

## **Resolution on Mental Healthcare and Advocacy Focused on Gender-Based Harassment among Girls and Women**

April 2018

The American Counseling Association (ACA) stands with girls and women who experience gender-based harassment including sexual and physical abuse, exploitation, and gender inequality. ACA recognizes that gender-based harassment is unjust and violates the human rights of girls and women. ACA supports the use of culturally-responsive mental health support and advocacy for girls and women who are survivors of gender-based harassment. Further, ACA stands in solidarity with the United Nations and its work to promote gender equality and globally prevent gender-based harassment.

Harassment involves any type of unwanted or agitating actions or behaviors of one individual or group directed toward another person or group, which may lead to fear and distress. Sexual harassment includes unwanted sexual advances, demands for sexual requests, and verbal and physical harassment framed in sexual behavior. Recently, public awareness of the influence and prevalence of sexual harassment in the lives of girls and women has increased. Specifically, one in two women experience some type of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual behavior in her lifetime. In the workplace, an estimated 25% of women experience sexual harassment. One out of six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. Younger girls and women (12-34 years) are at highest risk of sexual violence. Female survivors represent 82% of all juvenile rapes and 90% of adult rapes.

Though greater visibility has been given to sexual harassment among girls and women, the psychological consequences associated with this type of harassment continues to be a major mental health issue that affects many individuals, groups, and communities. Girls and women who have experienced some form of sexual harassment are at increased risk for posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and suicidality, substance use disorders, poor work and academic performance, and interpersonal relationship difficulties. As a result, preventing sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment, and promoting gender equality have been highlighted as top priority issues by the United Nations. Moreover, the United Nations has developed a set of Millennium Development Goals, one of which is focused on achieving gender equality and empowering all girls and women. This goal underscores the discrimination and violence towards girls and women that is perpetuated throughout the world. According to the United Nations, "Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world."

The eviscerating impact of sexual harassment, if left untreated, can be incapacitating. Therefore, well-trained counselors are in an excellent position to respond to the resultant deleterious mental health consequences associated with sexual harassment in the lives of girls and women. ACA is committed to promote counselor competence as it pertains to access to and delivery of culturally-responsive care for all girls and women who have been negatively affected by sexual harassment regardless of race, ethnicity,

gender, culture, physical ability, age, sexual or affectional identity, and socio-economic status.

The ACA and its members stand in solidarity with counselors in schools, agencies, and other work settings who counsel and advocate on behalf of all people who have been directly or indirectly affected by sexual harassment, exploitation, abuse, and gender-based inequality. The ACA and its members are dedicated to creating safe spaces for those impacted by adverse treatment and establish opportunities for ongoing culturally-responsive counselor training and effective counseling services that directly address these issues. The ACA and its members pledge to advocate on behalf of and with girls and women who experience these issues by working to remove barriers, promoting equality, and increase access to mental health care.

Based on the aforementioned, be it resolved that ACA staff and leadership team in conjunction with the Executive Committee will assess which of the following specific actions will be feasible for the organization to do over the next 18-24 months:

- o That the ACA charge a specific group/taskforce of volunteer leaders to develop culturally-responsive competencies for counseling girls and women who are survivors of gender-based harassment;
- o That the ACA promote the use of school and clinical mental health counselors, college counselors, and other professional counselors working with girls and women as primary stakeholders in gender-based harassment prevention, treatment, and advocacy;
- o That the ACA supports and initiates short- and long-term actions that promote awareness of gender-based harassment including, but not limited to, articles in Counseling Today, podcasts, webinars, and continuing education opportunities.