Leh Wi Lan
Learning and School Safety Study 2021

Status of school safety and violence reporting systems in and around junior and senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone

1. About the Learning and School Safety (LASS) Study

In September 2021, pupils in Sierra Leone stepped into classrooms to begin their second academic year in the COVID-19 pandemic. Like their peers across the world, junior- (JSS) and senior secondary school (SSS) pupils were affected after schools in Sierra Leone closed for six months between April and October 2020 and social distancing measures were enforced. The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education's (MBSSE) emergency planning and sector response included immediately rolling out distance learning tools, starting community sensitisation campaigns to keep children safe, adjusting examination schedules and issuing guidelines to manage safe school reopening and learning recovery.

The immediate impacts of secondary school closure on pupil learning and well-being were captured in the 'Back to School' study (2020) under the UK aid funded Leh Wi Lan programme.[1] Although Sierra Leone appeared to have avoided major learning loss following school closure, the study found that majority of secondary school pupils were still performing behind grade and learning inequalities likely increased.[2] In addition, lockdown affected children's physical, emotional and economic well-being and the challenges were especially severe for girls, older pupils, and those from poorer households. School closure had exposed children to risk of physical abuse and exploitation, extra chores and work, poverty, hunger, fatigue, and emotional distress. For many pupils, schools serve as a safe space which became unavailable during the closure.

One year on, the Learning and School Safety (LASS) 2021 study under the Leh Wi Lan programme uses quantitative and qualitative evidence to reveal the direction of travel in both learning achievement and child safeguarding mechanisms in terms of violence reporting systems in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. In doing so, the LASS study aims to capture the longer-term impacts of school closure and catch-up strategies for learning recovery.[3] It also aims to support children, especially girls and children with disabilities, to be in school safely in line with the MBSSE's Radical Inclusion policy and recent guidelines on Reducing Violence in Schools.[4] Details of the LASS study design are shown on the right.

This briefing note looks at the status of school safety and violence reporting systems in and around junior and senior secondary schools by answering six key questions:

a. How safe do pupils feel in school? What are common safety concerns in and around schools?

b. Do pupils understand what constitutes violence in school and know the potential mechanisms to report this?

c. How do pupils get information about violence and violence reporting mechanisms?

d. What do pupils do when they feel unsafe or witness incidences of violence in school? What share of pupils have ever reported violence?

e. What systems do schools have in place for responding to reports of violence, identifying potential safety concerns and violence prevention?

f. What support facilities are available to pupils outside of schools for reporting incidents of violence? What is the feedback on these community support systems?

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1 Schools reopened on 5th Oct 2020. Fieldwork for the mixed-methods Back to School study took place in Oct-Nov 2020.

2 Interested readers can access the Back to School (2020) report and previous years' Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (2019, 2018, 2017) reports on the status of teaching and learning in Sierra Leone on https://mbsse.gov.sl/leh-wi-lan/

3 These results are discussed in LASS Briefing Note (1): Recovering from school closures in Sierra Leone: Status of pupil learning outcomes in junior and senior secondary schools.

4 Available at https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GUIDE-FOR-REDUCING-VIOLENCE-IN-SCHOOLS-.pdf

2000 JSS3 and SSS3* pupils tested on English and maths at the start of the school year

One-on-one test administration: each pupil is tested individually by a data collector using a combination of paper test and handheld computer device for approximately 50 minutes

40 questions per test covering both English and maths

250 school principals interviewed for School checklist (including collection of observational data in schools)

Background questions on pupil profile characteristics, household assets, disability (functional difficulties), self-study practices and support, awareness of violence and violence reporting systems in and around schools

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with representatives from MBSSE, District Education Officers (DEOs), Family Support Units (FSU), and gender specialists

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with JSS3 and SSS3 pupils, and school and community representatives (via the Community Teacher Association – CTA)

*JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for BECE and WASSCE, respectively.

2. How safe do pupils feel in school? What are common safety concerns in and around schools?

Insights from the LASS study suggest that violence in school is widespread across Sierra Leone, and that the perceived risk of gender-based and sexual abuse has worsened since 2017. Reliable school-based data on the types and frequency of abuse is limited. However, various forms of abuse were commonly reported in discussions with pupils and parent representatives of

Figure 1: Girl's perception of whether sexual harassment by male staff and pupils takes place in their school (2017 and 2021)
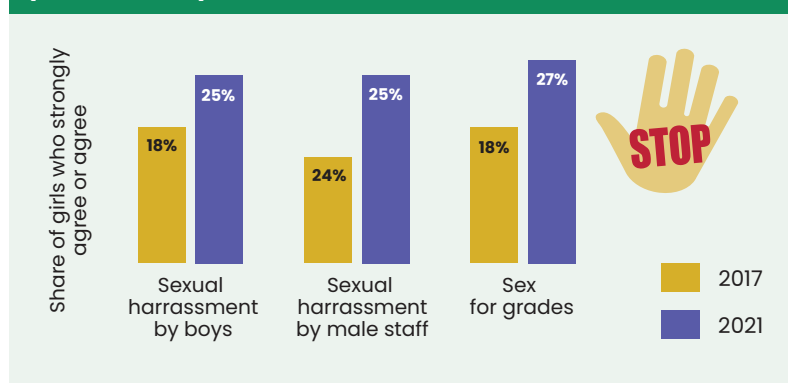
Community Teacher Associations (CTA) and this was also supported by LASS survey data from girls.[5] These confirmed the prevalence of different types of safety issues and showed that girls were more likely to acknowledge risk from sexual harassment in 2021 than they did in 2017. As shown in Figure 1, one in four female pupils in the LASS study agreed or strongly agreed that girls were sexually harassed by boys or male staff in their school, and 27 per cent reported that some male teachers ask girls for sexual favours in return for good grades. These indicators of sexual abuse have increased markedly over the last few years, suggesting that safety in schools has deteriorated overall and/or that girls are more aware and confident to talk about these sensitive topics.

