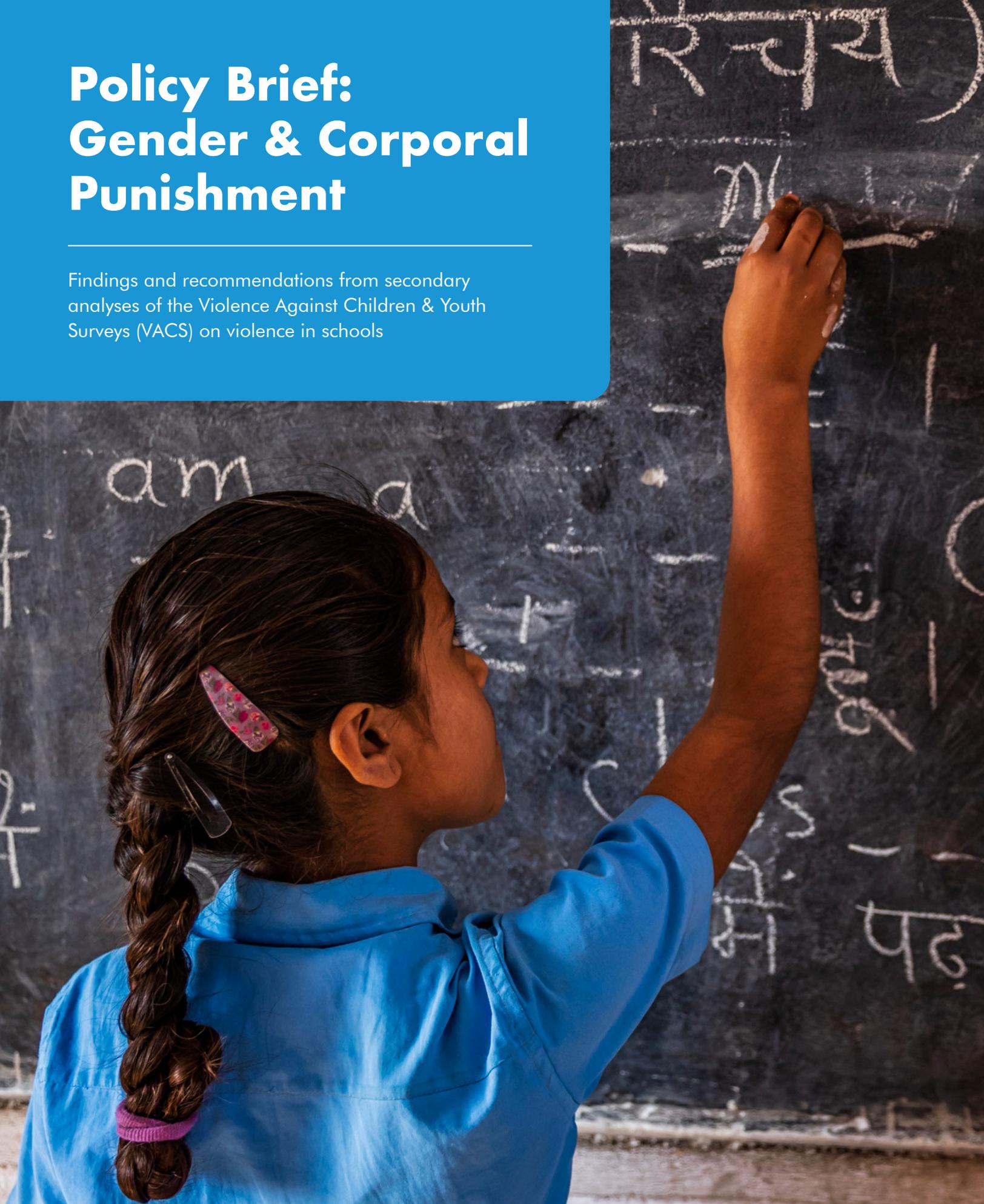


Policy Brief: Gender & Corporal Punishment

Findings and recommendations from secondary analyses of the Violence Against Children & Youth Surveys (VACS) on violence in schools



Exploring the Gendered Dynamics of Corporal Punishment in Schools

Summary

Corporal punishment – physical and psychological violence enacted as a form of discipline – is the most widespread form of violence against children and youth, globally.¹ It has devastating consequences for children’s physical and psychological safety and well-being, as well as their mental health, socialization, relationships, development, and increased likelihood of becoming perpetrators of violence.^{2,3}

Corporal punishment perpetrated by educators and authority figures can impact learners’ educational outcomes and participation in school.⁴ Corporal punishment in schools also contributes to the normalization and acceptance of violence within homes and communities.⁵ While prohibitions against corporal punishment in schools are common, the prevalence of violent discipline remains widespread, and likely underestimated.

