Leh Wi Lan
Learning and School Safety (LASS) Study 2022

Briefing note 2: March 2023

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 study 2022 (LASS II)

"We will stop at nothing till every boy and every girl can access education and stay safely at school. Nothing more, nothing less."

Dr David Moinina Sengeh, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education – February 2023).[1]

In recent years, Sierra Leone has been spearheading efforts to create a radically inclusive education system where all children – regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, location, sex, gender, or parenting status, are able to live and learn in safety and dignity. Violence against children can take many forms (physical, sexual, psychological)[2] and can occur both in schools and around schools (e.g. on the way to school, in communities, or at home). A 2021 study by the Centre for Global Development drawing on household survey data showed 28.8 per cent of girls aged 15-19 across sub-Saharan Africa report having experienced physical or sexual violence previously.[3] The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the risks children, especially girls, face in their homes and communities. There is substantial evidence that unwanted violence and abuse not only violates children's rights, but also impedes the ability of both girls and boys to learn and thrive within school.

The UK aid funded Leh Wi Lan programme has been supporting the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) in Sierra Leone with robust data on school safety and violence reporting through the Learning and School Safety (LASS) studies.[4] Last year's LASS 2021 study served as a reminder of the multiple challenges to children's safety and well-being, with the perceived risk of sexual violence potentially increasing since 2017. It highlighted scope to improve pupils' awareness on what constitutes violence, especially in relation to physical abuse; and to ensure the available violence reporting systems in and around schools are safe, accessible and confidential. Evidence was also presented on the key role of school-level actors: principals, teachers, mentors, other pupils – both in perpetuating the problems, as well as providing solutions to pupils safety in schools.

One year on, the LASS II (2022) study uses quantitative evidence[8] to track trends in pupil learning, safety and violence from reporting systems across secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Details of the LASS II (2022) study design are shown below.

Nationally representative sample of 150 secondary schools and 1200 pupils (600 girls and 600 boys)[5] selected from the Annual School Census 2021 using stratified two-stage sample design

Eight JSS3 or SSS3 pupils (4 girls and 4 boys)[6] within each school tested on English and maths at the end of first term

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 1 hour

44 questions per test covering both English and maths[7]

150 school principals interviewed for School checklist (including collection of observational data)

Background questions on pupil characteristics: gender, disability, home language, household assets

Questions on awareness of violence and violence reporting systems in and around schools for pupils and principals

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1   Video address to World Government Summit, 13-15 February 2023.
2   The MBSSE's description of the various categories of school related violence can be accessed at https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GUIDE-FOR-REDUCING-VIOLENCE-IN-SCHOOLS-.pdf. See pp 10-12.
3   Evans et al. (2021) 'Adolescent Girls' Safety In and Out of School'. Study data excludes Sierra Leone.
4   Interested readers can access the LASS (2021) results on school safety, and previous years' (2017-2020) Secondary Grade Learning Assessment reports on the status of children's learning and wellbeing in Sierra Leone on https://mbsse.gov.sl/leh-wi-lan/
5   590 girls and 584 boys in the achieved sample.
6   JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for BECE and WASSCE respectively. In single sex schools, all eight pupils were boys or girls.
7   The tests used were designed for Sierra Leone in 2017 and aim to provide information complementary to Sierra Leoneâ·Žs extensive examination system. They focus on learning outcomes linked to the curriculum rather than on curriculum content coverage per se. Since 2020, two of the originally developed five test booklets have been used, and assigned randomly to pupils instead of routing via a filter form.
8   Last year's LASS (2021) study on the other hand was a mixed-method study, providing both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The sample size was also larger (250 schools) to allow regional level estimations

This briefing note provides evidence to programme and policy stakeholders to support all children, especially girls and children with disabilities, to be in school safe and thriving, by answering six key questions:[9]

🔑 Key research questions

1   How safe do pupils feel in and around school? Are safety risks perceived to be different for different groups of pupils?

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

3   What do pupils do when they feel unsafe or witness incidences of violence? Are pupils using the available reporting systems?

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

5   To what extent have the MBSSE's recent school safety policies been understood and implemented at school level? In particular, the National Referral Protocol and the Corporal Punishment Initiative.