Teachers in some cases demand sexual favours or money from children in return for better grades, and refusal results in teachers bullying and abusing pupils. While many school representatives, including teachers and school principals, denied incidence of sexual abuse within schools, discussion with pupils suggested otherwise. The issue of teachers seeking sexual favours (mainly from girls) or accepting money in exchange for higher grades was mentioned by many pupils. Compliance at times led to a series of abuse with teachers informing colleagues who also 'made advances on you for the same reason'. Where the child did not respond to the teacher's advances, this could result in physical or verbal abuse – and in some cases teachers even failed pupils who refused. Unlike their richer peers, pupils from poorer backgrounds were less able to give teachers money for grades. Apart from the physical and psychological ill-impacts, this practice

We have teachers who are always requesting sex from the girls just so that they can give them good grades. This is one thing that is affecting the female students greatly because most of these pupils' become dropouts from school and when most of them go for these external exams they don't do well at all because they were probably not studying and all their grades were being awarded to them in return for sex. (Male SSS3 pupil, Western province)

Sex for grades usually happens with older girls. If they fail the teachers will ask them for money and those who don't have [money] will go for sex just to pass the exams. For some children, their parents cannot afford to give the money requested by teachers to get the passing mark… Teachers usually threaten the pupils if they are being denied sex, they will tell them that they are going to fail if they don't cooperate with them and that will make the children not want to attend school. (Female JSS3 pupils, Eastern province)

reportedly affected children's learning in multiple ways. Pupils also reported that the exchange of sexual favours or money for grades by some pupils created an unfair schooling environment for other children in their class.

Corporal punishment is also particularly common practice, with school representatives' and CTA members' perceptions on 'acceptable' levels of disciplining ranging from extreme physical beating to measures like cleaning the school compound. The new Anti-corporal Punishment Initiative announced by the MBSSE in October 2021 has had mixed reception at the school and community level. Some school representatives and CTA members believed that banning corporal punishment would leave teachers with no means of disciplining pupils and this would be a set-back to learning and the school environment. In other cases, school and CTA respondents suggested that the policy was good for protecting children and any disciplining should only be done in moderation via tasks like cleaning or fetching water. The Leh Wi Lan programme has made efforts to provide positive discipline strategies and strengthen the implementation of Teachers Code of Conduct in this regard. Nonetheless, the majority of pupils and teachers mentioned in discussion that corporal punishment continues to take place in schools. Several boys and girls reported that they were frequently beaten and flogged in school, and corporal punishment was a major reason for school absences and dropouts as it created fear among pupils of coming to school.

Some teachers like flogging pupils. Whatever you do, they will find ways to flog you. (Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)

We do sometimes tell them [pupils] to kneel down on the floor because there are different types of corporal punishment that we give to them when they disturb class or cause any problem. (Teacher, SSS, Southern province)

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5 The LASS (2021) survey re-administered a module on Girls Safety in schools that was first administered to female pupils in SGLA I (2017) in order to identify changes in perceptions of girls to various safety statements overall, and any notable differences for groups of girls.

Emotional abuse from teachers in the form of bullying, harassment and discrimination is a challenge in Sierra Leone's schools. In discussion, pupils reported multiple incidents of teachers using abusive language in classrooms whereby they called children "stupid", made fun of their pronunciation, or scolded them for asking questions in class. Both girls and boys were equally subject to such abuse. Children said they were embarrassed by such behaviour and that it discouraged them from learning. In some cases, if a pupil reported such cases and the teacher came to know, this would lead them to bully the child even more. This suggests serious concerns about the quality and confidentiality of reporting systems. A small number of schools reported that they had started to mentor teachers on their behaviour with children which was working to reduce such incidents. This has also been noted in previous Leh Wi Lan Teacher Research Studies.[6] While positive change is happening in some schools, overall, girls' responses to the LASS survey suggested that verbal abuse by teachers was widespread and may have increased since 2017, with nearly 50 per cent of girls now agreeing that these type of incidents take place in their school compared to 38 per cent of girls in 2017 (see Figure 2). It is possible that more girls are now able to recognise verbal abuse as inappropriate behaviour and therefore able to report it, however the LASS study does not have comparative data to verify this.
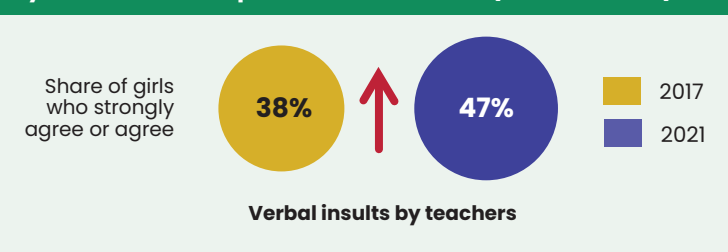
Bullying and verbal abuse among pupils ("provocation") is often targeted at more marginalised pupils. In some instances this was linked to poverty, with children making fun of the condition of the uniform or shoes of their poorer colleagues which caused them embarrassment. Pregnant girls were also targeted and discriminated against by other pupils. In some cases, these girls also faced family pressures and societal stigma because of their condition. This negatively impacted their psychological health and pupils said it caused some pregnant girls/new mothers to leave school despite recent government policy efforts.

Figure 2: Girls' perception of whether emotional abuse by teachers takes place in their school (2017 and 2021)

Share of girls who strongly agree or agree

38% **47%**

2017
2021

Verbal insults by teachers

"We have a teacher who uses bad words against us in class. Whenever he comes to teach, he will use words against us that makes us feel bad always. For example, if pupils are making noise in class while he is teaching, he will never ask you to keep quiet – he will just use negative words against whoever is causing noise." (Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)

"This violence has to do with provocation in school, for instance, when you provoke your colleague in school for a battered shoe he is wearing, there is a tendency that your colleague might stop coming to school as a result of the provoking…Yes, violence also has to do with poverty because if the colleague were from a rich home, they will certainly buy him a better shoe to wear." (Male SSS3 pupils, North-Western province)

"We have a girl in our class who has an issue with her ears [hearing] and it is why most of the girls provoke her. They will sometimes say she has a 'smelly ear' which makes her very uncomfortable. Sometimes they will say she smells like dog which will make the girl to remain quiet for the rest of the day." (Female JSS3 pupil, Southern province)

"We have few pupils that are disabled and we are aware that most of them are poor. One thing we do is that we make sure they are not stigmatized. We try to counsel them as well as their schoolmates telling them that disability is not the end of everything… they should be encouraged by schoolmates and should be friends. We also make sure that we speak to their teachers to not allow them be bullied by other pupils while they are in school." (Community Board Chair, SSS, North-Western province)

Pupils with disabilities are also more susceptible to bullying and discriminatory behaviour from teachers and other pupils in some schools. Such pupils were mocked for their disabilities by other pupils which discouraged them from school, or forced them to shift to another school. LASS survey results also show that girls with disabilities perceived greater risks of sexual harassment by male staff or teachers in their schools than other girls. 32 per cent of girls with any type of disability agreed or strongly agreed that male staff sexually harasses girls, and 33 per cent said that sex-for-grades happens in their school, compared to 22 and 25 per cent of girls without disability, respectively. Some schools were making effort to limit this by using inclusive teaching strategies to support pupils with disabilities in classrooms, and sensitising other pupils to address harmful behaviours towards their peers.