This policy brief presents findings and recommendations from secondary analyses of the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) exploring the intersection between gender, experiences of and attitudes toward corporal punishment, and its consequences. It provides a series of recommendations for further research and considerations for policy and program development to prevent corporal punishment in schools.

Findings from the secondary analyses revealed that students’ experiences of corporal punishment by teachers varied across countries and based on the sex of both the teacher and the student. Our findings suggest that teacher-perpetrated corporal punishment is often gendered. In most countries with a high prevalence of corporal punishment by teachers, male students report significantly higher levels of violence by male teachers, compared to female students.

The variations in experiences and use of corporal punishment by gender suggest that other intersecting identity factors, including sexual orientation and gender diversity, disability, racial and ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status should be further studied, as well.

As we conducted this research, the COVID-19 pandemic upended communities around the world, disrupting everyday life and educational access for almost 2 billion school-age children worldwide. Analyses of past crises suggest that COVID-19 could result in as many as 20 million girls never returning to school.⁶ As recovery efforts roll out, there is an imperative and an opportunity to build back better, ensuring that all children return to schools that provide safe, positive learning environments.

THE STUDY OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS OFTEN LACKS A GENDERED LENS

Corporal punishment in schools takes place against a backdrop of social norms including those that drive gender inequalities and gender-based discrimination and violence. As such, corporal punishment in schools often constitutes a form of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), mirroring patterns of gender-based violence both in, around, and beyond schools.⁷

While both girls and boys experience physical violence as a form of punishment, girls may suffer specific types of punishment for different reasons.⁸ Restrictive social norms around gender and widespread gender discrimination often result in particular risks and experiences of violence among girls, and corporal punishment can be used to control girls' behavior, encourage submission and timidity, and reinforce traditional gender roles.⁹ In turn, male teachers are more violent toward male students, overall, reinforcing society-wide gendered dynamics of violence and its association with masculinity within the school environment.

Efforts to prevent and address corporal punishment in schools, including through prohibition,

sensitization and training of teachers, and school-based social norms change interventions are increasingly common. However, the gendered nature of corporal punishment in schools and its impact on normalizing violence is under-addressed and needs to be better understood so that prevention measures and behavior change interventions are as effective as possible. For example, Raising Voices' Good School Toolkit has demonstrated very promising results in decreasing physical, sexual, and emotional violence and injuries among students in a randomized control trial.¹¹ The RCT indicated somewhat greater success among males participating in the intervention, suggesting that strengthening components of the intervention addressing gender norms and inequalities could result in greater impact for female students.

Defining School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV)

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) is any act or threat of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools and other education settings, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. SRGBV violates children's fundamental rights, is a form of gender discrimination, and has wide-ranging consequences for children's physical and emotional well-being, school performance and attendance and likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating future violence.¹⁰

Corporal Punishment in Schools and the Law

Research by End Corporal Punishment indicates that 135 countries enacted legislation prohibiting corporal punishment in schools. 64 countries currently allow for corporal punishment in some or all educational settings. While 32 of these 64 countries have a ministerial provision or policy that prohibits some corporal punishment in schools, national legislation either fails to enforce existing policy or undermines it by authorizing corporal punishment in schools.



VACS DATA ILLUSTRATES GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

Our research sought to better understand the interplay of gender with both experiences and perpetration of corporal punishment in schools, as well as attitudes toward its acceptability, through the analysis of VACS data. Our hope is that these findings can inform efforts to better understand the relationship between gender and violence in and around schools to promote and ultimately achieve safe, positive, and gender equitable school environments.

What are the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys?

Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) are nationally representative household surveys of males and females ages 13 to 24 that measure sexual, physical, and emotional violence in childhood. The surveys also provide important data on risk factors, protective factors, consequences of violence, and access to services.

The VACS are led by national governments, with technical assistance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of the Together for Girls partnership.

