

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Assessing Child Protection, Safety & Security Issues For Children in Ugandan Primary and Secondary Schools

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Study Background and Methodology

This brief summarises a research study assessing the extent and impact of protection and safety problems impacting children in Uganda's schools. The study was conducted by Winsor Consult LTD between 2011 and 2012, and commissioned by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES).

The research consisted of a quantitative and qualitative survey. The sample was 40 primary schools and 10 secondary schools in eight districts across four regions of Uganda: Northern, East, West, and Central. This work involved the participation of 3,879 children, key informant interviews completed with 450 children and 466 adults (teachers, PTA members, district school inspectors, police, School Management Committee (SMC) members and media professionals), and focus group discussions held with 360 children. A policy overview was also undertaken to identify any gaps in the existing frameworks. Information-gathering tools including a secret box and written vignettes for storytelling were used to collect illustrations of participants' experiences.

Four major areas of concern emerged from the study: **sexual abuse; emotional and psychological abuse; physical abuse/corporal punishment; and environmental hazards and security risks related to the infrastructure of schools.**

Overview of Laws and Policy

Children's Knowledge of the Law

> 87% of children surveyed knew there exist laws to keep them safe.
> 79% of primary and 96% of secondary school children feel the laws aren't working.

Uganda has implemented laws expected to guarantee the safety of children in homes and institutions. Key line ministries responsible for children's affairs have prepared statutory instruments and regulations relevant to child safety, such as The Children's Act, The Employment Act, The Domestic Violence Act, The Children Trafficking Act, and others. In addition, the MoES has undertaken a

number of safe school initiatives in its commitment to provide quality education to all, including: Safe School Contracts; Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards (BRMS), which are child-friendly standards including provisions on protection of children from violence and school security issues; and safe-school training to school inspectors and tutors who train teachers. The MoES finalised a Safe Schools handbook for teachers and a facilitator's guide, and in 2010 all Coordinating Centre Tutors (CCTs) and inspectors in Uganda were trained on these materials. With UNICEF support, CCTs are funded to train 3 teachers in every school in 22 districts in Acholi, Karamoja, and West regions.

GAPS IN CHILD PROTECTION LAWS AND POLICIES This study found gaps in child protection laws and policies in Uganda – addressing these gaps could help towards guaranteeing that children's rights are upheld. For example:

+Procedure to enforce constitutional provisions in Uganda's courts is stiff, expensive and takes a long time to complete, making it difficult to prosecute, and to improve system.

+The active participation of local actors is missing, and village councils handling children's issues are weak.

+Culture and traditions hold back enforcement of child protection laws (for example, in the case of persistent early marriage).

Key Findings

Children in the schools sampled suffered sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Poor school infrastructure poses risks to children's health and well-being.

Widespread abuse in the sample:

- 81% of children ages 10-18 years depicted numerous forms of violence they have experienced at school.
- 68% of children indicate teachers were the main perpetrators of violence.
- Sexual abuse is common among 10-18 year old school children sampled in the study (defined as engaging in any sexual behaviour with a child, by fondling or kissing, or through penetrative sex, and other behaviours – see pg. 2). The interview asked about sexual abuse perpetrated by adults and peers. Some 77.7% of primary and 82% of secondary students reporting having experienced some form of sexual abuse; and 5.9% were subjected to defilement.
- 67% of students sampled reported to have been sexually abused by a male teacher.
- 74.3% of children interviewed report having been caned by an adult at school.
- Emotional abuse by teachers and bullying by peers is a persistent problem.

Lack of Reporting Mechanisms

- Of the children in the sample who experienced sexual abuse at school, only 40% of girls and 39% of boys reported it.
- Children fear being victimized by perpetrators: When reporting to senior staff, pupils are called to meet directly with the perpetrator, indicating poor skills in handling cases.

Security and Safety Issues

- Many children feel unsafe at school, citing concerns with insecure toilets, fire safety, and poor infrastructure.



Study Findings – The Extent of Violence and Safety Issues

Abuse is common in schools: A range of mistreatment and violent and non-consensual behaviours were found to be common occurrences in schools. A large share of children (81 per cent) in the sample understood and depicted numerous forms of violence that they had experienced at school, including sexual abuse and physical and psychological abuse; many of the children interviewed (68 per cent) said teachers were the main perpetrators of violence in schools, followed by fellow pupils (30.4 per cent).

Sexual abuse: Some 77.7 per cent of the primary school children and 82 per cent of the secondary school students surveyed reported having experienced sexual abuse at school; 51 per cent of victims were aged between 10 and 13 years and 40.6 per cent between 14 and 17. Some 5.9 per cent of children found to have been subjected to defilement. The interview asked about sexual abuse perpetrated by teachers and peers. Teachers were repeatedly reported to be the major perpetrators of abuse: 67 per cent of children said they were sexually abused by male teachers. (Sexual abuse in this study is defined as sexual contact with a child such as sexual touching and fondling, kissing, and penetrative sex or defilement; as well as engaging a child in other sexual behavior that she or he does not comprehend or give consent to, such as indecent exposure of sexual objects, engaging in sex in front of a child, encouraging children to engage in prostitution, or sharing pornography with a child.)