1 in **3** girls with a disability report sexual harassment from teachers in schools

6 Available at https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LWL_Teacher-Research-Book.pdf

More broadly, children are exposed to risk during their commute to and from school with one in three girls feeling unsafe on the journey. It was physically challenging for children to walk long distances by foot, and this also increased exposure to traffic, busy roads and market places.[7] Girls were particularly affected by this and they were more vulnerable to sexual abuse from bike riders and strangers on the way. The survey results confirm that one third of girls (33 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that they risked harassment while travelling each day. This figure was very similar in 2017. Pupils and CTA respondents in a few schools in the provinces also said that long commutes to schools put pupils at risk of kidnapping. Pupils with physical disabilities, such as problems with sight or walking, also faced challenges with commute to school as access roads were narrow, unpaved and/or involved walking through 'bush' which they could not manage without assistance.

Incidents of abuse in the wider community outside of schools are reported to have somewhat reduced compared to the school closure period, but certain groups of children (e.g. the poor and those living away from their biological parents) face continued risks. CTA respondents and key informants reported that cases of abuse affecting children in the community were higher when schools were closed due to COVID-19, and the government's efforts to control this were commended in this regard. However, certain groups of children face continued risk, and poverty was identified as one of the leading causes of this. This was because the poor socio-economic condition of some families pushed their children into child labour, early marriages or prostitution to support household expenses. Pupils and CTA respondents also reported that safety issues were more likely to be experienced by children who were adopted or being raised by guardians/relatives because there was sometimes less care for their well-being than in cases where children lived with their biological families. This was especially so when there was overlap with poverty which made these children extra vulnerable.

Poorer pupils and those living away from their families are **more vulnerable** to risk

> *There is a big stream very close to the village and when it rains the stream gets full and that makes it very difficult for the girls to cross the stream to come to school. As for the boys, they will take off their uniform and place it in a plastic bag and cross the stream because they have the courage to do that. But the girls cannot afford to do this.* **(Male SSS3 pupil, Northern province)**

1 in **3** girls feel unsafe travelling to and from school

> *Now that school has opened, rape is one among other things that has dropped a bit and children are not getting pregnant like that.* (Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)

> *I will say poverty is also a threat to the safety of the pupils because the reason why they are involved into all this kind of sexual practice or abuse it is because of money. I must let you know that it is most of these girls or boys that do provide for their families.* (Teacher, SSS, Southern province)

Box 1: What makes a school environment safe?

Pupils, parents and school representatives frequently associate the concept of a safe school environment with better infrastructure

Pupils, parents and school representatives frequently associate the concept of a safe school environment with better infrastructure. As such, measures such as installing fences, constructing boundary walls and posting security personnel outside school gates were reported to physically secure school premises. Pupils and CTA respondents also described an ideal safe school as one that had a good building with adequately sized and well-maintained classrooms and provision of basic utilities like electricity and running water. A large number of respondents also mentioned the importance of access to functional and clean toilet facilities. This was especially important to encourage girls to come to school

Girls' survey responses give a mixed picture as to whether key safety infrastructure is improving. One in two girls (50 per cent) believed that their school was well fenced, which has improved from 39 per cent in 2017. On the other hand, one in three girls (31 per cent) feared going to the school toilets and this perceived risk has worsened since 2017, when only one in five girls (22 per cent) had the same view. Girls in 2021 were also more likely to agree that during menstruation girls did not attend school because of the state of the toilets (44 per cent compared to 38 per cent in 2017). School infrastructure is seen as particularly unsafe by pupils from the poorest backgrounds and those with disabilities. For example, only 28 per cent of the poorest girls, and 42 per cent of girls with any disability thought their school was well fenced, compared to 50 per cent of girls in general.

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7   The LASS study focused on secondary schools which normally cater to children from several local communities.

Box 1: What makes a school environment safe? (continued)

School location is seen as another important determinant of school safety because of the issues with commute and exposure to distractions

The nature of risks and hazards varied according to the local environment of schools. As discussed, for more remote schools, the long commutes to and from school discouraged some children from attending and increased risk of sexual abuse or violence from passers-by. This was also a problem for schools located near busy market places and roads, which exposed children to traffic and crowds. On the other hand, CTA representatives reported that schools in close proximity to other schools, sports stadiums and clubs also faced problems with attendance and attention of pupils who were easily distracted by the surrounding activities and more inclined to truancy and negative peer influences. School and community respondents recognised the need to mitigate against these risks, although capacity to do so was reportedly limited in some cases.
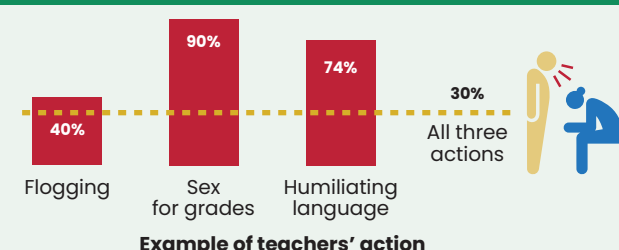
A safe school environment is also commonly associated with respectful inter-personal relationships between pupils and school staff

School representatives and pupils mentioned that teachers should be friendly and approachable, yet maintain discipline. They should act like 'parent' or 'mentor' figures for the children and lead by example. Respondents clearly highlighted need to report any exploitative sexual relationships and to ensure strict accountability of teachers. This also requires the use of corporal punishment and abusive language to be moderated. Similarly, the relationship between girls and boys should be based on mutual respect so that pupils, especially girls, feel safe attending schools.

> *In the first place, the school should have security. The school should have a watch man at the gate to make sure that they prevent bad people from entering the school compound. Secondly, we should ensure that the teachers are disciplined, because we have teenagers who are full grown or matured, and if the teachers are not disciplined they may have affairs with these girls.* **(Principal, JSS, Northern province)**

3. Do pupils understand what constitutes violence in school and know the potential mechanisms to report this?

Three-quarters of pupils (78 per cent) say they understand what violence in school is. However, most pupils appear to be aware of the meaning of sexual and psychological abuse while understanding of physical violence is limited.[8] Figure 3 summarises pupils' ability able to recognise different types of violence in school. The majority of pupils were able to correctly identify an example of sexual abuse and an example of verbal abuse from teachers. Understanding of physical violence was much lower, with only 40 per cent of pupils able to recognise that a teacher canning/flogging a pupil counts as violence. Less than one in three pupils (30 per cent) could correctly identify all three categories of violence, suggesting that there is scope to improve pupils' understanding of what constitutes abuse. This is especially so for physical abuse and corporal punishment – with the message of zero tolerance for this in schools.

