

# Say It Isn't So Lady "O": A Sex Scandal at the Oprah Leadership Academy for Girls

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## Introduction

"I am a mama bear when it comes to protecting my children" (Gaskell, 2007). These were the words of the billionaire media mogul Oprah Winfrey following the tragic announcement that allegations of sexual abuse were made against the school matron by 15 female students at the prestigious Leadership Academy for Girls founded by Winfrey. Unbeknownst to "Mama Oprah," a code of silence was being enforced that hindered the girls from coming forth with the reality of the situation.

## Background of the School

In January 2007, Oprah's Leadership Academy for Girls was formally opened in Meyerton, South Africa. Oprah Winfrey stated that she instituted a leadership school to, "offer didactic and leadership options for intelligibly gifted girls from underprivileged backgrounds of South Africa" (Oprah School Scandal, 2014). The posh 40 million dollar private academy was established by Oprah and Nelson Mandela to provide a quality education (Building a Dream, 2014).

Because protecting the girls was a high priority, Winfrey had worked to ensure the students' safety by installing high-tech security systems, electric fencing, and guards. When the allegations came out Winfrey expressed that although she was fully aware that any system was only as good as the people running it, she was still stunned to get a call from Academy CEO John Samuel regarding the allegations of sexual abuse ("Oprah's Great Hope", 2008).

### **The Scandal and Charges**

Samuel contacted Winfrey in early October informing her that 15 students had come forward with a list of complaints about various forms of mistreatment (“Oprah Wept”, 2007). Virginia “Tiny” Makopo, 27, was charged with 13 counts of indecent assault, assault and criminal injury committed against at least six students aged 13-15 and a 23-year-old at the school (Silverman, 2007).

When the allegations first became public Winfrey immediately made plans to speak with students via satellite. Winfrey took a trauma counselor to help the 152 students (Oprah Addresses Abuse Scandal in South Africa, November 5, 2007, 2010). Winfrey spoke to each girl individually encouraging them to, “break the silence.” Fifteen of them did, recounting how they were abused by dorm matron Makopo (Rudolph, 2007). Winfrey took full responsibility saying the screening process was inadequate and “the buck always stops with me” (“Oprah Wept” , 2007).

### **The Parents**

Winfrey flew to South Africa a second time to meet with parents. She apologized for the unfortunate circumstance and promised changes were forthcoming, “I’ve disappointed you. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” a tearful Winfrey told angry families who showed up for an emergency meeting at Leadership Academy. Later the parents applauded the quick action she took and the concern she had shown the school and its students. According to a media website, a father of one of the students stated, “We don’t blame you. You have more passion for the school and its existence than anyone else in this country, including us parents” (Grossberg, 2007).

### **The Media**

Nearly every media outlet across the globe reported on the story that caught international attention. Winfrey very candidly discussed the case with the media openly sharing her pain and disappointment. Winfrey stated that in her role as a leader, “You get to know who you really are in a crisis. This I know for sure. As I write this, I’m in the center of a full-blown, class A, devastating situation-having just gotten an e-mail informing me that the police in South Africa have picked up and are waiting to charge a dorm matron at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls” (“Oprah’s Great Hope” 2008).

The initial hearing was held at the Magistrate Courtroom, 13 miles away from Oprah’s Leadership Academy. Makopo was released, several hours before Winfrey’s press conference, on the equivalent of \$450 bail (“Oprah Wept”, 2007). One media outlet indicated that the “O” brand had been tarnished. However, another media source reported that Winfrey proved herself to be a strong leader in the heat of battle. Winfrey reflected an atypical model of leadership answering every harsh question about the sex abuse scandal (Adubato, 2007).

Winfrey did not immediately go public via the media, she first addressed the crisis by dismissing school administrators who should have been more on top of the situation. She also quickly communicated with all key stakeholders at the school. Her first concern was to show sensitivity to the girls involved in the scandal. Winfrey was front and center with the media, apologizing to all stakeholders including the parents, telling them, “I’ve disappointed you. I’m so sorry” (Adubato, 2007). Having a background of abuse, Winfrey also shared the intimate details of how she was

raped by a distant cousin at age nine and then abused by three other men, trusted family, and friends. According to the *Times*, a Johannesburg paper, the scandal, “did not reflect badly on Winfrey.” Instead it was stated that the incidence was a poor reflection on the nation of South Africa. Reported allegations of sexual abuse had reached “alarming proportions” therefore it should not have been surprising that it manifested itself in Oprah’s school. In fact she was praised in the media for her prompt, aggressive handling of the situation (Perry, 2007).

### **School Staff**

Following the visit to the school, Winfrey publicly reported that the head mistress’ contract would not be renewed and promised a shake-up (“Oprah Wept”, 2007). After an internal investigation, two employees were terminated and the school administration was completely re-vamped. This resulted in the headmistress filing a claim for defamation of character in which Winfrey settled out for court for an undisclosed amount.

### **The Students**

Winfrey, an advocate for victims, was horrified that the girls were told to stay silent. She told the girls that leadership is all about using your voice, no matter what the personal consequences (Gaskell, 2007). To further empower the girls and diminish their fears she gave each girl a cell phone with her number on speed dial (Oprah Wept After Hearing Alleged Abuse, 2007). Winfrey and a team of professionals developed a three-fold intervention plan that first, looked into the charges, offered psychological support for the girls, and re-built an educational team. Once the crisis was resolved the school began anew.

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