6   What support facilities are available to pupils outside of school for violence reporting and referral?

Note to readers: In the findings which follow, increases, or decreases in the value of indicators between 2021 and 2022 are only discussed where these are statistically significant.[10]

2 How safe do pupils feel in and around school?

Responses from pupils, and to some extent principals, confirm that violence in school is common in Sierra Leone, but prevalence has not worsened since last year. Pupils are most likely to agree that physical violence takes place in their school, but sexual violence and psychological violence are pervasive too. Trend information is available from girls who were asked the same questions last year about sexual and psychological abuse, and their views suggest that the prevalence of both remain high but have not worsened.

The key results covering each type of violence are discussed in turn below, followed by more general findings on how safe different groups of pupils are perceived to be in school.

Two in three pupils, and one in four principals admitted that corporal punishment takes place in schools, suggesting that the MBSSE's recent anti-corporal punishment initiative is yet to be fully understood and enforced. Following preliminary insights from last year, the LASS 2022 study looked at corporal punishment in more detail. Corporal punishment was found to be a widespread practice in schools with 66% of pupils, both boys and girls, saying that staff members use physical punishments in their school. Just over a quarter of principals (26%) agree that this happens in schools in their local community. Principals were also asked about the MBSSE's anti-corporal punishment initiative (see **Figure 1**), and while the large majority of principals are aware of the initiative (92%), their responses reveal barriers in terms of understanding and practical implementation. For instance, 16% of principals don't understand that the anti-corporal punishment initiative prohibits all types of corporal punishment regardless of the situation. Likewise, when asked about whether teachers in their school use corporal punishment some or all the time, one in three principals (30%) admitted that this happens. Physical violence was also seen to be commonly perpetrated amongst pupils by peers, with 59% of boys agreeing that they are physically harassed (like getting into fights or being hit) by other pupils at school.[11]

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9   The pupil learning results are discussed in LASS 2022 Briefing Note (1) Status of pupil learning outcomes in junior and senior secondary schools two years on from school closures in Sierra Leone.
10 In this study statistical significance was tested at 90% confidence or above.
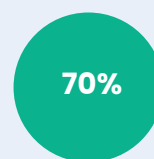11 The LASS 2022 study asked boys about physical harassment from other pupils in their school. Girls were not asked this.

Figure 1: Awareness of Anti-Corporal Punishment (CP) Initiative in schools

Proportion of secondary school principals
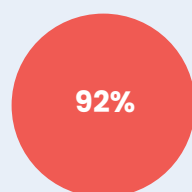
92%
Aware of
CP initiative

75%
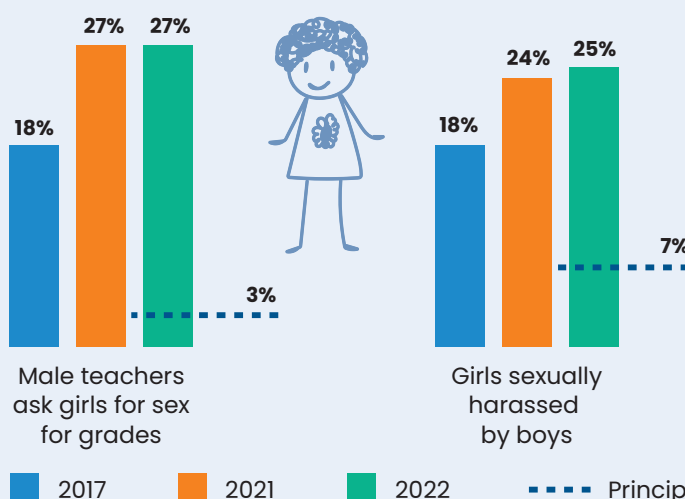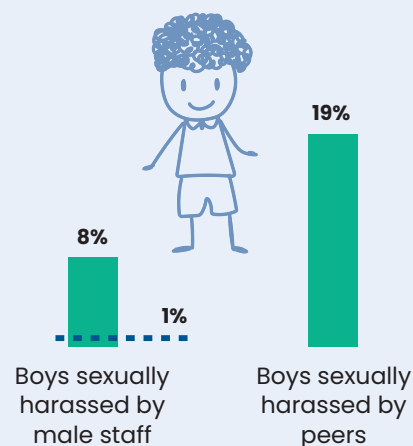Aware and understand
CP is prohibited