We generated estimates of various forms of violence experienced by students, including physical and sexual violence perpetrated by both peers and teachers, in eleven countries.^I We also looked at post-violence behaviors, including school absenteeism and service-seeking.^{II} Finally, we assessed the prevalence of violence and post-violence characteristics by level of education. This policy brief highlights the key findings of the analysis that are specific to corporal punishment by teachers.

An important caveat to these findings is that they likely represent an underestimation of corporal punishment in

schools, since they account for only specific forms of physical violence perpetrated by teachers^{III}, and not the full array of violence included in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)'s definition of corporal punishment.¹²

Corporal punishment in schools is prevalent but varies significantly by country

Corporal punishment by teachers exists – to varying degrees – in all countries included in the analysis ([see Figure 1](#)). In Honduras, 2% of female students and 1% of male students experienced corporal punishment by teachers. Thirteen percent of female students and 15% of male students in Zambia reported experiencing corporal punishment by teachers. Among the countries analyzed, Uganda had the highest rates of corporal punishment (36% of female students and 45% of male students). Teachers continue to rely on physical violence to discipline students, despite progress made across countries to prohibit the use of corporal punishment in schools and promote positive discipline.¹³

In some countries, experiences of corporal punishment by teachers differ significantly by gender

Corporal punishment is highly prevalent among male and female students. Male students in Malawi and Uganda reported significantly higher levels of corporal punishment by teachers, compared to female students. In Malawi, 38% of male students experienced corporal punishment by a teacher, compared to 23% of female students. In Nigeria, however, female students reported significantly higher levels of corporal punishment by teachers. Although not included in this brief, girls often face higher risks of other forms of school-related gender-based violence, including teacher- or peer-perpetrated sexual violence ([see Figure 1](#)).

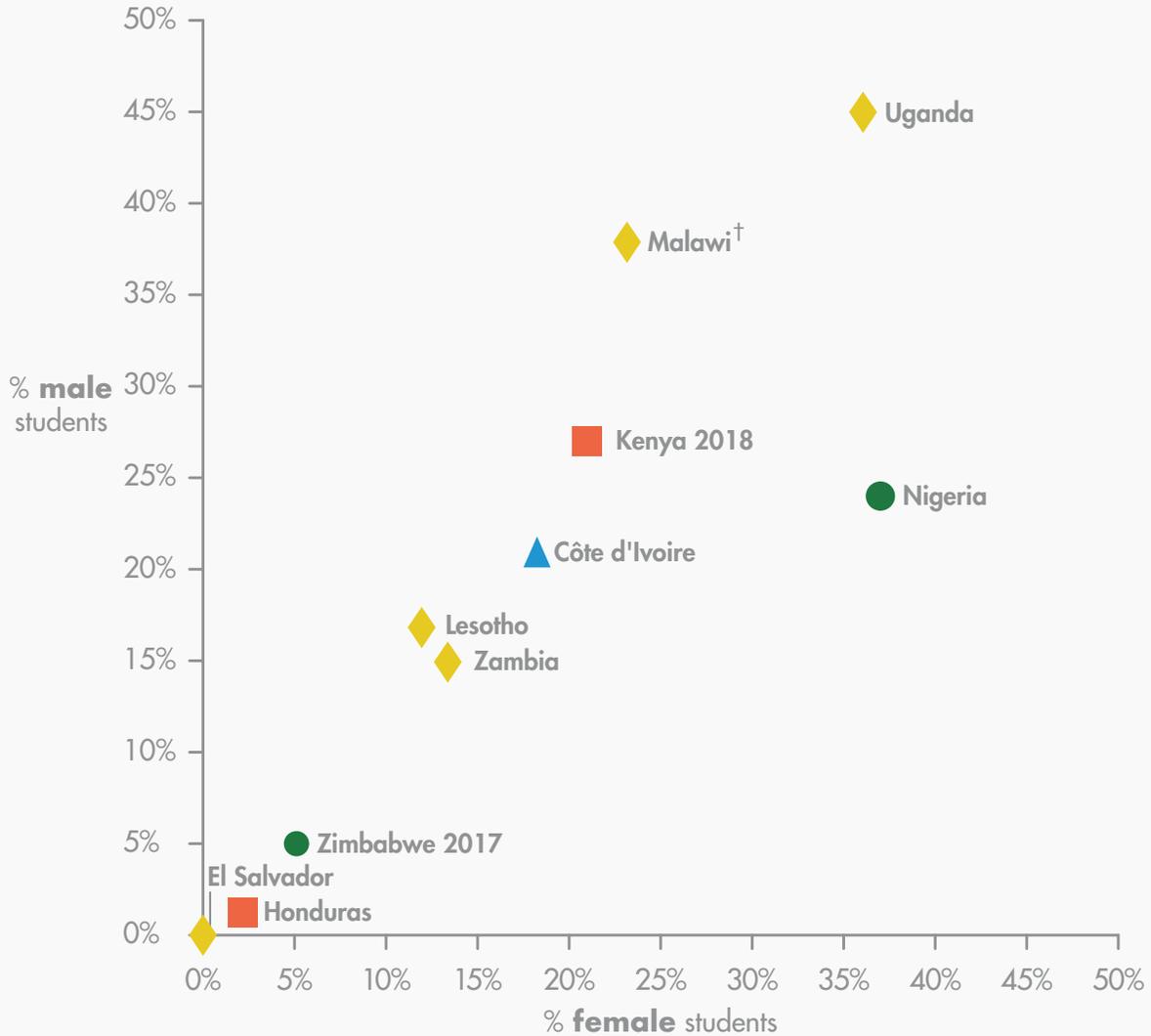
I. Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Honduras, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

