Note to facilitator: This session aims to confront many negative stereotypes about women. You should be prepared to hear men and women utter demoralizing generalizations, victim blaming, and complex justifications that are ultimately rooted beliefs that ultimately protect a cycle of violence towards women. It is important to remember that America harbors negative gender stereotypes too. You cannot react with anger or judgement, especially if you are white and/or female. For American women, this is a gargantuan task. You should rehearse your responses and redirections. Trust that the room contains more intelligence than you do and ask for any other views. Do not give your own opinion. The goal of this session is to move dialogue along the spectrum of a complex cultural issue and spark thoughtful conversation, not to make everyone think just like you. Paramount is the skill of facilitating discussion: summarizing, asking open-ended questions, timing, keeping the floor open, relating back to core concepts, never wrapping it all up with your own opinion. All of this will be influenced or impossible if you cannot keep your own emotions in check.

Read the following analysis, upon which this session is based, to better understand the cultural and historical context of administrator and educator views. It may also help to open this session by talking about cultural differences, sharing what you, as an American, have learned and gained from working in Liberia and its education system.

Educator Training Activity: Mothers and Students, Too

Objective: Participants will identify commonly held beliefs around pregnancy in school, what causes school pregnancy, define exploitation and sexual exploitation, compare beliefs about pregnancy with accepted community values, examine school culture surrounding pregnancy and make action plans to foster a growth mindset in female students.

Prep:

Write the definition of 'exploit' on a flipchart.	Flip Chart with line across, long ways.
Flipchart with group work prompts written.	Flipchart with heading: **What causes pregnancy in school?**

1. Create a safe space by emphasizing a shame-free environment. Say something like: *We are having a discussion and maybe you will not agree with what everyone says. But it is important that we all listen very carefully and respect each other's view. If someone says something you do not agree with, you can disagree, but you have to take care in the way you respond to them. We will be talking like a family.*

2. Read the following statements out loud and ask for thumbs up or thumbs down for agreement. Discussion may follow the voting process.

◎ *A person should be punished for breaking a rule, even if they don't know how to avoid it.*

■ *Teachers are supposed to have more self-control than students.*

Students should be protected from shame.

💚*Once you become a parent, you are no longer an important person in society.*

3. Ask participants - *What causes pregnancy in school?* Take hands, compile answers on flip chart. As participants give answers, key answers to the guiding statements according to their symbols. The first three responses will most likely be: *peer influence*, *parents*, and *no sex education*. Taking these three responses into account, you will make a symbol next to each of them, according the guiding statement they are related to, like so:

peer influence ■ (I chose this symbol because teachers may also be influenced by peers and choose to have sex lives)

parents ◎ (I chose this symbol because being pressured by your parents to have a relationship with an older male doesn't leave many options for avoiding pregnancy)

no sex education ◎ (I chose this symbol a person cannot easily avoid pregnancy if they don't know that it results from intercourse)

The symbols you choose may not always be the same, and if a response doesn't easily go with a symbol, don't put one there. Do not mention the symbols for now, but let the participants see you thinking about it and doing it.

4. Ask for the definition of exploit, then give it. **Exploit - To benefit unfairly from the work or a need of someone.** Ask for an example of exploitation. If not forthcoming, give one. Ask for an example of sexual exploitation and wait long enough for someone to answer, because they probably will.

5. Ask for a connection between the symbols on the statements and the answers on the flip chart about what causes pregnancy. Ask if there are any symbols that you missed.

6. Ask the following questions, compiling the answers in shorthand on a flipchart:

- What are some of the bad things people can say about women, from the sex and gender session?[1]

- What are some of the things students can say to female students in class?

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[1] The workshop that encompassed this session also included a Sex and Gender session that identified negative stereotypes about women.

- What can[2] students say to female students who get pregnant?
- What can students say to them when they come back?
- What can admin say to females who get pregnant?
- What can admin say to females who come back after being pregnant?

Circle all the words and pause. Ask for a connection between the answers to the above questions and growth mindset[3]. Ask if these words may have anything to do with female students who drop.

7. Group Work:

- *Admin:* What are some ways we the teachers and admin can support female students and give them a growth mindset concerning pregnancy? What are our responsibilities according to the ministry?
- *Male students:* What are some ways we the male students can support female students and lower pregnancy (do not say advise the girls[4])?
- *Female students:* What are some of the things we the female students need from administration, teachers, PTA and male students to succeed in school?

All groups briefly share their work. Close with applause.

