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National Scandal Over Major Child Abuse Cover-Up in French Schools

BY **FELICITY CAPON** / APRIL 8, 2015 10:53 AM EDT

Information passed to *Newsweek* has revealed that global horror over child abuse and its concealment by the Establishment, hitherto focused squarely on the UK, now needs to be widened to France as well.

Thousands of children in French schools have been sexually abused by paedophile teachers, an international NGO has claimed, accusing the French education authorities of a decades-long “cover-up”.

The revelations emerged when a 45-year-old headteacher in the town of Villefontaine, near Lyon, was accused last month of blindfolding two six-year-old pupils and forcing them to perform oral sex on him as part of a workshop on “experiencing new tastes”.

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It later emerged that the headteacher, who confessed to raping nine other children at the school, had a 2008 conviction for possessing images of child pornography. Despite this, he had not been banned from working with children.

The French education system is set to become the focus of a national scandal after minister for education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem was forced to admit last week that 16 teachers were allowed to work in schools last year despite holding previous convictions for paedophilia.

Marie Grimaud, the lawyer representing the two children, as well as seven others from the ages of three to seven, says in an exclusive interview with *Newsweek* that the cases coming to light at the moment are only “the tip of the iceberg”.

Homayra Sellier, founder of Innocence en Danger, an NGO dedicated to child abuse victims, says: “The ministry of education has covered this up for years. The government has never been inclined to listen to these stories.”

Sellier says her NGO is now being “showered” with reports of abuse. In the past few days, she has received dozens of new cases. One case can include complaints from as many as 20 children, and Sellier forecasts thousands of cases will emerge, a concern echoed by another French NGO, Lueur d’Enfance, which works to support and defend the rights of children.

According to Grimaud, teachers who try to speak out about child abuse at the hands of other teachers are silenced by school directors and local officials, and even threatened with legal action – usually defamation. Others have lost their jobs. As for the teachers the children accuse, they usually stay at the same school, or are quietly transferred to another. “The taboo is extremely strong within the French national education system about the existence of paedophile acts committed against students,” she says.

Vallaud-Belkacem, the education minister, has promised a thorough investigation into “the failures of the system” and has described the abuse as “intolerable”. The investigation will also ask why the ministry of justice did not regularly pass on information about convicted paedophiles to the ministry of education.

Yet Sellier argues that as well as changing the law so that anyone convicted of paedophilia is prevented from working with children, above all, children need to be listened to when they complain of abuse. “Children don’t brag about being raped or playing with a teacher for sex, it’s not like bragging about how many toy cars they own,” she says.

“French people are now going mad over this, but for us, this is not news,” she continues. “France has got to wake up now.”

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