



Policy brief on violence in and around schools and its direct and indirect impacts on educational outcomes of children

What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Impact at Scale

A seven-year initiative funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to scale up evidence-based, practice-informed prevention of violence against women and girls. The programme will invest £67.5 million to prevent and contribute to eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG) by:

- Systematically designing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating a range of approaches to scaling up violence prevention efforts, translating proof-of-concept evidence into robust, large scale programmes and strategies.
- Designing, piloting, and testing new theory-driven violence prevention approaches (innovation).
- Strengthening long-term capability and capacity to deliver cutting-edge, evidence-based violence prevention programmes across the programme's grantees, the UK Government (principally FCDO), and developing country governments
- Using evidence to influence a more effective, scaled-up global response to end VAWG.

The policy brief was written by Anisha Saggi of Social Development Direct. With thanks to our group of peer reviewers, including Line Baago-Rasmussen (UNICEF), Catherine Anne Evelyne Flagothier (UNICEF), Kristen Hansen (UNICEF), Shanaaz Mathews (University of Cape Town), Emily Esplen (FCDO), Anne Gathumbi (IRC), Caroline Pritchard (FCDO), Jade Woolley (FCDO), and Dr Erika Fraser (Social Development Direct). Thank you for your valuable feedback and inputs to the policy brief.

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Overview

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5 and 16 have set important targets to make schools safe, inclusive and non-violent environments. With less than six years to the 2030 deadline, there is still significant work remaining to achieve these goals, given violence in and around schools still manifests within every society, globally.