70%
Aware and says
no teachers use CP
in their school

Source: LASS II survey 2022

Sexual violence against girls in schools has remained stable and sizeable, but boys are victims of sexual abuse in schools too. Like last year's findings, one in four girls agreed that sexual abuse of girls by male staff, and by male peers (boys), takes place in their school (**Figure 2**). Teachers demanding sexual favours from girls in return for good grades was a particularly prevalent form of abuse with 27% of girls reporting that this occurs. The LASS 2022 study also asked boys about sexual violence for the first time. Although the proportions are lower than girls, it is clear that boys are also victims of sexual violence in school, with 8% of boys agreeing that staff sexually abuse boys, while an even higher share (19%) said that the sexual harassment was instigated by other pupils.
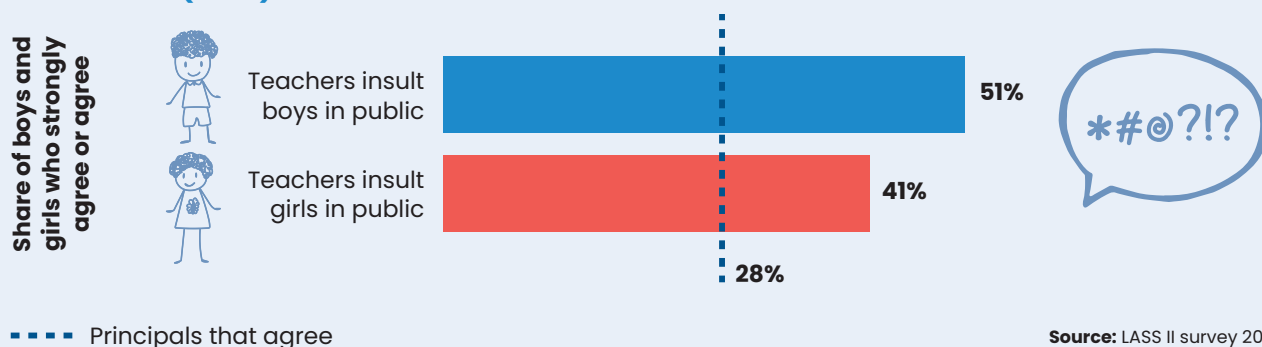
Figure 2: Girls' and Boys' perception of whether sexual harassment by male staff and pupils takes place in their school

Share of girls who strongly agree or agree

Male teachers ask girls for sex for grades: 18% (2017), 27% (2021), 27% (2022), 3% (Principals that agree)

Girls sexually harassed by boys: 18% (2017), 24% (2021), 25% (2022), 7% (Principals that agree)

Share of boys who strongly agree or agree

Boys sexually harassed by male staff: 8% (2022), 1% (Principals that agree)

Boys sexually harassed by peers: 19% (2022)

2017 2021 2022 ---- Principals that agree

Source: LASS II survey 2022

Principals under-report the incidence of sexual violence against girls and boys compared to pupils, and especially if teachers are involved. When reflecting on schools in their local community, only a very small share of principals (dotted lines in **Figure 2**) agreed that pupils suffer sexual abuse by school staff (3% for girls and 1% for boys), while a slightly higher share (7%) admitted that girls are sexually harassed by boy pupils. Given the safeguarding role that principals are supposed to play to protect children against violence, it is perhaps to be expected that many principals would be reluctant to report frankly on this topic.
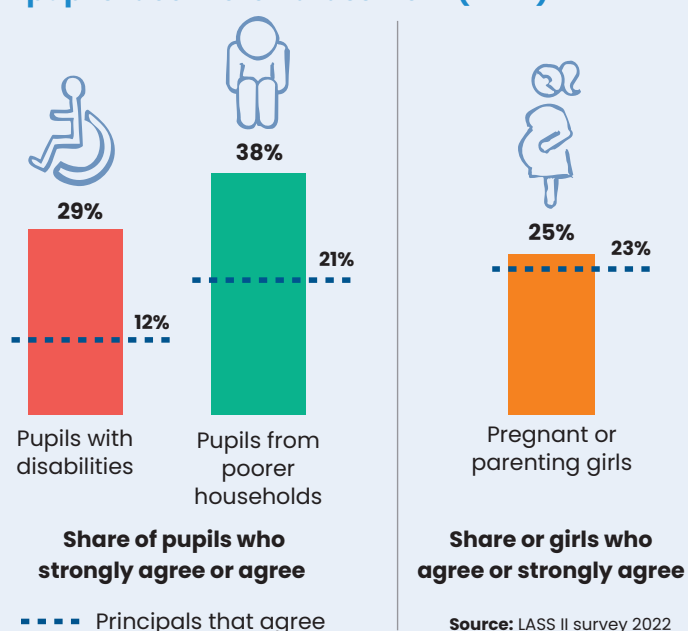
Psychological or verbal abuse from teachers is also common in schools with more than 40% of girls and 50% of boys confirming that teachers insult them in public (**Figure 3**). A similar proportion of girls had affirmed this last year, suggesting there hasn't been much improvement. This was corroborated to some extent by principals as close to 30% agreed that this type of verbal harassment by teachers happens in schools in the local community. Typical examples of this type of humiliation came up in the qualitative research last year, where pupils talked about being called 'stupid' by their teachers during class and being made fun of for making mistakes.