Figure 3: Pupils' understanding of different type of violence in school

- Flogging: 40%
- Sex for grades: 90%
- Humiliating language: 74%
- All three actions: 30%

Example of teachers' action

Source: LASS survey 2021.

Understanding of the different types of violence in school varies by location and wealth status of pupils. For example, 98 per cent of pupils from the Western province, and 92 per cent of the richest pupils, knew that sex-for-grades is an example of sexual abuse. In contrast, the same groups of children were much less likely (28 per cent and 32 per cent respectively) to correctly identify canning as an example of violence compared with the national average of 40 per cent. Knowledge of canning or flogging as a violent practice was relatively high in the North West (64 per cent) and East (49 per cent), though it was unclear what was driving the difference in understanding relative to other provinces. On the other hand, pupils living in the Northern province were far less likely to recognise sexual violence (74 percent) relative to the national average of 90 per cent.

In addition, most pupils know where to potentially report incidents of violence, especially via school-based reporting mechanisms. Nearly all (98 per cent) pupils[8] were able to state at least one legitimate violence reporting mechanism in or around schools. Figure 4 shows the breakdown by type of reporting mechanism identified by pupils. Qualitative findings show that pupils usually expressed preference to report day to day issues (like fighting, minor theft, damage of property) in-person to trusted individuals in schools, however they preferred anonymity and more protected reporting channels for more complicated concerns (like sexual abuse, bribery or other serious allegations against teachers like corporal punishment). While pupils could easily approach school principals or mentors for the former, access to the latter was complicated by concerns around availability and confidentiality of in-school reporting mechanisms. These are discussed more fully below.

8 All statistics in this section on awareness of types of violence and reporting mechanisms are based on a sub-sample of pupils (78%) who said that they understood what constitutes violence in school. Information is not available from the pupils who said they did not understand this. If all pupils had been asked these questions, the estimates may be higher or lower than those presented.

Figure 4: Pupils' awareness of violence reporting mechanisms

School channels				Institution outside school			Adult outside school	
Principal 69%	Mentor 59%	Suggestion box 16%	Girls and boys club 3%	Family support unit 2%	Community health centre 1%	Police 7%	Household member 20%	Other adult 3%

Source: LASS survey 2021.

Reporting to school principals or to school mentors are by far the most commonly proposed violence reporting channels. As head of the school, the principal was the default route in most (69 per cent) cases. This worked efficiently in cases where the school had a strong principal who was trusted by the children. This was because the principal had direct oversight and authority over pupils and teachers which allowed for quick resolution of concerns. The principal was also normally present in schools, so children could have easy access and there was mention of some principals facilitating this through operating an 'open door policy'. Where issues required escalation to parents, the police or outside authorities, this was normally also done by the principal. However, there was little scope for anonymity in reporting to the principal and some pupil were afraid of reaching out to them directly. In addition, pupils in some schools complained that principals were inclined to side with teachers whenever a concern arose, which left children feeling somewhat powerless.

Mentors (including trusted adults such as guidance counsellors) are identified as an alternative reporting and resolution channel by nearly 60 per cent of pupils, and children are more comfortable reporting to mentors rather than to teachers. Almost all schools (90 per cent) have mentors (discussed further in Section 6). In general, pupils felt that mentors were trusted and accessible, whereas there was a sense that teachers may at times have less authority or interest in resolving pupils' issues. This was also complicated by the fact that teachers were often complicit in some of the types of abuse in schools, including sex or money for grades, corporal punishment and verbal abuse in classrooms.

Less than one in five (16 per cent) pupils say they will use a suggestion box to report violence. This was usually the case for more serious cases of abuse, however there were problems with availability, damage and concerns around preserving anonymity with suggestion boxes. Qualitative evidence from discussions with pupils shows that they prefer to use suggestion boxes to report sexual abuse or complaints against teachers because they did not involve any in-person contact. This facilitated pupils who were shy or did not want to reveal their identities and helped ensure that their 'voices were heard' in cases of abuse they did not wish to speak about directly. As such, one of the common recommendations from pupils to improve the school safety environment was for anonymous suggestion boxes to be provided.

> *In school here we mostly make our reports to the principal because he is the head of the school. Whatever affects us when we tell him, he makes sure he advises those involved to stop … sometimes when you complain the principal will be active then, but as time goes by he tends to forget to take action.* (Female JSS3 pupils, North-Western province)

> *I will also make sure I report to somebody I trust so …I will make sure I report to the principal himself. I won't make those reports to any other teacher because you cannot tell whether the teacher that you are reporting to is also amongst those teachers who are after these girls.* (Male SSS3 pupil, Western province)

> *The doors of our mentors are always open and they are ready to assist us at any time. She will provide menstrual pads to those who have messed up their uniforms… she will also talk to a teacher without the teacher knowing that you made the complaint.* (Female JSS3 pupil, Southern province)

Suggestion box no longer functional

Source: LASS data collection team.

> *The suggestion box is useful because some of us don't have the mind to talk to the teachers. Therefore, it is only through the box we will express our feelings or make our complaint. The one in charge of the box will open it and find ways to settle the issue, and if the complaint is beyond him, he will take it to the principal and they will take action.* (Female JSS3 pupils, Western province)

School level survey data shows that just one in three schools (32 per cent) currently have suggestion boxes.[9] Furthermore, only 9 per cent of schools had placed the suggestion box in a secure location (i.e. where pupils would not be easily seen by teachers or other adults). In most cases, the box was placed outside the principal's office or outside the teachers' staff room which created an element of mistrust and discouraged usage, as pupils felt 'the suggestion box has no privacy as it is supposed to be'. Pupils also mentioned reports being 'traced' and public opening of suggestion boxes with the notes read out openly (or not always anonymously) which went against principles of anonymity. Suggestion boxes had also been left open or broken in a number of schools which led to them being disused over time. This was confirmed by observation.

Box 2: Does being a member of a Girls and Boys club (GBC) help to improve pupil understanding of violence and awareness of violence reporting channels?

One in four pupils (25 per cent) said their school had a GBC or a club with similar features, such as an anti-violence club, and only 8 per cent of pupils have ever attended a GBC meeting. There was no strict entry criteria for membership, although this generally did not cover the entire school population. Less than half (44 per cent) of pupils who had ever attended a GBC meeting reported that safety information was shared via radio recordings in the last meeting.

Although prevalence of GBCs is fairly low, there is some evidence that having ever attended a GBC meeting may contribute to better understanding of violence in school. Approximately 41 per cent of pupils who have ever attended a GBC meeting were able to correctly identify all three types of violence compared with 30 per cent of pupils who have never been to a GBC meeting.