Estimates on scale of violence in and around schools globally



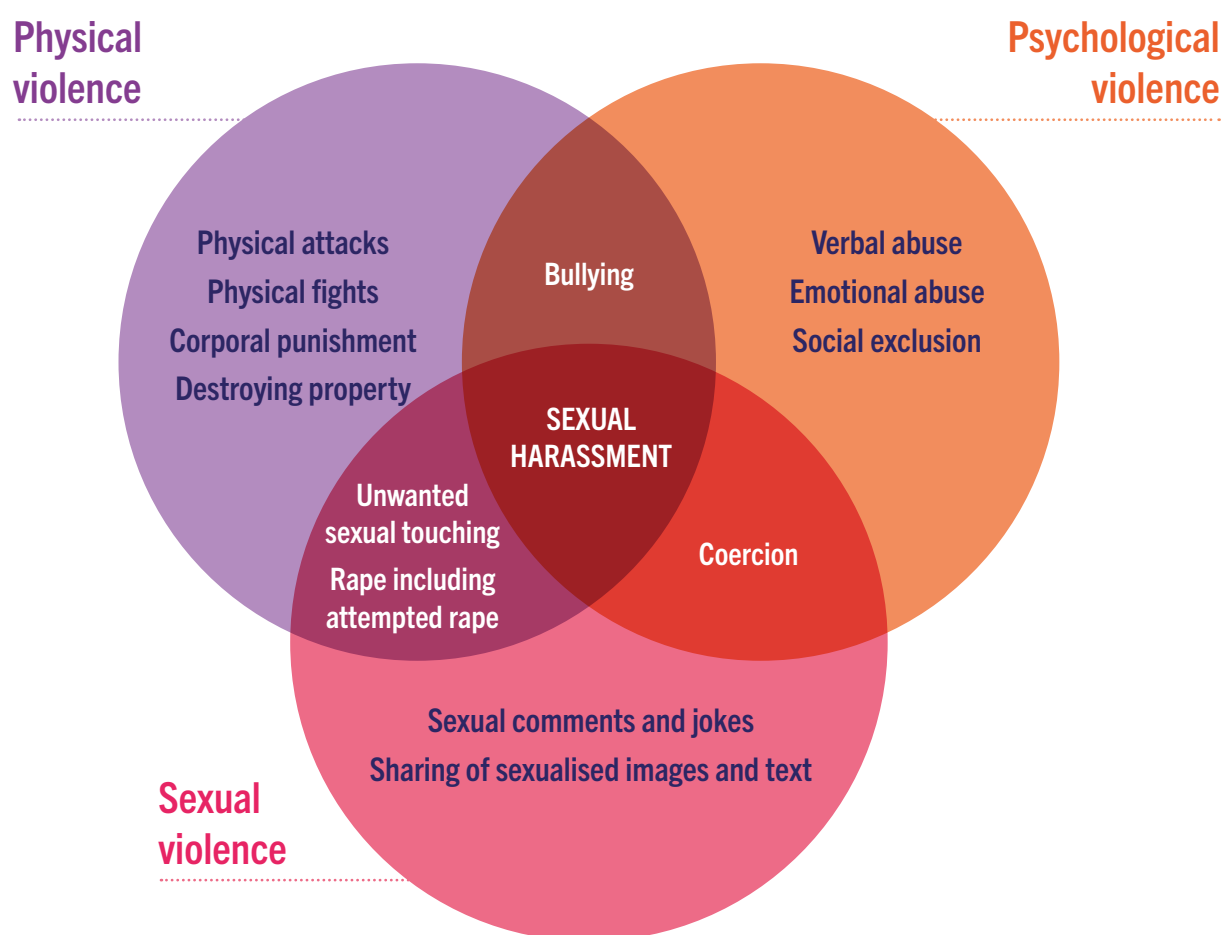
- **Extensive evidence shows that violence in and around schools can have significant impacts on educational outcomes, both directly and indirectly.** Directly, violence in and around schools can impact the academic performance of learners, increase the risk of absenteeism and dropout rates, and negatively impact future careers and earning potential. Indirectly, violence in and around schools can have long-lasting negative impacts on brain development, mental health, social-emotional skills, and continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence. All direct and indirect impacts on educational outcomes are mutually reinforcing of each other and can be a cause and effect of one another.
- **Gender inequality is a root cause of violence in schools.** Gender inequality, discriminatory practices, and harmful norms that position women and girls as “subservient”, drive violence against them. Addressing gender inequality and promoting more gender equitable culture in schools is key to preventing violence.
- **There is extensive evidence on the prevention of violence that highlights violence in and around schools is preventable.** Schools and governments that are tackling or have tackled this issue **have seen reductions in school dropouts and improved educational outcomes.** Most interventions cover five thematic areas: building life skills; building knowledge and awareness; providing psycho-social support; providing skills training for the school staff; and promoting a whole-school approach.

Forms of violence in school globally

There are multiple forms of violence in and around schools, all of which can significantly impact children and their educational outcomes. It is important to recognise that violence varies across life stages, and is influenced by factors like age, gender, social norms, behaviours, location, and intersecting identities. **Violence in and around schools can occur** inside and outside classrooms, around schools, in dormitories (for boarding schools), in playgrounds, on the way to and from schools, and online. It can occur privately or in sight of other children.

School-related gender-based violence is an overarching term which encompasses physical, emotional or psychological, and sexual violence, as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1 Adapted from UNESCO, 2019 and UNGEI and UNESCO, 2015



Key points to note:

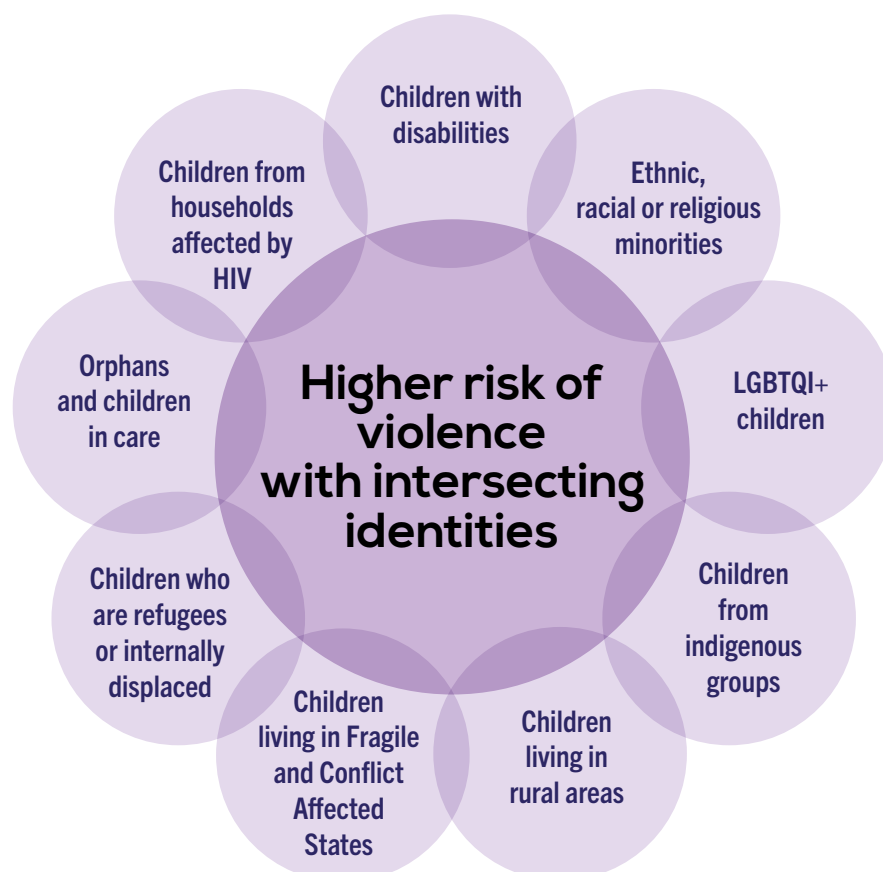
- Poly-victimisation is a term used to highlight that **different forms of violence do not occur in isolation**. For example, a child who experiences physical violence is more at risk of experiencing sexual or psychological violence. The different forms of violence tend to reinforce each other. Violence can occur within and across multiple and separate settings, where a child who is experiencing violence at home or in the community often faces violence at school as well. This feeds into the continuum of violence from the home, to the community, and to school.
- **A secondary analyses of the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys** revealed that teacher-related corporal punishment is often gendered, with male students reporting significantly higher levels of violence by male teachers, compared to female students.

- Violence occurs on social media, email, via mobile phones or other technological devices. **Some children report they encounter violent content** via large group chats, posts from strangers on their newsfeed or through the recommender systems. Common forms of online violence include cyber-bullying, online grooming, and trolling, alongside being exposed to violent content on topics related to suicide, self-harm, and eating disorders. The borderless and less-regulated nature of cyber-space enabled violence to persist, and can **adversely affect school engagement, academic performance, dropout rates**, and overall wellbeing.
- Bullying involves an imbalance of power and usually a pattern of aggressive or manipulative behaviour occurring repeatedly against a victim. **Bullying takes many forms**, including psychological bullying (e.g. taunting), physical violence (e.g. fighting), cyberbullying (e.g. spreading rumours online), or sexual violence (e.g. sexual harassment).

Children most at risk of experiencing violence in and around schools

Intersecting identity factors can make certain children more at risk of experiencing violence than others. As shown above, boys are more at risk of experiencing corporal punishment, and girls are more at risk of experiencing sexual violence, especially adolescent girls. However, children from marginalised groups are more at risk of violence in and around schools, because of their perceived 'difference to others'. **Figure 2 highlights those at higher risk**, noting that there could be an increase in a child's risk of violence based on their intersecting identities. For example, girls with disabilities are even more likely to experience sexual violence at school, with a survey in **Uganda** showing 23.6% of 11-14 year old girls with disabilities reporting sexual violence at school, compared to 12.3% of girls without disabilities.