Figure 3: Girls' and Boys' perception of whether psychological abuse by teachers takes place in their school (2022)

Share of boys and girls who strongly agree or agree

Teachers insult boys in public — 51%

Teachers insult girls in public — 41%

28%

- - - Principals that agree

Source: LASS II survey 2022

Verbal abuse from other pupils also appears to be pervasive in schools. More than half (54%) of both boys and girls agreed that verbal harassment of pupils by their peers takes place in their school. This can take the form of name calling or other types of 'provocations'. The LASS 2022 study also found evidence of peer pressure, which is a related form of emotional abuse, particularly for boys to get involved in negative activities, such as drugs or gangs. Boys talked about this issue during the qualitative research last year, which was validated this year with 57% of boys confirming peer pressure for boys to carry out harmful activities happens in their school. Many principals were aware of this type of peer pressure among boys, with 43% of principals acknowledging this harmful practice takes place in schools in the local community.

Figure 4: Pupils perceptions that vulnerable pupils face more harassment (2022)

38%

29%

25%

23%

21%

12%

Pupils with disabilities

Pupils from poorer households

Pregnant or parenting girls

Share of pupils who strongly agree or agree

Share or girls who agree or strongly agree

- - - Principals that agree

Source: LASS II survey 2022

1 in 4 pupils and principals agree that pregnant and parenting girls are targets for abuse

In general, pupils who are vulnerable for different reasons including disability, poverty, pregnancy or motherhood, are more likely to face harassment and abuse in schools than other pupils. Discrimination against pupils from relatively poor households is particularly common as nearly four in ten pupils (38%) agreed that this happens in school. This supports the findings from the qualitative research last year where pupils described examples of verbal abuse based on the condition of their uniforms or shoes. Nearly 30% of pupils confirmed that pupils with disabilities face increased risk of harassment, while 25% said pregnant and parenting girls were also targets for abuse. Both of these groups of vulnerable pupils came up in discussions last year about bullying and verbal abuse, which was linked in some cases to them dropping out of school or shifting to other schools to escape the situation.

Roughly similar proportions of principals confirmed the prevalence of discrimination against pregnant and parenting girls (23% compared to 25% of girls with this view). However, there is less consistency between the views of pupils and principals on the harassment of pupils with disabilities or those from poorer backgrounds. For example, only 12% of principals agree that pupils with disabilities are at greater risk of harassment than other pupils, while 21% believed this to be so for pupils from poorer background (see dotted lines on **Figure 4**). This difference may reflect the fact that Leh Wi Lan has been engaging principals about the inclusion of pregnant and parenting girls in particular, and creating safe spaces for debate, which may have contributed to principals speaking more openly about this issue.