II. The VACS provide a comprehensive representation of the experiences of violence among children, adolescents and young adults, but the prevalence of school-related gender-based violence may be underestimated due to survey limitations.

III. For the physical violence module, VACS respondents are asked whether someone: 1) slapped, pushed, shoved, shook, or intentionally threw something at you to hurt you?; 2) punched, kicked, whipped, or beat you with an object?; 3) choked, smothered, tried to drown you, or burned you intentionally?; 4) used or threatened you with a knife, gun or other weapon?

Figure 1. Corporal punishment in schools is prevalent, but varies significantly by country

% of female and male students that experienced physical violence by a teacher



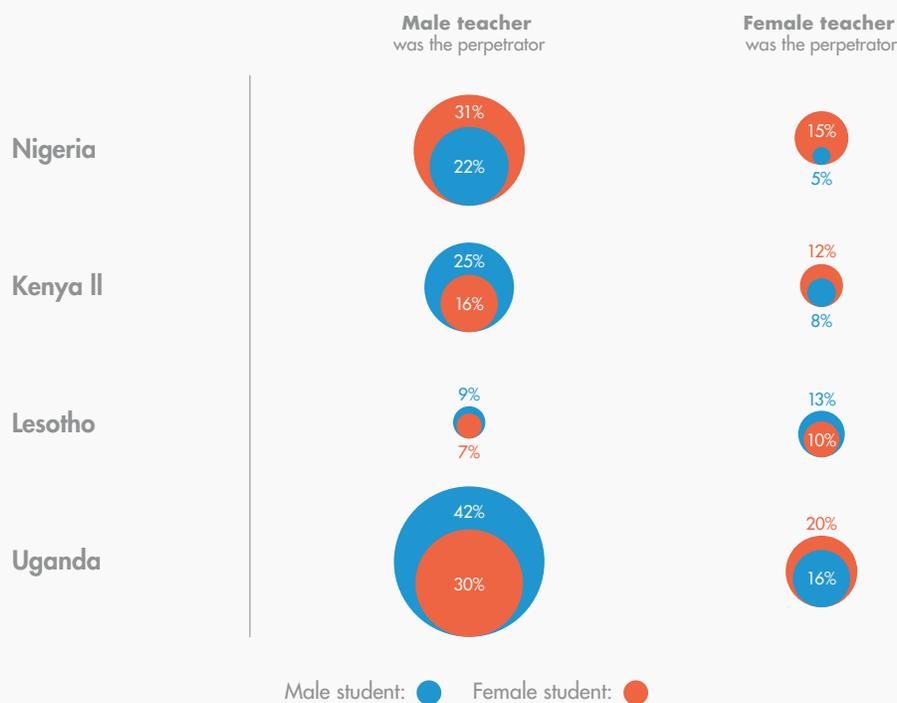
Legal Status of Corporal Punishment in Schools in VACS Countries Analyzed

(Source: End Corporal Punishment)¹

- Prohibition in schools and all other settings (home, day care, alternative care, penal institutions and as criminal punishment)
- ◆ Prohibition in all schools (†status in private schools is unconfirmed)
- ▲ No national legal prohibition exists, but national guidance prohibiting corporal punishment in schools exists
- Corporal punishment in schools is legally permitted

Figure 2. Corporal punishment victimization and perpetration is often gendered

% of female and male students who experienced physical violence by a male or female teacher



Male teachers tend to perpetrate more corporal punishment against students of the same sex

In several countries, both male and female students report high levels of corporal punishment perpetrated by male teachers. Female teachers also use corporal punishment to discipline students, but at far lower reported rates.