Figure 2 Children at higher risk of violence with based on identity factors



Impacts of violence on education outcomes

Direct Impacts on Educational Outcomes:

Learning performance

It is well researched that violence in and around schools has a direct effect on the academic performance of students. This is for both children who are survivors of violence and those who have witnessed violence. In cases where teachers are perpetrators of violence, it creates an environment of fear, which is not conducive to a safe and supportive learning environment. For example, studies from **India, Jamaica, Pakistan**, Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam have shown that corporal punishment is consistently associated with **lower learning outcomes, especially in literacy and numeracy**. Evidence has also demonstrated this association with bullying in **Latin America** and Sub-Saharan Africa, and **sexual violence in Malawi**, despite the latter being less researched because of the sensitivities with researching sexual violence.

Dropout and absenteeism

There is a higher dropout rate and level of absenteeism of students when violence persists in and around schools, due to fear, lack of trust and trauma. Particularly survivors of sexual violence that has occurred in and around school face significant mental health challenges such as depression, self-isolation, anxiety and posttraumatic stress. They may also face stigmatisation and negative social effects, including rejection, loss of support networks and abandonment, all of which means there is significant underreporting of sexual violence. These impacts are likely to increase the rates of drop out or absenteeism, if not appropriately handled.

Parents may withdraw their child from school if they have lost trust in the education process and safety of their child in and around school grounds. This is particularly the case for parents of girls, further leading to an underrepresentation of girls in education settings. **A meta-analysis reviewing 43 studies from 21 countries** found girls who were survivors of sexual violence had three-fold increased risk of being absent from school.

The high dropout rate or absenteeism for girls can have further impacts on their future, making them more at risk of child, early or forced marriage (CEFM) or pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. Data has shown school attendance can reduce CEFM and child pregnancy. The meta-analysis also found boys who are bullied are three times more likely to be absent from school and all children who have experienced violence have a 13% predicted probability of not graduating from school.

Employment and labour market outcomes

It is clear children affected by violence in and around school experience negative impacts on their mental and physical health, their brain development and socio-emotional skills, and consequently their academic performance and absenteeism and dropout rates. **All of these factors can affect children's future ability to secure and maintain jobs, reduce the likelihood of enrolment in tertiary education and constitute a higher probability of children engaging in early labour force**, as shown in **India, Peru, Vietnam and Ethiopia**. Studies have shown survivors of bullying have lower employment rates, work longer hours with lower hourly wages compared to those who had not experienced bullying. Girls who have dropped out of school because of violence in and around school are at **higher risk of CEFM, HIV/AIDS and pregnancy**, further affecting their ability to participate in the workforce later on in life. **The World Bank has estimated that the cost of violence in and around school lost lifetime earnings for labour force is estimated to be US\$ 11 trillion.**

Indirect impacts on educational outcomes:

Brain development, socio-emotional skills and the cycle of violence

Violence in and around schools can impact a child's brain development and social-emotional skills, perpetuating the cycle of violence. Studies have found that violence can affect the structure and functional development of a brain. **Adversity and toxic stress** caused by experiencing or witnessing violence can leave long-lasting impacts on the genetic predisposition of a child, which can affect the emerging brain structure and long-term health. **Some studies have shown that frequent exposure to violence** can affect part of the brain that results in lower cortisol level, resulting in one's inability to manage stress. **A study looked at the relation between history of violence exposure** and development of academic and mental health problems. It found that violence-exposed children have an increased risk of developing-school related problems, including mental health problems, learning disabilities, language impairments, and other neurocognitive problems.

Violence in and around schools can alter a child's socio-emotional skills. They are more likely to self-isolate and have a reluctance to participate. Violence in and around school can affect self-esteem and empathy, and reactive attachment disorder, alongside increasing their likelihood of **engaging in risky behaviours**, such as substance use, drinking alcohol, or having sex at a younger age, further impacting their education, future and development. A study in Jordan found a **link between drug addiction in high school students and violent behaviour**, and mutually enforce each other. It found violent behaviours were common among students with positive drug use, students they had problems with teachers or peers, and used abusive language with school staff.