In general, girls and boys have similar perceptions of safety in schools, but principals believe schools to be much safer compared to pupils.
About eight in ten pupils (both boys and girls) said they felt safe in school, whereas principals almost universally viewed schools in their local community as being safe environments for boys (99%) and for girls (96%). Girls' views on the safety of school infrastructure have remained constant since last year with half (51%) believing their school to be well-fenced and about one-quarter (26%) saying that they are afraid of using the toilets. There was also no change in girls' views on the risks of the journey to and from schools, with 35% saying that this was not safe for girls, which is similar to last year. Overall, however, girls perception of the general safety of female pupils in schools has declined by 10 percentage points (from 91% to 81%) since last year. The reasons for this are not evident from the survey results, especially given that girls views on the prevalence of the

Safety risks are not exclusive to girls – children of both genders face sexual and psychological violence in school

different types of violence in school (discussed in the paragraphs above) are very similar to last year. One reason could be greater understanding and confidence on part of girls to recognise and speak about issues affecting their safety in schools.
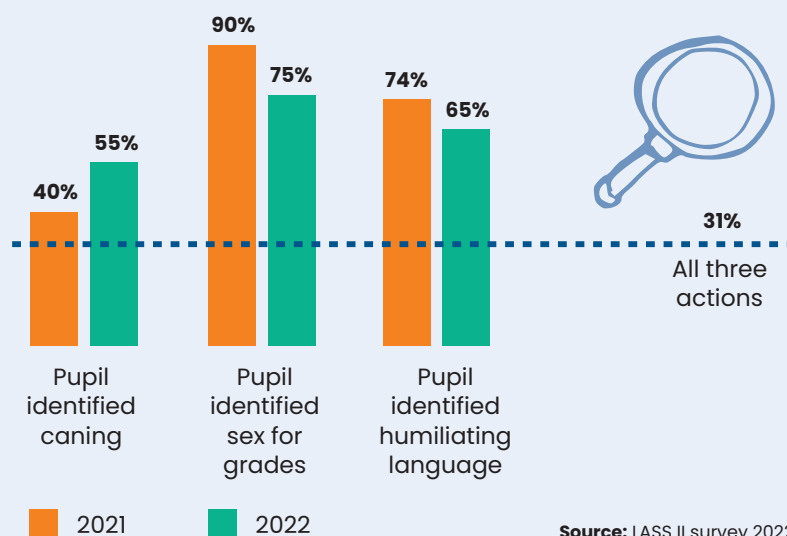
3 Do pupils understand what constitutes violence in school and know the potential mechanisms to report this?

Similar to last year's findings, pupils are most aware of the nature of sexual violence and least able to recognise physical violence.[12] About three-fourths of pupils are able to identify a case of sexual violence (75%) and psychological abuse (65%) but just over half can recognise physical violence (see **Figure 5**). Although the LASS 2022 study was not designed to capture causes, it is possible that the poor awareness of physical violence is linked to the extent to which physical violence is normalised in children's societies and home environments.

Nonetheless, the LASS 2022 study found that pupils' ability to identify physical violence from an example scenario about caning has improved

Figure 5: Pupils' understanding of different types of violence in school

Pupil identified caning: 2021 40%, 2022 55%
Pupil identified sex for grades: 2021 90%, 2022 75%
Pupil identified humiliating language: 2021 74%, 2022 65%
All three actions: 31%

2021   2022

Source: LASS II survey 2022

sharply since last year with 55% of pupils getting this correct compared to 40% before. This is an encouraging trend which should support the MBSSE's anti-corporal punishment drive, as pupils need to know what physical violence is before they can report it. On the other hand, understanding of sexual and psychological violence appears to have fallen since last year. Girls and boys have similar levels of awareness of the different types of violence. Overall, only three in ten pupils (31%) can correctly identify all three types of violence and this situation is unchanged from last year.