Teacher-perpetrated corporal punishment is often gendered. In most countries with a high prevalence of corporal punishment by teachers, male students report significantly higher levels of violence by male teachers, compared to female students. In Kenya, 1 in 4 male students experienced corporal punishment at the hands of a male teacher, compared to 1 in 6 female students (see Figure 2). In several countries included in the analysis, female students experienced higher levels of violence by female teachers compared to male students, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Teacher-perpetrated corporal punishment can result in serious injuries and school absenteeism

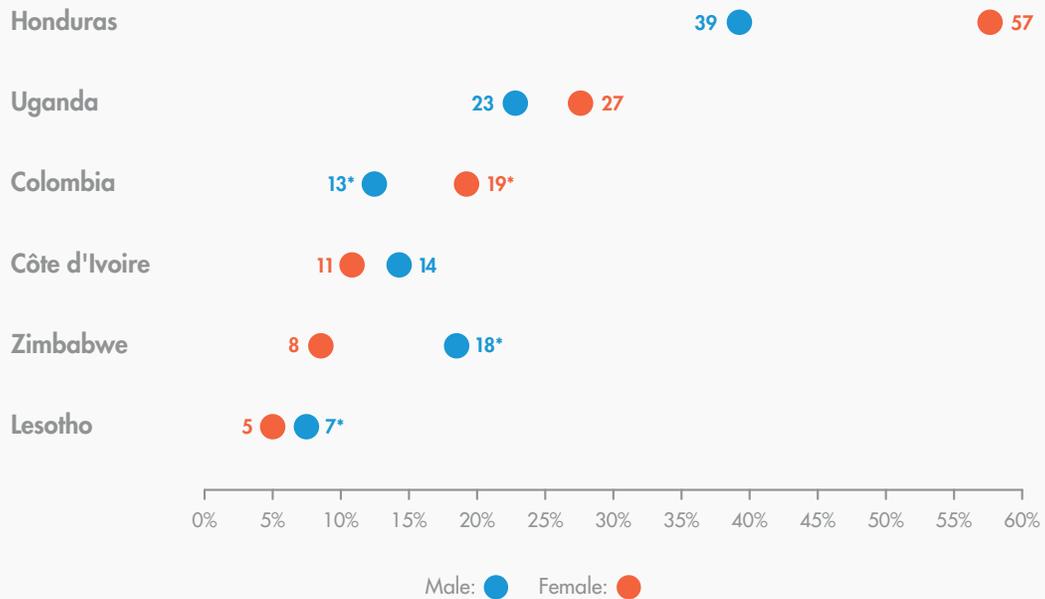
Male and female students who experience corporal punishment in schools often report school absenteeism as a result (see Figure 3). In Uganda, about 1 in 4 students who experienced corporal punishment by a teacher missed school as a result. In Honduras, among those who experienced corporal punishment, 57% of female students and 39% of male students missed school as a result.

Corporal punishment can have immediate negative consequences for students. In Nigeria, 7% of female students were injured^{IV} – ranging from bruises to broken bones – as a result of corporal punishment by a male teacher, compared to 3% by a female teacher. For male students, 3% were injured by a male teacher and less than 1% by a female teacher.

IV. Respondents were asked whether violence resulted in physical consequences, including bruises, cuts, scratches, sprains, dislocations, blistering, broken bones, permanent injury and/or disfigurement.