Being a member of a GBC may also help to improve awareness of potential reporting mechanisms for cases of violence in school. Almost all pupils (over 99 per cent) with experience of GBC meetings were able to name at least one reporting channel compared to 98 per cent of those without GBC exposure. This appears to be driven by better knowledge of school reporting channels. For example, awareness of suggestion boxes was much higher for the GBC group than those who have never attended a GBC meeting (30 per cent vs 16 per cent respectively). Similarly, 17 per cent of the GBC group mentioned awareness of talking to a mentor as a potential reporting channel compared with only 7 per cent of other pupils.

Pupils with exposure to GBCs meetings also had comparatively higher actual reporting rates (36 per cent) compared to pupils in general (23 per cent).

Yes, we have a GBC in this school. In some of our sessions, we will listen to the radio and then after that everyone will be asked to share what he or she understands from the radio discussion. They will advise us on our roles and responsibilities in and out of school. It does not take anything special to be a member of the GBC, those who are in charge will go to classes and make announcement asking for those who want to be members of the club. From there those who are interested will be invited to attend meetings. (Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)

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4. How do pupils get information about violence and violence reporting mechanisms?

Within schools, information on safety and violence reporting is shared with pupils mainly through assembly (devotion). School representatives suggested that speaking to a collection of pupils in assembly allowed for widest outreach. Any specific messages were shared with certain groups of pupils through individual follow-up and class-to-class visits. Visitors or organisations external to the school also often used the school assembly to speak to pupils.

Pupils also receive information via school mentors or safety committees. School level survey data showed that 90 per cent of schools had mentors and 71 per cent had designated school safety committees (SSCs). In schools that had appointed mentors or SSCs, they were usually involved in awareness raising and served a dual function as a reporting route for pupils to register concerns. In particular female mentors facilitated girls when it came to speaking about menstrual health issues or other factors they were not comfortable discussing with male staff members. Mentors were at times also involved in sensitising and counselling teachers on their interaction with pupils.

90%
of schools had mentors

71%
had school safety committees

One of our roles as mentors is to ensure that there is zero tolerance for violence. We also have the live radio player that we use to sensitize pupils in relation to issues around violence. If they encounter any form of violence, whether physical, emotional or even sexual violence, they should report such issues to us. (School mentor, SSS, North-Western Province)

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9   Leh Wi Lan and School Quality Assurance Officers' monitoring data suggests higher prevalence of suggestion boxes in schools (over 80 per cent). It will be useful to look into the discrepancy in findings.

About a third of schools (30 per cent) have painted murals on the school building as a means of sharing information about violence in school. Most murals (93 per cent) displayed information about at least one school-based reporting channels. Schools reported using songs, making references during devotion, or painting murals enroute to school toilets to refresh content in pupils' minds. However, there was some evidence that pupils 'just pass' by the murals without internalising any of the information, and observation showed problems with the visibility of content in about 15 per cent of murals. These were usually problems with fading and the quality of printing (stencilling) of the mural.

Mural painted on school wall
Source: LASS data collection team.

They write on the walls to tell you what you should do… that these are the type of bad things that can happen to children… the Principal and Vice principal are in this school to deal with bad things. (Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)

85 per cent of principals stated that their school had a Teacher Learning Circle (TLC), however they have more of a pedagogical focus in schools. TLCs were generally active in schools with 28 per cent of TLCs having met in the previous two weeks and a further 49 per cent having met during the current term. Discussions with school representatives suggested that these TLCs were mainly concerned with improvements in teaching and pedagogical support to teachers, and had limited role in directly raising awareness on safety or implementing reporting structures in schools.

Pupils also receive information on safety and violence reporting from external actors who visit the school, and via radio and WhatsApp messages. School level respondents in the South, West and North Western region reported awareness raising efforts by organisations, including NGOs, police and FSU, and community health representatives who visited schools to speak to pupils about certain topics.

The sister from the health centre would normally have health talks with the girls, and for those are interested, provide them with contraceptives. As for the FSU, we are all part of trainings that we normally attend in Port Loko on handling issues that affect girls. (Principal, SSS, North-Western province)

Some private and mission schools had set up WhatsApp channels to share content with their pupils and in a few cases pupils also reported hearing about safety messaging via radio programmes. Evidence from last year's Back to School (2020) study found that a about a third (29 per cent) of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils had access to a radio at their homes. The relatively low penetration rates suggests that radio messaging may not be the main sensitisation tool, but it can serve as a useful supplementary channel.
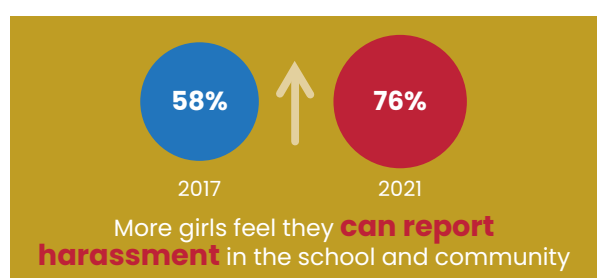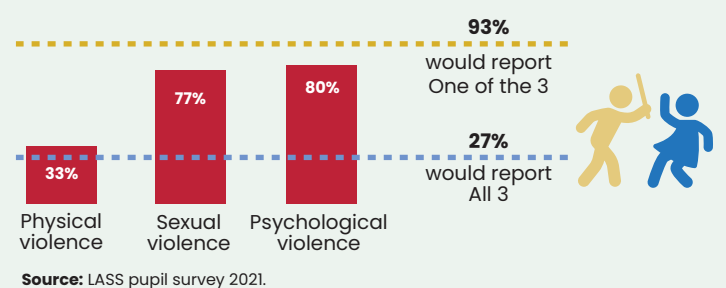
5. What do pupils do when they feel unsafe or witness incidences of violence in school? What share of pupils have ever reported violence?

Discussions with pupils, school and ministry representatives suggest that children are increasingly inclined to report abuse because they have more awareness and there are also more structures to report violence in and around schools. Pupils felt it was 'their right' to report as this would help to address the issues and also prevent them from happening in the future. In addition, for some pupils, especially girls, reporting incidents of violence allowed them an alternative to direct confrontations with the perpetrators themselves.

Consistent with this, three quarters of girls (76 per cent) said there was someone in the school or community to whom they could report instances of harassment, which has increased from 58 per cent in 2017.

However, pupils (boys and girls) are much more inclined to report cases of sexual or psychological violence, than physical violence. This is shown in Figure 5 and is likely related to pupils' relatively poor understanding of physical abuse compared to the other two types as discussed in Section 3. When presented with an example of each of the three types of violence, only 27 per cent of pupils said that they would report all three incidents if they saw them happening.

Figure 5: Proportion of pupils who would report incidents of violence in school

93% would report One of the 3

33% Physical violence

77% Sexual violence

80% Psychological violence

27% would report All 3

Source: LASS pupil survey 2021.