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12 Six scenarios were read out to children i.e. one correct and one fake example about each of the 3 types of violence, and they were asked to comment on whether they thought it was an example of violence in school or not.
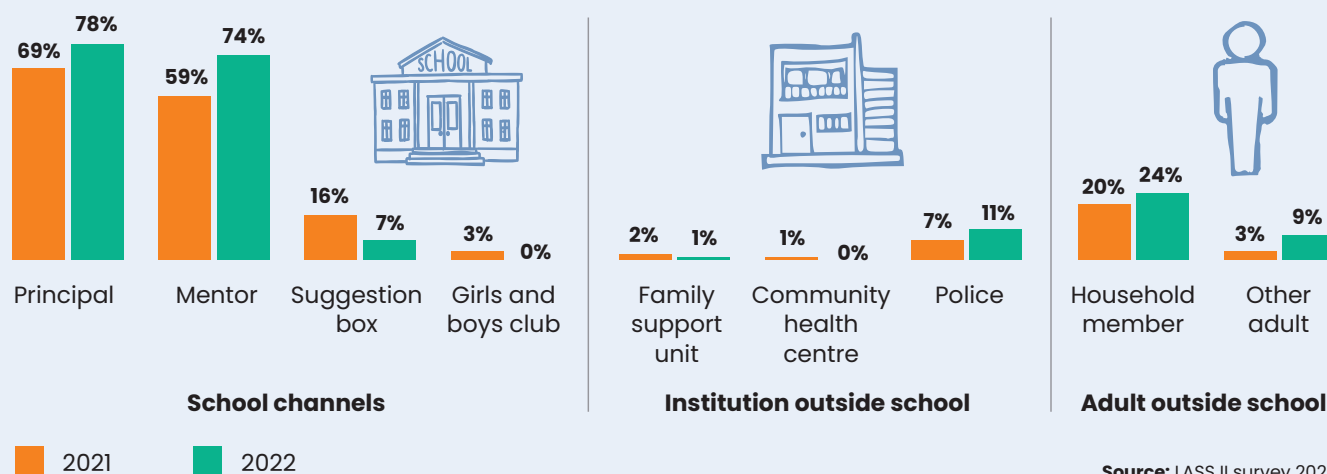
99% of pupils know at least one mechanism for reporting violence

Nearly all (99%) pupils know at least one mechanism for reporting violence, especially via school-based and in-person reporting channels. Similar to last year, pupils' awareness of at least one legitimate reporting channel for violence is close to universal, but there has been an increase in awareness of some key school and community reporting mechanisms amongst pupils (**Figure 6**). In particular, awareness of in-person reporting via principals, mentors[13] and other adults in the community has increased.[14] More than three-quarters of pupils now know that they can report to principals or mentors (up from 69% and 59% respectively last year), while just under one in ten pupils (9%) identified trusted adults in the local community as a potential reporting channel (up from 3% last year). Awareness of most of the other reporting mechanisms shown in **Figure 6** have not changed in the last 12 months, apart from suggestion boxes which were only mentioned by 7% of pupils this year, compared with 16% last year. Last year's qualitative research found that pupils preferred to use suggestion boxes to report more serious cases of abuse like sexual violence or complaints against teachers because they did not involve any in-person contact. However, there were problems with the availability and functioning of suggestion boxes including maintaining anonymity.

In general, girls' and boys' awareness of potential reporting channels is similar, though girls are slightly more able to identify at least one legitimate violence reporting channel overall. Girls are also more likely to be aware than boys of the potential to report violence to a household member (28% vs 19%) or via a community health centre (CHC).

Figure 6: Proportion of pupils aware of different violence reporting mechanisms

School channels

Principal	Mentor	Suggestion box	Girls and boys club
69% / 78%	59% / 74%	16% / 7%	3% / 0%