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[2] In Liberian English, this means 'What do' or 'What are some things that…'

[3] Another key theme of this workshop was Growth Mindset, based on Dr. Dweck's research. The workshop as a whole unified relationship-building, through words and actions, and growth mindset as a framework for successful schools.

[4] This is a common response that shifts responsibility to female students for a problem that is perpetuated by many members of the community.

Note: In 2016, I collected data on Liberian educator attitudes regarding student pregnancy. In reading the qualitative answers, I understood that this issue is deeply embedded in the gender roles, educational and traditional history of Liberia. In 2017, I wrote a session reflecting what I had learned. In 2018 and 2019, this session was adopted as part of the Student-Friendly Schools workshop, which annually tours Liberia and trains select administrators, teachers and students from public schools where Peace Corps volunteers are assigned to teach. I was privileged enough to facilitate the session nine times as a part of the workshop team. It was written with the intention of preparing American Peace Corps Volunteers for facilitation. Footnotes have been added to provide non-Liberians with linguistic and cultural context.

Background: The following analysis and session were written to address the disparity between high school graduation rates of females and males in Liberia. Like most school-age females in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2018), many young Liberian women experience unintended pregnancies and subsequent discontinuation of school attendance (Birungi & MacKenzie 2015). There is no mandated, clear policy on pregnancy in schools in Liberia, but there is a commonly held belief that pregnant students signify a school culture where risky behavior is accepted, creating 'the domino effect'. This explanation is often used to justify expulsion in other parts of Africa (HRW 2018). These beliefs may stem from a legacy of missionary educational culture, which founded present-day education in many parts of Africa, in addition to embedded gender norms that disproportionately burden women and girls in post-conflict and politically unstable communities (Ombati & Ombati 2012, Odimegwu & Mkwananzi 2016). Health or sex education is not thoroughly taught in West Africa (UNFPA 2017). The most progressive explicit policies in Africa focus on re-entry after giving birth (Chilisa 2002).

Methodology: Qualitative data was collected to better understand the role of the education system, and educators (teachers and administrators) especially in student pregnancy in Liberia. This analysis interprets handwritten responses of approximately 150 educators to open ended questions. The educators were chosen as counterparts by Peace Corps volunteer teachers to attend Peace Corps funded workshops, representing government schools where the volunteer teachers were placed. Tthe educators do not represent a random sample. The survey was not given consistently before or after the workshops at which they were administered, so some responders may have been influenced by workshop content. Educator responses were analysis using excel. The frequency of common words used in response to questions was counted and presented as tables, as this was determined to be the most accessible presentation of data to Liberian educators.

> "When a girl gets pregnant, her education becomes a setback, and the chances of having great dreams died." – survey response

Frequency of common words in response to "Do you think students becoming pregnant is a problem in Liberia? Why?"	
because they drop	28
education (lessens, hinders, stops)	21
no support for girl or child	7
(causes) poverty	2
progress (no, delays)	3
Frequency of common words in response to "What can schools do to prevent pregnancy?"	
sex education	56
family planning	6
council	2
reproductive health	0
advise	2
removing pregnant girls	4
promote education ("education is fine, give scholarship")	5

      Findings: Educators and administrators often determine educational outcomes of students who become pregnant. Teen pregnancy is high in Liberia, devastating the educational outcomes for female students through hardship, shame or degeneration of self-efficacy. While no one part of a society can lower the number of unintended pregnancies, educators can encourage re-entry to school and strive for a safe learning environment for their returned students. Many administrators expel girls when they are pregnant or send them to night school[5]. The best intention is to give a consequence that will delay, not cut short, education while teaching a lesson about life choices. The greatest burden of unwanted pregnancy falls on female students, so teachers want desperately for them to escape it. When they don't, disappointment and frustration make it easy to punish rather than discipline.

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[5] Night schools are supposed to be available in every district where there are day schools, so that adults who missed their education during the war can attend school after working for the day. Unfortunately, night schools generally only exist in capital cities of counties and are only functional in a few of those cities, as of 2019. Thus, sending a student to night school is usually the equivalent of expelling them from school.

In response to the question, "What happens when a girl is pregnant in your school?", most answered that the girl will drop from school, be forced to leave, or transferred to the night session. Some said they ask the girl if she 'can make it'[6], not distinguishing whether this meant continuing in night school or the day session. Not many (less than 5) responded in the same manner as this teacher who wrote: "When a student gets pregnant, as a teacher or a father, I have to encourage that student to go back to school after giving birth."