58% (2017) → 76% (2021)
More girls feel they **can report harassment** in the school and community

Our children are more likely now to report issues of school safety than before, because some are listening to what the teachers, mentors, and mothers are telling them. This is an improvement, because previously, for example, they would think that reporting a teacher is a crime and whatever the teacher does, one should bear with it. (KII District Official, Karene)

Furthermore, when asked about their own reporting experience, just over one in five pupils (23 per cent) have ever reported an incident of violence in school, and 90 per cent of them used a school-based channel to do so. This is in line with the preferred reporting routes in Figure 4. Boys were much more likely to have ever reported a case of violence in school compared to girls and there were also regional differences in actual reporting rates. Nearly one in three boys (29 per cent) of boys had ever reported a case of violence compared to one in five (18 per cent) girls. Pupils living in the Southern regions also had above average reporting rates (37 per cent compared to 23 per cent overall) while those from the Western region were far less likely than average to have ever reported (18 per cent).

23% of pupils have ever reported violence in school

1 in **3** boys and **1** in **5** girls have reported a case of violence

These reporting rates are likely to underestimate actual levels of violence as qualitative evidence shows children are sometimes afraid of reporting for risk of exposure or retribution, especially in cases where teachers are involved.

"We are not comfortable to make report in school because if your teacher is angry at you for no good reason, and you make that report to the Principal, then he will investigate the matter, but after investigation the student will be the one who is 'wrong'. The student has no right in this school, the teacher you report will certainly mark you X in his subject and you will never pass his subject." *(Male SSS3 pupil, North-Western province)*

This was particularly a concern for in-person violence reporting as children reported feeling 'shy' or 'afraid' or 'ashamed' in narrating incidents of abuse they have suffered. Furthermore, there was mixed feedback in terms of how confident children were of their report being taken seriously, which affected whether or not they made the report in the first place. Pupils in some schools complained that school administrations treat reports frivolously, while others feared they would be punished or face consequences especially where they complained against a teacher. Although there was mistrust around using suggestion boxes, qualitative evidence from discussions with pupils in the South shows that they often had at least some reporting systems available to them in the wider school and community, which may explain the higher than average reporting rates in the province. In terms of reporting violence outside of schools, both pupil and CTA respondents suggested that poverty and influence were often barriers to justice being served.

6. What systems do schools have in place for responding to reports of violence, identifying potential safety concerns and violence prevention?

Just over half of schools (57 per cent) have the MBSSE Reducing Violence in Schools (RVS) Guide.[10] The RVS Guide is practical manual for schools that describes the safety systems that should be in place, as well as strategies for improving violence awareness, prevention, reporting and response in schools. Two core features of this system are appointing mentors (at least one of each sex) for pupils to report issues to confidentially, and having an active SSC in place to regularly respond to reported incidents.

57% of schools have the MBSSE RVS Guide

Almost all schools (90 per cent) have mentors, but male mentors are far more common than female mentors which may reduce the chances of girls reporting incidents of violence. 73 per cent of schools that had a mentor had appointed at least one female in the role, while 97 per cent of schools had male mentor(s). This reflects larger disparities in the gender composition of teaching staff in Sierra Leone's schools. The LASS survey found that only 4 per cent of school principals and just over one in eight teachers (14 per cent) were female. This reflects mixed movement in gender composition of school staff compared to pre-COVID levels (2019) where more principals (7 per cent) and less teachers (5 per cent) were female.[11] Nonetheless, it shows that if pupils prefer to report to trusted adults of the same sex in school, then girls have far less choice than boys. Female mentors are also likely to better understand gender violence and barriers for girls in the local context and the disparity in numbers vis male mentors may limit advocacy for change at the school level.

SSCs are in place in the majority of schools (71 per cent), but most are not active enough or structured properly to fulfil their intended role. Only one in five SSCs (22 per cent) had met in the last two weeks, and 15 per cent of SSCs had never met at all. Given the SSC's intended role of reviewing and responding to violence reports and other safety matters on a weekly basis, most SSCs are not active enough to do this. Furthermore, only one in ten SSCs (11 per cent) included the minimum prescribed participants as per the RVS Guide,[12] while many included members of the CTA (29 per cent) and SSCs in a minority of school (9 per cent) included pupils. Qualitative evidence confirmed that SSCs currently played a fairly small and generic safety role in schools with members of the SSC involved in sensitising pupils, counselling and more reactive handling of issues that affect pupils. Disciplinary committees in schools were often reported to have more direct mandate to investigate reports and address issues. This suggests that they could benefit from being included in more formal training on the content of the RVS Guide and survivor-centred approaches disseminated at the school level.

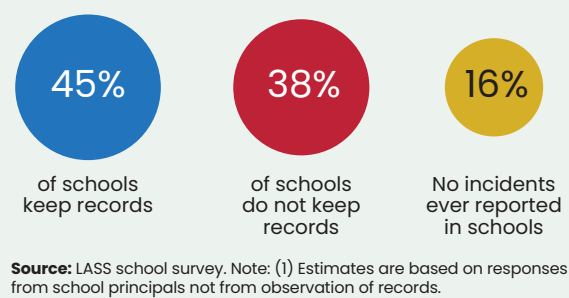10 The RVS Guide was distributed to all government JSS in February 2019 and SSS in September 2019.
11 Leh Wi Lan: SGLA III (2019) findings.
12 The RVS Guide (page 15) states that SSCs should comprise the principal, vice principal, male and female mentors, and guidance counsellor.

Comprehensive school safety assessments are supposed to be conducted at least once per academic year, but only 56 per cent of schools have completed such an exercise since September 2020. The RVS Guide states that the team conducting the assessment should include teachers and pupils for a more inclusive review, but survey findings show that pupil participation was rare (6 per cent of assessments). Almost all schools (98 per cent) who had conducted a safety assessment had identified priorities for strengthening school safety, and improving the school environment (for example fencing or fixing infrastructure)[13] was by far the mostly commonly reported. This is in line with qualitative evidence on perceptions of the ideal safe school (see Box 1). Other priorities from the assessments conducted included enhancing violence awareness among pupils or teachers.

Nearly half of all safety issues get documented in a formal manner at the schools level, however there is scope for improvement, including maintaining a centralised database to collate incidents of violence and referral within the MBSSE. 45 per cent of principals said that they maintained a documented list (such as a log or a register) of safety issues reported in the school. A further 16 per cent explained that they did not keep a record because no cases had ever been reported. As such, nearly 40 per cent of schools do not currently maintain a written record of safety incidents. Interviews at the district level and with MBBSE staff also revealed that data on violence in schools was not usually collected via formal data entry processes, rather it was based on more ad hoc and narrative monitoring reports by field officers.

