender-based violence

Côte d'Ivoire

Findings from a literature review

OUR PROJECT

A three-year project by Ipas and partners aims to deepen understanding and evaluate solutions to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination in secondary schools in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Mali.

Our goal: To collect crucial evidence on the experiences of adolescents known to face higher rates of GBV and discrimination (pregnant and parenting girls, people with disabilities, and gender non-conforming youth), and then to co-develop scalable, evidence-based approaches that make schools safer, more inclusive, and more supportive of every learner's right to education.

This project is led by a multi-country consortium made up of Ipas staff from Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Mali and the United States, and academic partners from two African universities: Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny and École de Sante Publique de Kinshasa.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND POLICY

Our project includes a multi-country review of published literature and relevant policy documents on GBV and the education system, with a focus on the experiences of pregnant and parenting girls, people with disabilities, and gender non-conforming youth in all three countries and their experiences with discrimination, violence, and exclusion in the school environment.

In August 2024, Ipas's academic partners conducted a document and policy analysis using electronic databases. The results help us understand the current political context in each of the three countries and the gaps in policy and practice that our project can fill—while also informing the ongoing design of our project and impacts we hope to achieve.

This brief shares our findings in Côte d'Ivoire.

Drawing exclusively on studies and data from the Ivorian context, this review aims to provide a necessary local perspective to inform future educational policies and practices.

KEY FINDINGS

Although policies and practices exist in Côte d'Ivoire to support pregnant and parenting girls, people with disabilities, and gender non-conforming youth in secondary schools, their implementation remains largely inadequate. Persistent discrimination, lack of institutional support, and inadequate infrastructure are major obstacles. However, inclusive initiatives and programs show that progress can be made through concerted efforts and effective partnerships.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

In Côte d'Ivoire, the education system plays a crucial role in training young people and promoting values of respect, inclusion, and equality. However, the path to education is often fraught with obstacles for pregnant and parenting girls, people with disabilities, and gender non-conforming youth.

These young people frequently face discrimination, violence, harassment, and stigma, both from their peers and from education staff. These negative experiences, which reflect dominant gender norms and structural inequalities in Ivorian society, have profound repercussions on their mental well-being, academic achievement, and prospects for the future.

Despite growing recognition of adolescents' rights in international policies, the reality on the ground in Côte d'Ivoire shows that many obstacles remain for these young people. Existing studies, although limited, highlight the negative impact of social attitudes and school policies on these groups. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding an in-depth and specific understanding of these groups' experiences and institutional practices impacting them.

FINDINGS IN DETAIL

Supportive policies and practices

- **Policies to support pregnant girls and young mothers:** School Reintegration and Continuity Policies: Order 254/MENA/DELC of August 12, 2024, on the terms and conditions of deferred schooling for primary and secondary public and private general education pupils.
- **Law to support gender and women's empowerment:** The Ivorian state has agreed to promote gender and women's empowerment via the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Law no. 2016-886 of November 8, 2016, establishing the Constitution of the Third Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, has set out the formal framework for gender equality.
- **Young mothers support clubs and LGBTQ+ rights awareness:** Initiatives such as support clubs for young mothers and LGBTQ+ rights awareness programs are beginning to emerge. For example, some NGOs are working with schools to train teachers to manage diversity and promote an inclusive school environment (Touré et al., 2019). Collaborations between schools and women's and LGBTQ+ rights organizations have established safe spaces and support clubs for marginalized youth (Koné and Diarra, 2019).

Unsupportive policies and practices

Laws and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people:

- The security situation for LGBTQ+ people is concerning and has deteriorated in recent years.
- While homosexuality is not illegal under Ivorian criminal law, as it involves sexual relations between consenting adults (CNDH, 2023), certain articles of the Ivorian penal code can be used to prosecute LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ people can be prosecuted under the language of the penal code, amended in June 2019, which refers in particular to “acts against nature” (Freedom House, cited by CNDH, 2023).
- Resources for LGBTQ+ youth and pregnant teens are scarce. Reproductive health services are often inaccessible or poorly adapted to young people’s needs, and psychological support programs are almost non-existent (Touré et al., 2019).
- Ivorian law does not address the issue of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Enforcement of anti-discrimination laws remains weak. LGBTQ+ youth face systemic discrimination and a lack of effective protection mechanisms in schools, limiting their access to safe education (Touré et al., 2019).

Gender discrimination:

- Girls continue to be unfairly discriminated against in school settings (MFPES, 2017). The inequality of opportunity created by discrimination at school also has repercussions on society (The Council of Europe, 2024).
- As Thibert (2014) has pointed out, schools, because of their special position, echo discrimination through teaching practices, unconscious prejudices or even textbooks that reproduce stereotypes.

Lack of support for young mothers:

- Schools lack adequate facilities to support young mothers, such as ‘crèches’ (nurseries/daycares) or counseling services. Educational programs are also rigid, not allowing young mothers to catch up on classes missed during pregnancy or after childbirth (Koné and Diarra, 2019).

About Ipas: We work globally to advance reproductive justice by expanding access to abortion and contraception, using a comprehensive approach that addresses health, legal and social systems. We believe every person should have the right to bodily autonomy and be able to determine their own future. Across Africa, Asia and the Americas, we work with partners to ensure that reproductive health services, including abortion and contraception, are available and accessible to all.

Learn more about our project:
www.ipas.org/YouthSafeSchools

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This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.



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