Figure 3. Students who experience physical violence by teachers subsequently miss school

Among female and male students who experienced physical violence by teachers, % who missed school due to the violence

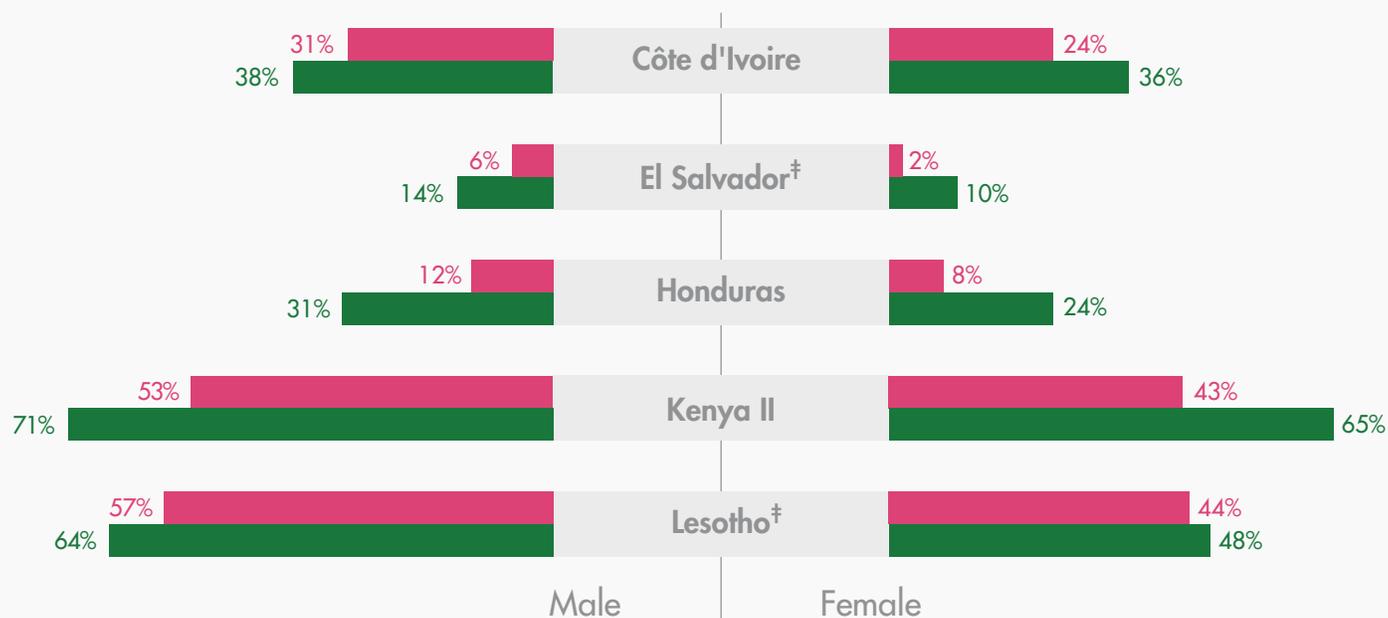


*Unreliable estimate (RSE > 30%), result should be interpreted with caution.



Figure 4. Agreement with corporal punishment at school is more common among students who only attended primary school or less

% of females and males who agreed with the need for corporal punishment at school, among 13-24 year olds who only attended **primary school or less** and who attended or completed **secondary school or more**.



[‡]Data among 14-24 year olds.

Corporal punishment continues to be normalized, but more education often leads to less acceptance of violence, especially among girls

Attitudes towards corporal punishment in schools vary widely across countries and by level of schooling. Individuals with a secondary school education^V are less accepting of corporal punishment by teachers, compared to those with a primary school education^{VI}. In Honduras, three times as many adolescent girls and young women with only a primary school education agreed with the need for corporal punishment in schools, compared to females with a secondary school education (see Figure 4). In Kenya, acceptance of corporal punishment in schools remains high, but males with a secondary school education are

significantly less accepting of corporal punishment (53% compared to 71%). However, in Lesotho, there was no statistically significant difference in acceptance of corporal punishment between males with a primary school education (64%) and those with a secondary school education (57%). A secondary school education had a more pronounced effect on acceptance of corporal punishment in schools for females, compared to males.

Girls and boys who experience physical violence in and around schools are not getting the support and services they need

Rates of disclosure of physical violence in schools varied across countries and by gender, from just

V. Currently attending or completed secondary school education or more.
VI. Includes those who never attended school.

8% of boys in Zambia to 75% of girls in El Salvador (see Figure 5). Despite the variation in disclosure rates, there was a consistent and precipitous drop off from disclosing experiences of physical violence to seeking services, and only 1-12% of students ultimately received any services.