Figure 6: School record keeping of incidents of violence in school

45%	38%	16%
of schools keep records	of schools do not keep records	No incidents ever reported in schools

Source: LASS school survey. Note: (1) Estimates are based on responses from school principals not from observation of records.

> *We record mostly the major issues like issues that reach the FSU or other serious issues. For the bulk of the minor complaints, we do not normally record them, sometimes we just settle them here in school or call the parents and settle it.* (Principal, SSS, North-Western province)

7. What support facilities are available to pupils outside of schools for reporting incidents of violence? What is the feedback on these community support systems?

When it comes to community reporting and referral support systems, pupils are most inclined to share concerns with their parents and the local community chief or authority, often as an intermediary channel before reporting to more formal institutions like the police. This is in line with survey findings on pupil awareness of different reporting systems in Figure 4. Pupils trusted their parents, and sometimes involved them to act as a pressure tactic for action within schools, especially when the school administration was being slow in handling issues. Similarly, both pupils and CTA respondents said it was common to report to the community chief for recourse before going to the police or courts, because s/he was usually seen as a trusted symbol of authority and dispute resolution within the community. In some communities however, power, rank and relations were reported to interfere with this, which was challenging for pupils.

Serious cases of abuse are commonly reported to the police because they are seen as having ultimate authority to investigate matters and provide protection. Pupils saw the role of the police to 'protect us from bad things'. It was also common to involve the police when an issue needed escalation or was not being pursued adequately by other forums. In a small number of instances, there were reports of involving courts. However, again some pupils and CTA representatives expressed reservations about bribery and corruption in dealing with these institutions. There were complaints of cases often being co-opted where the accused had more money or authority than the victim. Pupils in some schools also expressed fear of retribution when issues were taken to the police because of the level of escalation it involved. This was especially so in schools where the school administrations did not appreciate issues being reported publicly (to the police) before chance for internal resolution.

> *In the community, I mostly tell my mother about issues that makes me feel unsafe. For instances, if we are told to pay some amount of money in school, and we have been told by the government not to pay for anything in school because it is free education, then I will report such matter to my mother. We also tell our parents if the teachers are not teaching us in school because they are spending a lot on us, so they have the right to know.* (Male SSS3 pupils, North-Western province)

> *The junior school principal usually tells us that when a teacher does something to you, you should not forward that to your parents, you should first talk to them in school, if they cannot handle that they will send you to your parents…if you go straight to your parents and your parents go the police and report, then the school with not involve in that matter because you have disrespected them.* (Female SSS3 pupils, Eastern province)

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13 This includes school facilities and the access route pupils use from their homes to school.

Awareness of Family Support Units (FSUs) is low among pupils and has not improved since last year. Just under 4 in 10 pupils (38 per cent) know where their nearest FSU is. FSUs were often seen as separate from the police, and dealt with serious family matters and cases of gender-based violence for women and girls. This was confirmed in responses from both pupils and school/community representatives. The role of the FSU was to register and investigate reports, as well as to support the onward process of justice by providing evidence and apprehending suspects. FSU members were also reported to have visited several schools, particularly in the Southern and North-Western province, to raise awareness and sensitise children on how to report issues of violence and abuse. This was confirmed in discussion with an FSU Inspector in the North-West as part of the 'inter-sectoral and coordinated approach with the education sector'. However, one of the challenges with reporting to the FSUs was that concerned parties normally reached a settlement before the full investigation was complete and justice had been served.

> *A friend of mine was being blackmailed on social media, so she went to the FSU to report. There was an IT specialist there and the individual who did the act was traced and caught. This gave us confidence in them.*
> *(Male SSS3 pupil, Southern province)*

4 in **10** pupils know their nearest FSU

2 in **3** pupils know their nearest CHC
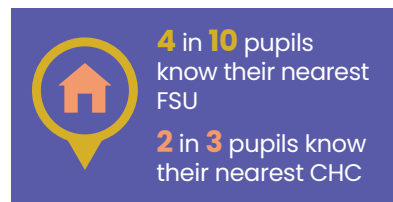
A significant proportion of pupils are aware of their local Community Health Centre (CHCs) and use them to report illness and/or sexual health issues or concerns. This included getting treatment for general sickness and accidents, follow-up on the use of contraceptives, and for examination in instances of rape where findings got escalated to the FSU. Like the FSU, CHC representatives visited schools to conduct awareness raising sessions, especially when it came to health and sexuality for girls. Survey data confirms that 65 per cent of pupils know the location of their nearest CHC and 64 per cent of these pupils have visited to report some issue. Both figures are very similar to last year's results. However, qualitative evidence showed that it was challenging for poorer pupils to get service at CHCs because treatment was often not free. CHCs also did not exist in all communities, especially for schools in smaller localities.

> *If they rape your child, you will go to the health centre. You know that the nurses there will be doing the checking.*
> *(Female JSS3 pupil, Northern province)*

Evidence on hotlines suggest that they have the potential to be a useful channel for violence reporting by pupils, however current knowledge and usage is limited. One in five pupils (22 per cent) was aware of hotlines for reporting violence, and only 18 per cent and 3 per cent of this group of pupils could recall the Government of Sierra Leone violence hotlines 8060 and 116 respectively. Pupils made reference to hearing about these via radio or during school assembly. Pupils more commonly mentioned the national anti-corruption hotline (515) to report instances of bribery in schools or teachers taking money from pupils.

> *About incident of violence, we normally hear about numbers [hotlines] on radios. Like the Ministry of Education, they gave us their own number ... 8060 for exam malpractice, violence and other things.* *(Male SSS3 pupil, Southern province)*

1 in **5** pupils was aware of hotlines for reporting violence

One Stop Centres and Rainbow centres are not commonly known to pupils, nor used as regular reporting channels outside of schools. Only 11 per cent of pupils were aware of the location of either of these centres. One Stop Centres have been initiated by the Ministry of Social Welfare for reporting of cases and provision of immediate care. However, limited pupil and CTA knowledge of their existence and functions suggest that they are not very well integrated with schools or pupil's everyday experiences. Rainbow centres have a similar role to One Stop Centres, but they are only available at district headquarter level in select locations. This was apparent in discussion with respondents, especially pupils, who had limited knowledge of the support they provide as a violence reporting system. CTA respondents were more aware of Rainbow Centres particularly in the Eastern, Northern and Western Province.

