



## **Girls for Gender Equity Testimony for the New York State Legislature Joint Senate and Assembly Public Hearing on Sexual Harassment**

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Good afternoon Chairpersons Skoufis, Biaggi, Salazar, Titus, Crespo, Walker, and committee members. My name is Ashley Sawyer and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations at Girls for Gender Equity (GGE). Thank you for holding this important hearing in response to the sexual harassment, and sexual assault that women, girls, trans and gender non-conforming people across this state experience in schools and at work. Thank you for doing the work help us move towards a safer and more accountable New York.

GGE is a youth development and advocacy organization based in New York City, committed to the physical, psychological, social and economic development of girls and women. GGE challenges structural forces, including racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and economic inequity, which constrict the freedom, full expression, and rights of transgender and cisgender girls and women of color, and gender non-conforming people of color. We do this work through direct service, advocacy and culture change. GGE has been a leader in the conversation around gender based violence, including sexual harassment and sexual abuse for close to two decades.<sup>1</sup> We are offering testimony today, in order to ensure that this body, and the general public understand how important it is to include cis and trans girls, and gender non-conforming youth of color within the group of people who need not only protection from harm, but true accountability when harm is caused.

Schools are the workplaces of young people. These institutions must be prepared to both prevent and respond to sexual violence. We are utterly failing. Just a few weeks ago in Binghamton, New York, we witnessed the disdain with which Black girls are treated by adults who purport to help them learn. As many of you know, a group of middle school girls were humiliated by their teachers, accused of consuming substances, and then each instructed to remove their clothing, one article at a time, for what essentially constitutes an unlawful strip search. The student who refused to get down into her underwear, was punished with suspension. It was because of the incredible advocacy of these student's families, local activists, including the local chapter of the NAACP, that we came to know of this horrific incident. Let me be clear - this was not an

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ggenyc.org/2018/06/the-me-too-movement-lives-at-girls-for-gender-equity-a-joint-letter/>



isolated incident. The conditions that contributed to this reality are the same conditions that contribute to harmful experiences that so many young people - especially Black girls - experience in schools, day in and day out.

In 2016, GGE launched a participatory action research process where over one hundred young people were able to identify key barriers to their ability to attend schools that were safe, supportive, and effective. The findings resulted in our report, *The School Girls Deserve*, revealing that 1 in 3 students in New York City public schools experiences some form of sexual harassment.<sup>2</sup> In our research, a student reported being catcalled in the hallway as early as elementary school. This student shared that they did not feel comfortable reporting it to any adult. Attending school everyday where students - and adults - make comments about a young person's body - and in many cases subject them to discipline because of what they wear or how a particular article of clothing appears on their body - is not only humiliating, but it can have lasting effects on the education for young people.

Education advocates often discuss what is commonly known as the "School-to-Prison Pipeline." This framing is helpful, but does not fully capture the experiences of girls and non-binary youth of color. We instead use the term "pushout," coined by scholar Dr. Monique Morris to characterize the ways that girls and non-binary youth end up leaving school before graduation. While they may not always enter the juvenile or criminal legal systems, they often lose out on educational opportunities because of system failures, including school-based sexual harassment. It is important that this body begin to understand sexual violence within schools as a contributor to low graduation rates.

If this state wishes to ensure that all students have the opportunity to meet their full educational potential, we must remove the systemic barriers that specifically harm girls and non-binary youth, especially sexual harassment and assault, and replace them with preventative measures. Prevention work done in schools, can be the work that transforms our culture and prevents sexual harassment in the workplace and within our communities.

We have this conversation about sexual harassment in New York as the federal government threatens to roll back the well-established, bipartisan, and necessary protections for students who experience sexual harassment in schools. Without the federal government's protection created by Title IX, it will be very difficult to hold school districts responsible for fostering safe and supportive environments. We would like to ensure that a student does not have to reach their breaking point before a school's obligation to protect them begins. We want to also ensure that

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[https://www.ggenyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GGE\\_school\\_girls\\_deserveDRAFT6FINALWEB.pdf](https://www.ggenyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GGE_school_girls_deserveDRAFT6FINALWEB.pdf)



schools do not build a practice of trying to put out fires in order to protect themselves from reputational damage, without doing the much needed work of preventing harassment so that no student has to experience the pain and educational harm of experiencing harassment.

In addition, it is imperative that structures are put in place to counter the potential changes happening at the federal level, in particular, students feeling safe to report sexual harassment to any adult within their school. In our *School Girls Deserve* report, we found that 97 percent of the students who shared that they experienced some form of sexual harassment, did not report the harassment. This means that students are forced to endure what sometimes amounts to, immense, daily trauma, without being equipped with the resources, counseling or services necessary to recovery and heal.

Today we are calling on New York to implement the following:

1. **Expanding Title IX Protections** beyond the federal requirements at all institutions receiving federal funding, including both K-12 schools and college campuses and expand the number of full-time Title IX Coordinators at school districts across New York State.
2. **Comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate sexual health education** inclusive of consent, LGBTQ identities and the full spectrum of healthcare options, every grade, every year, in every school across New York State
3. **Implementing culturally responsive education** at all grade levels in New York schools so that teachers are prepared to educate students across their identities, and so that students receive an education that reflects their histories and lived experiences.
4. **Reducing racially biased discipline with attention to girls of color and gender non-conforming youth** including the creation of a model dress code for school districts across New York State that celebrates cultural diversity, body diversity and gender expression.

If New York wants to end sexual harassment, this starting with these measures are a bare minimum.

We are grateful for the opportunity to present in front of this body, and for your commitment to addressing these issues. We look forward to continued conversations about tangible solutions to protect young people from sexual harassment.

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**ABOUT GIRLS FOR GENDER EQUITY:** [Girls for Gender Equity](https://www.girlsforgenderequity.org/) (GGE) is an intergenerational organization that centering the experiences of young women of color and LGBTQ/GNC youth of color. Through direct services, organizing and culture change work, GGE works to ensure that the voices of youth of color and especially cis and trans Black girls and GNC youth from low-income communities, will be heard and respected.