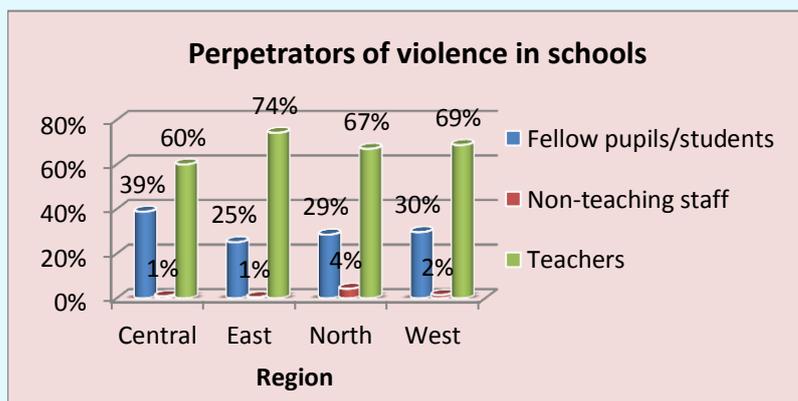
Physical abuse and corporal punishment: Despite caning having been banned by the MoES, as many as 74.3 per cent of children surveyed reported to have experienced caning by an adult in school. Continued physical abuse of children in schools was attributed to, among other things, inadequate investigation, and poor coordination and follow-up on physical abuse cases in schools by duty holders such as local government probation officers, District Inspectors of Schools (DIS), the police, SMCs, PTAs, and leaders at the local council level. The research team found that DIS did not adequately monitor compliance with the corporal punishment ban; some were reported to have sent prior warning of inspections to alert school administrators and organize bribes.

Emotional abuse and bullying: Some 46 per cent of children in the sample reported experiencing emotional abuse by a teacher (50 per cent of boys and 44 per cent of girls). Emotional abuse was more common in primary schools (56 per cent) than in secondary (41 per cent). Bullying was also a very common problem, with 43 per cent of children reporting having experienced it in school (46 per cent in primary and 31 per cent in secondary).

Lack of mechanisms for reporting abuse: Of the children interviewed who experienced sexual abuse at school, the minority – only 40 per cent of girls and 39 per cent of boys – reported it; many "never" did so. Children lacked awareness on child rights in schools, which inhibited them from reporting the violence they experienced. They also feared being victimized by perpetrators. When they reported information on sexual abuse to senior women, "the matter became public as pupils were called to staff rooms together with the perpetrator (teacher, student or non-teaching staff)", indicating inadequate skills in handling child sexual abuse and exploitation.

School fires and lightning strikes: Some 56 per cent of children lived in fear that their schools may catch fire one day because school authorities did not consider fire mitigation a priority. Findings also indicate that as many as 65 per cent of primary school children and 60 per cent of secondary school children surveyed did not know how to use fire extinguishers.

Risks to physical safety and security: Many children reported feelings of insecurity in their schools: 46 per cent of children felt that toilets were the most insecure places, followed by classrooms. Girls felt more insecure in toilets than boys due to a fear of sexual assault when toilets lacked proper shutters and doors. Some 97 per cent of children reported that their school buildings did not have emergency exits; 76 per cent said their schools lacked first aid kits. Study findings also revealed that a number of school buildings had cracks, broken windows, poor door locks and leaking roofs; 61 per cent of children who said their schools had leaking rooms were in Government schools.



"A science teacher tried to force himself on me in a corner during lunch time. I shouted until he left me. He always threatens me not to tell it to any one." -12 year old girl, Kampala district, Central Uganda

"Prefects are also allowed by the school administration to beat us." -10 year old boy, Mbale district, East Uganda



Impact of Violence on Children's Retention and Learning

This study assessed the impact of violence on children's retention, learning achievement and completion. Focus group discussions with children, teachers, and school management committee members uncovered the negative impact of violence against children. In specific, focus of these discussions landed upon **pregnancy; dislike for teachers and the school environment; and fear among children; these are detailed below.** Violence does not allow for a child friendly school because, among other problems, it leads to children's inability to learn, it inhibits creativity, and causes children to drop out before completion.

Pregnancy: Child sexual abuse unequivocally leads to girl's inability to complete school. Discussions with girls revealed that when teachers force them into sex their concentration levels in class goes down. Some of the girls that are sexually abused by adults in school were reported to have become pregnant and subsequently dropped out of school. Other girls are forced into early marriages when they become pregnant. Others contract Sexually Transmitted Infections, including HIV.