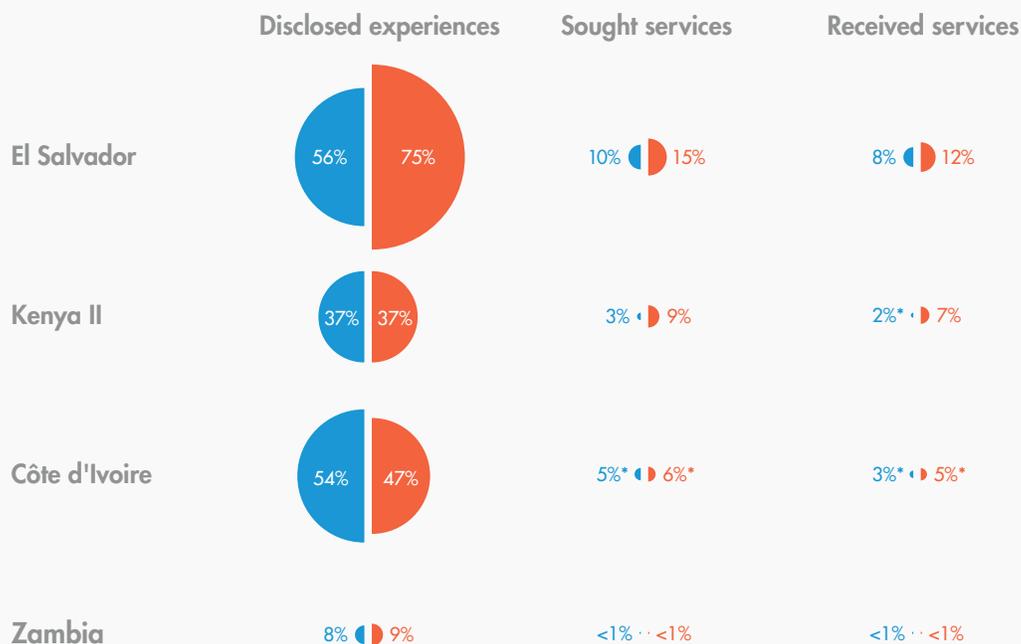
Prohibition is critical, but the relationship between prohibition and lower prevalence of corporal punishment in schools is not consistent

Among the countries analyzed, most of those with the lowest rates of corporal punishment have legal prohibitions on corporal punishment in all school settings, reinforcing the importance of legal prohibition as one tool to prevent corporal punishment. Honduras has by far the lowest rates of corporal punishment in schools and has codified

prohibition in some form since 1923. Corporal punishment in all settings is prohibited in Honduras, suggesting that prohibition in other settings, like the home, may influence the acceptance of corporal punishment in schools. Similarly, El Salvador has low rates and codified its prohibition of the use of corporal punishment in schools since 1996. However, several countries with corporal punishment prohibitions continue to see high rates of violence by teachers, including Malawi (where the legality of corporal punishment in private schools is not definitive) and Uganda, which only prohibited corporal punishment in schools in 2016. These examples of the relationship between prohibition and prevalence suggest that prohibition is one critically important aspect of a broader, comprehensive approach to preventing corporal punishment in schools.

Figure 5. Girls and boys who experience physical violence are not getting the support and services they need

% of male and female students who disclosed experiences of physical violence, sought services for those experiences, and received them.



*Unreliable estimate (RSE > 30%), result should be interpreted with caution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS, POLICYMAKERS, ADVOCATES, AND RESEARCHERS

Although the prevalence and drivers of corporal punishment in schools are well-documented¹⁴, our analyses provide a window into the interplay between gender and corporal punishment victimization and perpetration. We concluded that male teachers are more likely to use physical violence against students, compared to female teachers. Gender norms, power dynamics, personal experiences of childhood violence – especially corporal punishment – and many other factors may make physical violence as a form of discipline more acceptable among male teachers. Our findings demonstrate that male teachers are more likely to use corporal punishment against male students, confirming other studies that see same-sex patterns in corporal punishment by parents.¹⁵

Corporal punishment can severely impact the physical and psychological well-being of students. The prevalence of injuries – ranging from bruises to broken bones – as a result of corporal punishment in schools is extremely troubling and injuries were more common if the perpetrator was a male teacher. The UNICEF Young Lives 4-country, cross-regional study¹⁶ determined that the impact of experiencing corporal punishment in schools on math scores – controlling for other demographic factors – was significant for both 8- and 12-year-olds. Corporal punishment in schools also had a negative relationship with children’s psychological well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Finally, the study reported that fear of violence was the single largest reason for children reporting a dislike of school.