Educators rarely reported advising girls to return to school. Offering counsel appears to be viewed as going above and beyond, as this approach was the most progressive reported. Educators are well aware of the detriment to Liberia and the female workforce when girls drop and are kept from school by pregnancy or the burden of childcare. In response to the question "What can schools do to prevent student pregnancy?", almost all educators responded with sex education. Many educators listed financial or material needs as reasons for why students get pregnant.

Frequency of common words in response to "Why do you think students get pregnant?"	
support (looking for)	3
poverty	6
peer	27
parent	13
grades	1
support (lack of)	9
sex education (lack of)	10
family planning (lack of, not taking)	7
Frequency of common words in response to "What happens when a student is pregnant in your school?"	
advice	1
transfer	3
night	17
drop	36
force	28
shame	0

Recurring themes in the data are: girls need education to prevent pregnancy, get pregnant because they have transactional sex for material needs and must be punished to prevent other

[6] "I can make it" has a similar meaning in Liberian and Standard English. In Liberian English, it usually refers to being able to withstand a test or succeed in an endeavor in the future, once given an opportunity.

female students from believing that getting pregnant before they are finished with their education is acceptable.

Interpretation and recommendations: The key message of an effective session should marry these concepts; if female students must be disciplined for pregnancy, it should be focused on positive and supportive re-entry. However, educators have a responsibility to teach their students so that they can make informed decisions about their lives. If we think we can remove female students for pregnancy, we must also admit to failing them in our role as teachers of prevention.

An impasse in shifting educator attitudes regarding student pregnancy is yoked to a strong belief in Liberian educational culture: that students need to be subjected to negative consequences if they don't conform to school expectations. This is not a departure from sound reform theory, but the reality represents a classic teacher blunder. Teachers want students to read well, think well, and be well, but do not tell or show them *how*. Educators were not asked to rate their level of comfort with teaching sex education, but anecdotes from female Peace Corps volunteers, including myself, show Liberian administrators routinely ask female volunteers to run health clubs or teach health. When asked specifically what they want to be taught, they answer vaguely. Unless the volunteer uses the words 'sex education', the educators will not positively confirm what content they would like to be taught. If Liberian educators are too uncomfortable to say 'sex education', they can't effectively teach it. With this in mind, sex education for educators could be a valuable component to the Student-Friendly Schools workshop. To give them an opportunity to get comfortable teaching sex education, model school or practicum for Liberian teachers may be appropriate.

Educators are aware of the negative effects of unintended pregnancy and possible solutions to the problem. Be that as it may, they may not know or believe that supporting girls through pregnancy or providing support to return to school after birth will help. Educators could benefit from training on how this can be effective in long-term education outcomes and provided with concrete examples of how to do it. Methods and outcomes used in other African countries should be used as examples. A potent action plan may be as simple as asking parents to come to the school and making a plan about childcare or advising them on the value of girls returning to school.

Since benefits of females remaining in school and completing their education are widely known, and the practice of putting girls out of school is unlikely to change, a valuable resource for educators may be information on the Zambian practice of supporting girls who take a maternity leave to return to school and the benefits of continued education for female students. The following text may be a worthwhile display in workshop:

Successful schools in Zambia make sure their girl children[7] get back to school after pregnancy by filling out a form with the girls when they leave due to pregnancy, involving the parents to plan for childcare, and welcoming them back to school on an individual basis. The longer a girl is in school, the healthier her child will be, the wealthier she will be, and more time will pass until she has her second child.

The above information was taken from a case study called Second Chances for Girls: The Zambian Re-entry into School Policy, by Vera Wedekind and Tomaida Milingo, 2015, and from the FAWE research series, 2010.

To continue to learn more about these problems and how to fix them, the following questions are proposed for the next survey:

1. What do you think should be done to lower teen pregnancy in Liberia?
2. How many students are enrolled in your school?
3. Of the students in your school, how many were pregnant last year (that you know of)?
4. Why do we always think of educating girl children and not boy children about teen pregnancy?
5. What would happen if you educated boys about teen pregnancy?
6. Do you feel comfortable talking to students about sex education? Why or why not?
7. In your own view, should female students return to school after giving birth? Why or why not?
8. What decides if a girl return to school after giving birth?
9. Is sex education a part of the MOE curriculum?
10. Is sex education being taught well in Liberia? Why or why not?
11. Could a pregnant girl benefit from remaining in school until she gives birth? Why or why not?

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[7] girl children = children that are female.

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