Several NGOs and international organisations are also working to support child safety in communities, however their efforts are usually uncoordinated, with multiple actors following separate agendas across Sierra Leone. In discussion, respondents named various organisations working in different locations, with multiple partners reportedly working especially in the South, North and North-West. In addition to sensitisation in schools, these external institutions had a role in vilolence reporting and dispute resolution. Some NGOs had shared reporting hotlines with pupils, while others offered shelter and/or first aid to victims of abuse, especially of gender-based violence. There was also reference of non-governmental bodies working with pupils and their families to escalate issues to relevant authorities for resolution. Respondents in general appreciated the promptness of action by NGOs and international organisations, as well as their comprehensive management of situations. One key informant also suggested that such organisations at times had better on ground presence than government bodies which makes access easier for people.

> *People are going to [NGO] frequently to make reports because, sometimes there are people who want to use violence against those they have wronged, and [NGO] will act fast upon receiving the report. The benefit people gain from going to these places are, their cases are settled are dealt with in the right ways..* *(Male SSS3 pupil, Northern province)*

8. Concluding remarks and recommendations

The findings of the LASS study come as a reminder of the endemic nature of violence and sexual abuse in and around schools in Sierra Leone. Children in the country face multiple challenges to their safety and well-being, and COVID-19 related school closures increased the risk of exploitation and abuse for many. The reopening of schools has offered some return to 'normal', but this itself poses a separate set of issues for children and those responsible for their well-being. The MBSSE is rolling out plans to support all children, especially girls and children with disabilities, to be in school safely in line with its Radical Inclusion policy, guidelines on Reducing Violence in Schools, revised National Referral Protocols (NRP) for gender-based violence and recent legislation around use of corporal punishment in schools. The LASS study findings suggest that government and schools need to continue to engage partners and a wider coalition of players in the community to address safety issues and ensure adequate referral and response systems are accessible to all children. In particular, it identifies the following key themes for consideration in this regard:

- **The perceived risk of sexual violence in school is high and may have increased since 2017.** More girls report that sexual violence takes place in their schools in 2021 than in 2017. This suggests an upward trend in the perceived risk of sexual abuse. Of course, it is also possible that girls are more able to recognise abuse and report it in 2021, but the LASS study does not have comparable data to verify this.

- **There is scope for improvement in pupils' awareness on what violence is, how it operates and how to prevent it in school, especially in relation to physical abuse.** Awareness of sexual and psychological abuse is fairly high, but a significant majority of pupils do not recognise corporal punishment as a type of violence. The reflects traditional norms around the 'acceptability' of physical abuse in schools and communities.

- **Most schools have some form of violence reporting system. However, not all of these offer safe and confidential reporting channels to pupils and there is scope for better integration into existing school structures.** The LASS study found evidence of problems with some reporting routes that exist in principle but lose certain core aspects of their functionality in practice. This leads to concerns of leakage and backlash, and pupils not being comfortable using them. In addition, in adopting new directives and recommended structures on safety, schools now at times have several systems, in partial operation, for similar functions.

- **Teachers are central to the problem, as well as solutions, to safeguarding pupils in schools.** Pupils and CTA respondents agreed on the key role teachers play in making the school environment safer given their contact with pupils – both in terms of recognising and understanding violence and in terms of reporting and referral systems. It is a positive sign that some teacher training on recognising violence and supporting victims of violence has taken place since schools re-opened.

- **Cases of violence within schools and the education system are not typically reported to a centralised case management system.** Some degree of formal recording of safety incidents takes place at the school level, but this is not always managed outside of school, especially when it involves teachers. There is scope for improvement, including coordinating data vertically (between schools and the MBSSE) and horizontally (between the MBSSE, other government departments, partners, and non-governmental organisations).

Based on these, the MBSSE and its partners could consider the following recommendations:

1. Consultative and inclusive school safety mapping and planning – that invites women and men, boys and girls, community and traditional/religious leaders, and representatives of marginalised groups (e.g., children with disabilities) to contribute to discussing solutions and norm change.

2. Continuous sensitisation is required around understanding, recognising and reporting physical abuse and changing the narrative around corporal punishment – with the message of zero tolerance for this in schools. This is important for pupils, teachers, parents, and wider community members. The Anti-corporal Punishment Initiative is a key step, but this requires concerted effort to ensure acceptability at various levels.

3. Teachers need a sustained period of continuous professional development to use positive discipline strategies in school. Advocacy with parents and communities to demand alternative disciplining strategies can also help to create accountability to keep the new behaviours in place.

4. Written codes of conduct should be agreed annually and visible to teachers and pupils in all schools, with strict monitoring by the school authorities and Teaching Service Commission (TSC) to ensure implementation. Consequences for non-compliance should be clear and dealt with quickly and seriously, with removal from the profession where necessary.

5. Safety material and resources should be made more widely accessible to pupils via digitisation of content (e.g., for sharing on radio/WhatsApp), as well as through alternative platforms available in schools (e.g., via assembly, other pupil-led groups, mentors etc).

6. School infrastructural improvements are important for improving school safety, in particular, better fencing, classrooms, access routes and physical WASH facilities. The needs of girls and pupils with disabilities should be considered, as these groups have most to gain in terms of feeling safer.

7. Schools should be supported to access the digital version of the RVS Guide available on the MBSSE website. All school leaders, teachers and staff should be given training as first responders of violence and understand how to report and refer cases in a survivor centred way.

8. Confidentiality of reporting systems within schools and communities is needed to encourage pupils to report instances of abuse. The fine balance between confidential data management vs effective reporting and referral should be managed to limit hiding of incidents and reports while also building trust of pupils.

9. New safety structures in schools should be better integrated, or adapted, into current structures to ensure alignment and efficiency without duplication. For example, existing disciplinary committees, counsellors, and anti-violence clubs in schools will benefit from more formal training on the content of the RVS Guide and survivor-centred approaches. As well as clearly defining the differences in their functions and how they can operate together to reduce violence in school.

10. The role of FSUs and One Stop/Rainbow Centres should be defined and communicated more broadly in communities, not just for reporting but also as frontline systems for providing necessary supportive care to victims of abuse. Where possible visits from service providers should be done to help build awareness and links with schools.

11. Introduction of the revised NRP for gender-based violence should help strengthen reporting and referrals beyond school. All education stakeholders (MBSSE, TSC, school board of governors, CTAs, principals, teachers, pupils, parents) should receive training and guidance on their roles and responsibilities in implementing the NRP, including better recording of incidents and referral to service providers outside of school.

12. There is need to strengthen the National Committee on Gender-based Violence (NAC – GBV) structures at all levels to enable better collaboration and coordination of the work of various actors working to improve safeguarding of children in Sierra Leone – both in terms of inter-governmental relations and initiatives, as well as in the developmental space with partners and NGOs.

About the project and contact details

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