

Making the Grade: A Mozambican schoolgirl stands strong against sexual harassment

Though school should be a place of learning, for many girls across Mozambique it's often a place of harassment. However, thanks to PEPFAR's Gender Based Violence Initiative, girls across Mozambique are gaining the skills to stand up to sexual harassment and abuse. Lila Américo Lemos was just 14 when she bravely thwarted an attempted sexual assault by her teacher at Eduardo Mondlane Secondary School in Zambezia.

"We were at the end of the first quarter of classes when my teacher decided to announce the quarterly average grades of all students, except mine," remembers Lila. "When I asked why, he said that he didn't have any record of my test grades and that my tests must either be lost or at his house. I was stunned because I had completed all of the tests and did not understand why my grades were not recorded."

Lila had copies of all the tests at home, and offered to bring them in. Her teacher responded that he wouldn't be at school that week, so she would have to bring the tests to his house. When Lila asserted that issues related to school should be resolved at school, her teacher refused to relent. Though upset and worried about her future grades, Lila recognized that something was wrong with her teacher's demands and justification.

"How was it possible that only my grades were not recorded? And why should I have to take the tests to his home rather than bring them to school?"

Previously, Lila had participated in USAID-supported debates led by Mozambican civil society organization Associação Moçambicana Mulher e Educação (AMME.) AMME, in partnership with the Capable Partners Program (CAP) Mozambique, implemented a behavior change project with teachers and students in three secondary schools in Zambezia. With CAP support, AMME developed activities and debates that emphasized sexual violence as a risk factor for HIV infection, especially for girls in school. Remembers Lila, "One thing that struck me from these debates was when I learned that I should "say no" and tell someone older whenever an adult made a lewd request. For me, participating in this program was important because I could see immediately that the teacher was trying to find a way to be alone with me."

Lila told her parents, who feared for her grades but were suspect of her teacher's request. The following morning, Lila's father accompanied her to the teacher's home. When they arrived, Lila's teacher answered the door shirtless, thinking Lila had arrived alone. He asked why Lila had come with her father, and Lila's father explained he wanted to see first-hand what was going on with Lila's grades. The teacher then registered Lila's grades based on the copies of the tests she had brought.

"I advise all girls like me to always be safe and report to their elders about any behaviors that make them feel uncomfortable," says Lila.

AMME is one of more than fifty leading Mozambican civil society organizations participating in the Capable Partners Program (CAP) in Mozambique. Supported PEPFAR through USAID, CAP provides civil society organizations with grants and intensive technical assistance in organizational development, project design, and implementation. CAP also partners with the Health Policy Project (HPP) through PEPFAR's Gender-based Violence Initiative to help partners integrate gender and gender-based violence issues into select programmatic activities. Through this support, CAP strengthens Mozambican civil society organizations to expand their critical role in Mozambique's HIV/AIDS response.