Select Gender-Based Violence Literature Reviews: Corporal Punishment in Schools in Low-Income Countries

BACKGROUND

At the request of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago conducted this literature review to address the research questions below. This literature review is one of a series of eleven contributing to Agency efforts to better understand gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on the empowerment of girls and women.

What are the extent, nature, and consequences of corporal punishment in schools in low-income countries?

How is corporal punishment in schools gendered in processes and outcomes in low-income countries?

Do studies from low-income countries address social norms in upholding or challenging corporal punishment in schools as a widely accepted practice?

NORC’s LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

Evidence review findings can inform future program design, research, evaluation, and both education and public health policies. Important insights from the review follow:

Policy makers around the world increasingly view corporal punishment is a form of violence against children. UNICEF describes corporal punishment as the most common form of violence against children globally. Corporal punishment has been banned in 128 countries in schools in recognition of its encompassing multiple forms of violence against children. Of the 67 countries where corporal punishment remains legal in schools, 56 are undergoing processes of legal reform, while more than 35 already have policies, ministerial orders, or rules against its use in some or all schools (GIEACPC 2020).

Corporal punishment in schools is highly prevalent in low-income countries. Corporal punishment disproportionately affects students who are younger, girls, food insecure, refugees, disabled, HIV positive, or other stigmatized groups.

Corporal punishment is gendered. Girls have been found to be at higher risk than boys of psychologically humiliating treatment as a form of corporal punishment, and of sexual exploitation and abuse at school, at times in exchange for being spared corporal punishment. Where boys may be beaten more frequently or severely than girls, corporal punishment may be based on normative expectations of hyper-masculinity and stoicism in the face of pain.

What is corporal punishment?

According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment Number Eight on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, corporal punishment is: “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting (‘smacking,’ ‘slapping,’ ‘spanking’) children, with the hand or with an implement. [...] In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child.”
Corporal punishment affects child development negatively. Existing reviews of the evidence on corporal punishment from methodologically rigorous and ethically approved research and evaluations have repeatedly shown multiple harmful effects and no benefits for child development. A range of poor biomedical and developmental outcomes are associated with corporal punishment in childhood: injuries and mortality; poor behavioral regulation; impaired cognitive development; and negative mental and physical health.

Attitudes, beliefs, and norms underpin yet contest corporal punishment. Many adults in school and home contexts hold contradictory beliefs, attitudes, and practices concerning violence against children and struggle to clearly delineate what constitutes acceptable “discipline” or “punishment” versus violence. While physical assault of an adult is criminalized in most countries, proponents of corporal punishment frame violence against children by adults as socially acceptable violence. Nevertheless, many adults perceive harsh physical punishment as ineffective at regulating child behavior.

Evaluation results show corporal punishment is preventable. Available rigorous evidence shows that non-violent, positive discipline alternatives, supportive teacher-student relationships, and a safer school climate can contribute to reducing students’ risks of poor academic performance, dropout, poor mental and physical health, and other compounded problems affecting child development.

NORC’s LITERATURE REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Program Design

- Combined whole-of-school within whole-of-community programs, coordinated within and across education, health, and child protection sectors, are needed to prevent and respond to corporal punishment, among other forms of GBV against children in schools and homes.
- Intervention development through careful co-design with evaluation and implementation partners for school, home, and community contextual relevance and sustainability, can help maximize and measure interlinked education and child development outcomes.
- Longer-term gender norm change community-wide is required for cultivating safe, supportive, stable and nurturing schools and homes that value girls and boys equally and use alternative, positive, non-violent discipline methods with students of all genders. Further, prevention program design for reducing corporal punishment among all forms of GBV in schools should take into account the unique needs and rights of disaster- and conflict-affected, displaced children of all genders as they seek to access education in a safe, stable, and nurturing learning environment.
- Strategically, the need for building adults’ scientific knowledge of the developmental harms of corporal punishment, and skills for ending the practice, extends also to pediatricians and other health workers in their vital roles in child health and safety, and potential public health educational role in schools.
- Taken together, laws, policies, and increasingly school-based GBV prevention programs, call for promoting a safe and supportive learning environment, training all teachers on positive, non-violent discipline methods, and ending violent punishment of children both at school and home.

Research and Evaluation

- Rigorous research and evaluation designs, along with the use of mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) are required to build the evidence base on outcomes and pathways for preventing and responding to corporal punishment as a form of GBV in schools. Experimental, randomized evaluation designs, and longitudinal, mixed-methods research across diverse low-income contexts and populations also are required to expand the evidence base on the causal mechanisms and effects of school corporal punishment as a form of GBV and its effects on academic retention, achievement, and healthy child development. Qualitative inquiry is required to interpret statistical results, through investigating the change pathways of programs to prevent corporal punishment.
Qualitative unpacking of perceptions of what constitutes, “corporal punishment,” can help contextualize quantitative measures to be included in epidemiological and social science research and program evaluation data collection instruments on school violence.

Sex- and age-disaggregation of future research and program evaluation using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, are required to better understand gendered power dynamics, social norms, and pathways of reducing school corporal punishment among all forms of GBV against children.

Clear definitional framing of corporal punishment as encompassing multiple, gendered psychological, physical, or sexual acts of violence, humiliation, and intimidation, can improve measures to evaluate student exposure to corporal punishment beyond “caning.”

Teachers’ self-reported behaviors concerning corporal punishment perpetration must be triangulated with students’ reports of violence exposure in school surveys. Epidemiological self-reported violence exposure measures are further needed for students, given the insight that past efforts to measure student or teacher attitudes or perceptions alone as a proxies for behavior change have been unreliable.

Survey design and administration methods must be developed to accommodate functional impairments in child and adult respondents’ capabilities to see, hear, walk, or talk in order to include actively, rather than intentionally or unintentionally exclude, children, caregivers and teachers with disabilities.

Finally, to be successful in preventing and responding to GBV against children, corporal punishment prevention programs, and research and evaluation, will require improved accountability and support from currently under-resourced formal and informal, government and community-based child protection initiatives.

Please use this link to access the full report in the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC): https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X1XZ.pdf