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## A Girl Fight with Merit

By Cindy Richards

The statistics are enough to make parents of girls never want to let them out of the house: The age at which females are at the greatest risk of being raped or sexually assaulted is 14.

One in five high-school girls is physically or sexually abused by a dating partner. Of the incidents of sexual harassment during the 1999-2000 school year, 127,568 occurred on school grounds. In addition, 628 rape or attempted rapes and 4,261 cases of sexual battery occurred on school grounds that year.

Those horrifying statistics were reported by Girls Inc., the national nonprofit organization formerly known as the Girls Clubs of America. The New York-based organization, which is dedicated to improving life for girls, is shining a spotlight on these statistics as part of its 2005 Girls Rights Week focus on violence against girls.

Today, six high school and college-age women are in Washington meeting with members of Congress. Their goal: to expand the federal Violence Against Women Act to include funding for programs that fight violence against girls.

“We know that violence against women starts as violence against girls,” said April Osajima, director of public policy for Girls Inc.

The 10-year-old Violence Against Women Act will expire Oct. 1 unless it is reauthorized by Congress and signed by President Bush. The law was passed and first reauthorized under President Bill Clinton.

Over the last 10 years, the U.S. government has spent more than \$5.5 billion to improve criminal justice and community-based responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking in the United States. But the vast majority of that money was aimed at programs for women.

Girls Inc. would like to see more money spent on programs for girls who are victims of or witnesses to violence, including programs in the middle schools and high schools aimed at both girls and boys to fight domestic violence, dating violence and sexual assault.

Osajima said her organization has had some initially positive response from members of Congress. But the judiciary committee, which must consider the reauthorization, is preoccupied

with federal judicial appointments. It's far too early to predict whether the proposals to include initiatives for girls will make it into the law, she said.

Hoping to rev up the process, Girls Inc. is sending Shannon Eaves of California and Zanae Cook of Philadelphia to Capitol Hill.

In remarks prepared for delivery today, Eaves will talk about one of her best friends who, as a young teen, was raped repeatedly by a prominent member of her community. No one, not even the girl's mother, believed her. But she went to the police anyway and had her abuser arrested.

The story reverberated throughout the town and the girl was further victimized. Ultimately, her mother kicked her out of the house.

The story is sad – the girl still is dealing with the emotional fallout of the rapes and their aftermath, Eaves will tell congressional staffers – but it is not isolated. Several of her friends have experienced date rape, including her best friend who was drugged and raped while unconscious, she will say.

“[We] need more programs to help girls and young women understand the risks, know their rights and be empowered to be as safe as possible from violence,” she will say.

Cook, meanwhile, will talk about her own victimization. While riding a city bus, she was harassed, bullied and intimidated – by another girl – as other passengers sat idly by.

And she'll talk about a friend whose dad hit her mom. The friend turned violent, too, ultimately starting to fight at school and striking a teacher. She was transferred to another school, and Cook is left to wonder how she is.

“Thinking about these situations made me recognize that violence is a huge issue,” she will say, according to her prepared remarks.

“I think about all the passengers that watched those girls harass me on the bus that day, and [wonder]: Has violence against girls and women become such a norm that no one hears or cares about your cries for help?”

I hope not.

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