

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

### Democratic Republic of Congo

#### 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 Democratic Republic of Congo.** Drawing exclusively on studies and data from the DRC context, this review aims to provide a necessary local perspective to inform future educational policies and practices.

## KEY FINDINGS

Discrimination, stigma and institutional neglect in DRC cause pregnant and parenting girls, people with disabilities, and gender non-conforming youth to experience increased barriers to education. Combating stereotypes and discrimination against these populations in schools is essential.

Despite efforts by some DRC laws and policies to protect and promote the rights of pregnant adolescents, obstacles remain, especially with implementation and interpretation of these legal provisions. To improve the situation, it will be imperative to strengthen legal frameworks and ensure their effective implementation. Inclusive education policies must account for the difficulties faced by pregnant and parenting adolescents to enable them to continue their education.

In the DRC, the vulnerability of gender non-conforming youth in schools is exacerbated by laws and social norms that contribute to discrimination and stigmatization. Any effort to improve the rights of gender non-conforming youth, particularly in the field of education, would require changes in legislation, awareness of human rights principles, and cultural change that promotes inclusion and equality.

Collaboration with NGOs, civil society organizations and community projects can play a key role in raising awareness, reducing stigma and promoting and protecting the rights of these specific youth populations in schools.

## FINDINGS IN DETAIL

### Supportive policies and practices

#### Laws and regulations that support pregnant girls:

- **Right to education:** The Congolese constitution guarantees the right to education for all, without distinction. This includes young pregnant women, although their actual access to education may vary. No article of the constitution calls for the expulsion of pregnant girls from school.
- **Gender equality law:** Laws exist to promote gender equality and combat discrimination, with measures to protect the rights of women—including pregnant women—in educational establishments.
- **National initiatives:** Specific programs can be implemented by the government or partner organizations to help pregnant girls continue their education, even if these programs are not uniform across the country.

#### Laws in support of LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming youth:

- **Right to education:** The Congolese constitution guarantees the right to education for all, without distinction. Theoretically, this should include LGBTQ+ people, however, the actual application of this right can be compromised by societal attitudes.
- **Anti-discrimination:** Although legislation is insufficient, human rights discourses sometimes refer to protection against discrimination. However, this does not always apply specifically to issues of sexual orientation.

## Practices that support pregnant girls:

- **Support policy:** Some schools have policies that encourage pregnant girls to stay in school, enabling them to continue their education.
- **Awareness-raising programs:** Initiatives aim to raise awareness among educational staff and students of the importance of educating pregnant girls, thereby reducing stigmatization
- **Accommodations:** In some cases, accommodations are made to help pregnant girls continue their courses, such as the possibility of attending distance learning courses or flexible timetables.

## Support to eliminate school-based GBV:

- The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is a pan-African initiative that aims to eliminate school-based GBV by protecting African children, with a national chapter in the DRC. FAWE's manual for schools and education professionals targets both school administrators and students, building their capacity to identify, prevent and respond to school-based GBV. This manual also provides monitoring and evaluation tools to monitor the effectiveness of measures implemented in schools to prevent school-based GBV, and it is complemented by a gender-sensitive pedagogy manual as well.
- The Tuseme "Let's talk!" program recommends solutions and preventive measures adapted to the context of African countries. Tuseme, a Swahili word meaning "let's express ourselves," empowers young girls and raises their awareness of gender issues by improving their self-esteem, leadership, social and life skills. The program also fosters a positive attitude among boys towards girls' education.

## Unsupportive policies and practices

*Statement from a school leader in the DRC regarding a policy of expelling students who become pregnant:*

*"...because she can influence other students to follow her example. As a result, she risks compromising the school's reputation. Responsible parents will no longer want to enroll their children in our school. To avoid this, the school has no choice but to keep the girl away. And it's with the aim of maintaining order and discipline within the establishment."*

## Laws and regulations unsupportive of pregnant girls:

- **Lack of specific regulations:** There is often a legal vacuum regarding specific policies for pregnant students, which can lead to varying interpretations from school to school and discriminatory practices.
- **School expulsions:** In some schools, unofficial rules or discriminatory practices lead to the expulsion of pregnant girls, preventing them from completing their education.
- **Social stigmatization:** Morality laws or social norms can reinforce the stigmatization of pregnant girls, negatively influencing their access to education.

## Laws unsupportive of LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming youth:

- **Criminalization of homosexuality:** Congolese law criminalizes homosexual relations, and people recognized as LGBTQ+ can face criminal sanctions. This creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students in schools.
- **Lack of legal protection:** There are no specific laws protecting the rights of gender non-conforming or LGBTQ+ youth in the school environment, leaving students exposed to abuse without legal recourse.

## Practices unsupportive of pregnant girls and LGBTQ+ youth:

- **Stigmatization and discrimination:** Pregnant girls are often the target of discrimination and stigmatization, which can lead to expulsion from school or social isolation. LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming young people also frequently experience discrimination, harassment and violence in schools, both from peers and educational staff. This can lead to a fear of revealing their identity, forcing them to hide.
- **Lack of clear policies:** In some schools, there is no formal policy to support pregnant students, leaving them without help in times of need.
- **Difficult conditions:** School infrastructures may not be adapted to the needs of pregnant women, such as access to adequate sanitary facilities and health care.

**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](http://www.ipas.org/YouthSafeSchools)

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