Based on these findings and in the context of longstanding efforts to prohibit and prevent corporal punishment of children, particularly in schools, we recommend and amplify existing recommendations¹⁷ for the following actions for educators, researchers, and policy- and decision-makers:

FOR THE EDUCATION SECTOR AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTERS

Recognize and commit to addressing the gendered nature and impact of corporal punishment in schools on learning outcomes and student well-being

These research findings indicate the need for gender-responsive policies and interventions that seek to address and correct the practice of corporal punishment in schools – as part of larger efforts to prevent and address SRGBV and all forms of violence against children – and to create safer learning environments through a whole-school approach.¹⁸

Promote and resource the role of the education sector in gender-based violence prevention and response

Educators and administrators need training and resources in order to both understand how the gendered nature of corporal punishment reinforces generational cycles of violence, and to facilitate safe and positive learning environments and support students experiencing violence in and outside of school. Schools can serve as a critical point of intervention to link children and youth to health and social services.

Integrate gender-responsive corporal punishment prevention into education sector programs and measure corporal punishment in education sector programming

Interventions to improve access to quality education and generate better learning outcomes must address school safety and the impact of positive learning environments on students' well-being and learning outcomes. As part of its Select Gender-Based Violence Literature Reviews, USAID published an evidence review on Corporal Punishment in Schools in Low-Income Countries which provides recommendations for defining, measuring, and researching SRGBV, including corporal punishment, and guidance for program design and evaluation.

Support further research on corporal punishment in schools, including its relationship to gender and impact on learning outcomes

The data analyses described in this brief reveal the importance in understanding the interplay between corporal punishment and gender discrimination and inequitable gender norms and the insights that can be gleaned from existing and future research. Other areas of intersection with corporal punishment that should be further understood in addition to gender include sexual orientation and gender diversity, disability, racial and ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status.

Prioritize sensitization of educators and caregivers about the consequences of corporal punishment, specifically, and violence against children within and outside of schools

A whole-school approach to promoting safe learning environments and gender equitable and non-violent social norms has the potential to change the trajectory of children's likelihood to both experience and perpetrate violence. While findings from these analyses demonstrate that more education attainment generally results in less acceptance of corporal punishment, safe school environments and prohibitions of violence in and around schools require a concerted effort from high-level decision-makers to educators in the classroom, and specific school policies are key.

FOR POLICY- AND DECISION-MAKERS

Prohibit corporal punishment in schools and develop and implement policies and interventions that are gender- and age-responsive to prevent corporal punishment in schools

It is crucial that all laws and regulations authorizing all forms of corporal punishment in schools are repealed. Equally, work to mitigate violence in school settings must incorporate gender analysis and a gender-responsive approach. Gender and age are two factors that are consistently under-addressed in discussions, frameworks, and commitments centered on addressing violence against children and improving children's educational experiences and outcomes. Decades of research demonstrate that gender discriminatory and unequal social norms, attitudes, and structures have a significant effect on risks and experiences of violence across settings.

Recognize that schools are microcosms of society where gender discriminatory attitudes and social norms that condone violence can be reinforced or challenged

Schools serve as microcosms of the world children experience outside of school and can either reinforce or challenge social norms within families and communities. Because schools play such a significant role in children's development and socialization, they are a critical venue for social change and addressing social norms around violence and gender equality. These findings indicate that secondary school attainment decreases the acceptance of corporal punishment and other forms of violence, affirming the wide-ranging role of schools in socialization and the adoption or rejection of harmful social norms. The higher prevalence of gender unequal norms and the acceptance of violence among those completing only primary school also suggests that

early interventions are crucial to the promotion of equitable and non-violent social norms.

Focus policies and resources on making schools more gender equitable and inclusive.²⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the already-urgent need for schools to address inequalities that have been exacerbated by the

impact of the pandemic. To ensure that students return to safer and more productive learning environments, governments must focus on building back better by addressing SRGBV, including online violence and bullying, ensuring that schools are equipped with appropriate sanitation facilities and are accessible for all students, and allowing and encouraging pregnant girls to return to school.

Together for Girls, the AidData Research Lab at the College of William & Mary, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with support from USAID’S Higher Education Support Network and Global Affairs Canada, conducted secondary analyses of twelve national Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) to better understand the experiences of children and youth who attended school with respect to violence in and around school settings, particularly school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). Contributing and reviewing partners include the End Corporal Punishment team at the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, UNGEI, and USAID.



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