

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

Kim Gandy, President,
National Organization for Women
733 15th St NW, 2nd floor
Washington, D.C. 20005

February 1, 2002

Dear Ms. Gandy:

Please consider two hypothetical scenarios: 1) A male employer informs a 25-year-old female employee that she will not be considered for promotion unless she allows him to massage her buttocks. 2) A male school principal informs a 15-year-old schoolgirl that she will be suspended from classes for the next three days, therefore receiving zero grades on all missed tests and assignments, unless she submits to his spanking her on the buttocks with a wooden board. What are the essential differences between these two cases? Which of the two would you consider to be a more egregious violation of a defenseless victim? If you had to choose, which victim is in more urgent need of protection?

Bear in mind that the beating is more painful and more dangerous than the massage, that the schoolgirl is probably more dependent on the adults in her world and less resourceful in defending her own interests, and that the psychological consequences to her are more apt to be long-term, setting her up for future victimization by other presumed authority figures, e.g., boyfriend, husband, employer—anyone with the power to demand her compliance and to hurt her if she resists.

At this time, thanks largely to the efforts of such organizations as yours, nowhere in the U.S. are employers legally permitted to demand sexual favors in exchange for job security or advancement. In the public school systems of 23 states, however, thinly disguised sexual favors can be, and are being, coerced from students with impunity. According to the most conservative estimates, legal beatings of schoolchildren number about 1/3 million incidents per year, and many of those beatings are inflicted by adult males on underage females (though even 18-year-old women are not exempt from being paddled). It is often with threats to these girls' academic standing—and by extension, their prospects for college admission—that these men prevail on them to "assume the position."

The purpose here is not to make a moral distinction between the mistreatment of girls and that of boys. We consider any deliberate aversive stimulation to the pelvic area of a

non-consenting, underage person, irrespective of gender, to be a sexual violation. The purpose is rather to present the issue in terms of your particular mission: the protection of women.

Ironically and tragically, to date no major women's rights advocacy group that we are aware of has addressed this issue (excepting a 1992 resolution by the Florida chapter of NOW and a story published in *Women's Enews* last September). It seems clear to us that one way—arguably the best way—to empower grown women would be to stop systematically disempowering young girls. That could be achieved with relative ease and speed. Virtually every other advanced nation, and more than a few developing nations, have already given schoolchildren statutory protection from disciplinary beatings. Ten European nations and Israel have now extended that protection to children in their homes. Posted on our Web site is "Rape: Lesson No. 1," a young woman's account of her experience with corporal punishment while a student at a Florida public high school. It speaks eloquently to this issue and should be read by everyone concerned about violence against women. You may read and make copies of that document at www.nospank.net/s-rape.htm. You can also see typical paddling-related injuries at www.nospank.net/whacked3.htm.

In closing, we invite you to share this letter with board members, staff and the membership of your organization. We hope that you will decide that now is the time to protect schoolgirls from sexual violence disguised as discipline. To ignore their plight is to do a gross disservice to all women and to all society. Please keep us apprised of your plans in this regard. You may count on our cooperation in every way.

Sincerely,
Jordan Riak,
Executive Director
Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education (PTAVE)