Children may start to view violence as normal and internalise these behaviours as a way of resolving disputes. This can lead to lifelong risks of being exposed to re-victimisation, violence, dominance, and control, as they observe and experience power dynamics that exploit others. Alternatively, this can lead to lifelong risks of **repeating the pattern of violence and abuse** against siblings, their own spouses and children, exacerbating the intergenerational cycle of violence. **A study has shown as a result of the normalisation of violence in and around schools**, boys are more likely to be perpetrators of dating violence or IPV and girls are more at risk of re-victimisation later in their lives.

Mental and physical health

Violence in and around schools can have a significant impact on a child's mental health, causing children to feel unsafe or fearful at school and internalise the adversity they encounter, leaving them feeling isolated, lonely, anxious, suicidal, and depressed. **A study using data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey** found these mental health symptoms to be associated with bullying victimisation in Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Thailand and Timor-Leste. In addition, these feelings may effect children's physical health, exposing them to symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, obesity, or self-harm. **There is an additional risk that these feelings persist into their adulthood**, especially if they have not received any form of therapy or access to mental health and protection services. For example, **girls are more likely to internalise these experiences** and are at greater risk of alcohol abuse or dependence later in life. Boys are more at risk of externalising these experiences through truanting and showing signs of behaviour problems.

The impact on mental health also causes a knock on effect to students learning performance and academic capabilities, which can also be gendered. **A study in the United States found that girls experiencing bullying victimisation** and depression had a lower academic performance than boys.

Promising interventions to prevent violence in and around schools

Innovative interventions in low- and middle-income countries have shown that violence in and around schools can be prevented, especially when engaging school staff, students, families, and communities. Schools and governments that are tackling or have tackled this issue have seen reductions in school dropouts and improved educational outcomes. Evidence suggests that key components of effective interventions include: building life skills; building knowledge and awareness; providing psycho-social support; providing skills training for the school staff; and promoting a whole-school approach. Going forward, policy makers and practitioners must develop the skills, systems, and infrastructure to implement these interventions at scale. They should be designed with a whole-school approach, aiming to transform school culture for lasting change, while considering the specific context, social norms, and needs. Examples of promising interventions include:

- The **Good School Toolkit (GST) intervention in Uganda**, which provided behavioural-change techniques to school staff and students, achieving a 42% reduction in the risk of physical violence from school staff. Techniques included goal setting, development of action plans, positive discipline, and reflection and practice on new behavioural skills.
- **Right to Play's programme in Pakistan**, which used play-based learning activities with students to build confidence, empathy, and resilience, and ability to critically examine gender norms and use of violence. It included community-based events, positive discipline, teacher training, and a focus child protection initiatives. An evaluation found significant decreases in self-reported peer violence, victimisation, perpetration, and depression. For example, for peer violence perpetration, the reductions in the intervention and control arms were 25.3% versus 11.1% for boys and 55.6% versus 27.6% for girls, respectively. Depression scores also dropped between intervention and control arms, with 7.2% versus 4.8% for boys and 9.5% versus 5.6% for girls, respectively.
- **An intervention in China involved coaching parents**, which fostered empathy among students and reduced bullying incidents. School staff were also trained on classroom management, positive discipline, and identification and management of different forms of violence.
- **Certain countries** have banned corporal punishment in the last decade, including Pakistan and Sierra Leone. However, this needs to be enforced among school staff. National, regional and local governments require enforced laws and policies, and robust reporting and referral mechanisms to successfully tackle violence in and around schools.
- The Government of South Australia provided **guidelines and amended the curriculum** for schools that developed young people's ability to become responsible digital citizens, focusing on how to use the internet to learn and explore the world, use the internet ethically and responsibly, and understand the potential risks and threats. The guidelines also support teachers and students on how to cope with bullying and other violence online.
- The What Works to Prevent Violence programme have developed some guidance on '**School-based approaches to tackling violence**'. It explores successful programmes that have been employed in schools at the primary and secondary level, and have proven to be successful in tackling school-based violence and changing attitudes and norms towards violence.



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