Dislike for teachers and the school environment: The research team found that when children are sexually, physically and emotionally abused they hate teachers, and this affects their interest in school. Discussions with boys revealed that corporal punishment in particular made them hate school to the extent that they start to look for alternative routes such as casual labour.

Fear among children: Study results from focus group discussions with children indicate that when children see their peers being humiliated (emotionally and physically abused), they hate school, drop out and fear to return. In Northern Uganda, the research team found that due to the long period of civil war, there are a number of children who go to school with ages above the average age for their classes. These children feel that they are "mature" enough and should be encouraged to continue schooling instead of being subjected to forms of violence at school.

Other impact areas: Loss of interest in some subjects, affecting student's future and choices. Loss of creativity among children: Abuse ruins innovation and creativity. Bullying by peers, making children hate school.

CASE STUDY: James (not real name) is a 16-year old boy of senior two in Gulu district. He narrated how his sister left school due to continued caning and emotional abuse by a male mathematics teacher. He said his sister wanted to continue schooling but the abuse made her drop out. The school had no arrangements for helping weak students to progress with education, which James believed could be done. James' sister has since got married at the age of 17.

Recommendation: The use of a secret box method, regularly managed by the head teacher or a member of the School Management Committee, should be encouraged in schools to allow children to freely report acts of violence. Administrators should then follow up.

Seen Through Children's Voices

Children surveyed in this study revealed their own understanding of violence and its effects through drawings and written words; they also gave suggestions for fixing the problem.

"We need to be educated on how to handle male teachers that disturb us."

"Every teacher that comes in class hurls insulting words to us – especially academically weak pupils. They make us feel like we are useless. Some older pupils end up deserting schools because of this."

"Teachers should be taught how to use positive discipline instead of caning us."

"Our school has no clear arrangement for handling child abuse. Our students committees don't work. Our senior woman is not respected by the head teacher. She has nowhere to report the abuse we experience yet we also fear to report. The non-teaching staffs also sexually abuse us by using sexual words."

"School should expel teachers who act violently."



Conclusion and Key Recommendations

This study reveals that a large percentage of children continue to experience violence in Uganda's primary and secondary schools, and this has far-reaching and negative impact on their ability to learn, stay in school, and thrive. Violence is a widespread problem despite existing laws and guidelines on child protection in Uganda, signalling a need for action at the school and local community levels as well as at the national level. Worryingly, teachers are the major perpetrators of violence against children in schools; and existing mechanisms for handling abuse cases, such as through unprepared matrons and senior women and men, are inadequate. The high rate of sexual abuse and low rates of student reporting of the problem calls for special attention by the MoES and its development partners, collaborative Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), and local governments on the matter. The involvement of communities will be vital in the identification of child protection strategies and innovations relevant to local contexts. The creation of local government positions, such as Secretaries for Children's Affairs through the Local Government Act (2000), offers a strong opportunity to involve young people in planning processes that can strengthen child protection in schools. A strong and effective school inspectorate system will also be critical in enforcing standards and rewarding compliance.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To duty holders at the school and local community level: teachers, head teachers, inspectors, PTAs and SMCs

- Raise awareness of district inspectors of schools to improve compliance to the corporal punishment ban and to keep ethical behavior.
- Implement the teacher's Code of Conduct.
- Strengthen investigation, coordination and follow-up mechanisms to track physical abuse cases in schools.
- Strengthen active participation of children in child protection activities such as child rights and peace clubs through initiatives organized by the head teachers, in collaboration with SMCs and parents.
- Provide training to those school stakeholders like matrons, senior women and senior men who often lack skills for handling child abuse.
- Increase the dissemination of material on child protection in school and ensure that children, teachers and other adults have access to such material and understand the content.

To the national and local government

- Undertake critical actions geared towards preventing and mitigating violence against children in schools.
- Build capacity of duty holders to effectively handle child-safeguarding in schools.
- Build capacity of local government to prepare byelaws that strengthen prevention of and response to violence against children in schools.

To the Ministry of Education and Sports

- Establish a clear reporting and referral mechanism for violence against children in schools.
- Prepare and use abridged versions of existing laws, including provisions of the CRC, policy guidelines and regulations for child protection in schools.
- Step up awareness on fires in schools and promote implementation of fire safety measures.
- Review awareness of child protection issues and provision of on-the-job training to in-service teachers.
- Support implementation of a revised teachers' code of conduct, with strict directives against abusing children and strict measures – such as cancellation of offending teachers' contracts – to ensure they adhere to it.
- Document, share and learn from past and current child protection initiatives in schools by MoES and its development partners, including NGOs.
- Support a robust programme of further research into and monitoring and evaluation of violence against children in primary and secondary schools.
- Design training materials and programmes for children and those working with them on tackling prevention of violence, with child victims of violence in schools and the gender dimension

This research briefing is part of a series of research and evaluation summaries produced by UNICEF Uganda and its partners. For more information, please contact Maricar Garde, Head of Research, Evaluation and Advocacy at mgarde@unicef.org.