Institution outside school

Family support unit	Community health centre	Police
2% / 1%	1% / 0%	7% / 11%

Adult outside school

Household member	Other adult
20% / 24%	3% / 9%

■ 2021   ■ 2022

Source: LASS II survey 2022

In addition, about eight in ten girls and boys feel confident that there is someone in the school or community to whom they can report sexual violence, with a marked upward trend for girls since 2017. As seen in **Figure 7**, the proportion of girls who agree that there is someone in the school or community that they can report sexual violence to, has increased from 76% to 84% in the last 12 months, and from 58% in 2017. Trend information is not available for boys, but a sizeable majority (75%) of boys also agree that there is someone to whom they can report sexual abuse. This ties in with the earlier finding that a large majority of girls and boys are now able to identify sexual violence.
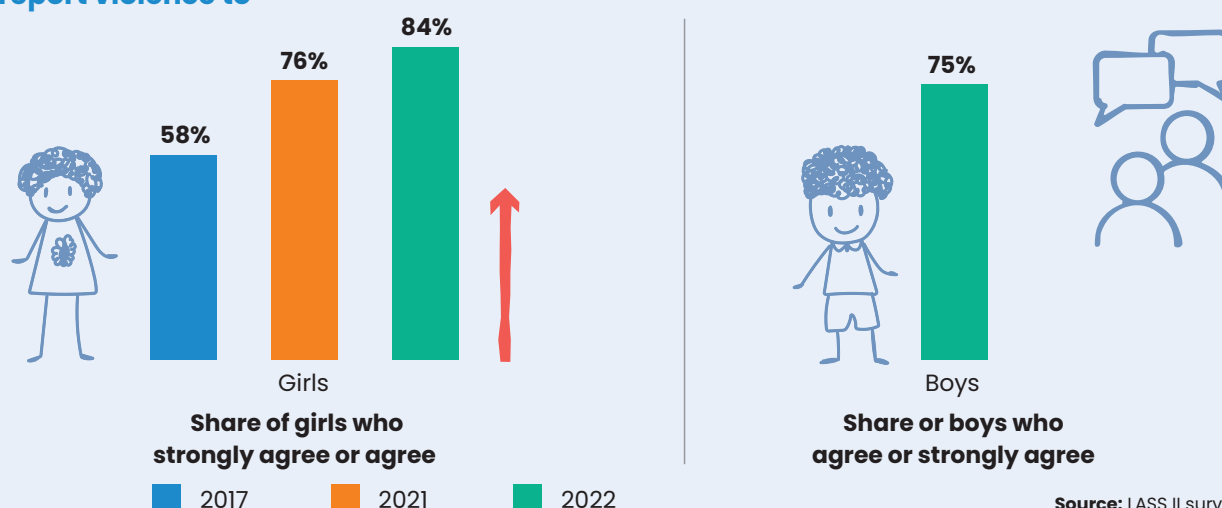
8 in 10 girls and boys feel there is someone to whom they can report sexual violence

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13 Mentors are senior teachers or members of schools who act as a trusted person with whom pupils would feel comfortable sharing any incidence of violence in or around schools.
14 Other adults means those who are not household members.

Figure 7: Proportion of pupils who feel there is someone in the school or community to report violence to

Share of girls who strongly agree or agree

Share or boys who agree or strongly agree

2017   2021   2022

Source: LASS II survey 2022

4 What do pupils do when they feel unsafe or witness incidences of violence in schools? Are pupils using the available reporting systems?
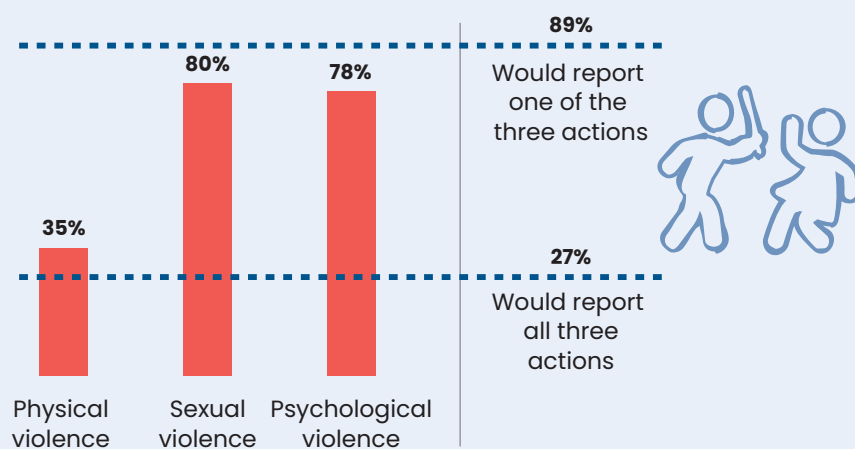
Pupils are far more inclined to say that they would report cases of sexual and psychological violence than physical violence. There is no change in this pattern since last year. More than three-quarters of pupils say that they would report sexual (80%) or psychological violence (78%) if they witnessed it, while only one in three pupils (35%) would report physical violence (see **Figure 8**). This suggests that the improvement in pupils' awareness of the meaning of physical violence since last year (discussed in the previous section) does not appear to have increased their willingness to report this type of abuse. Overall, 89% of pupils say that they would report at least one type of violence, which is a modest decline from 93% last year. However, there is no change in the far smaller share of pupils (27%) who state that they would report all three types of violence. There are also no notable gender differences, with girls and boys equally likely to say that they would report incidents of physical, sexual and psychological violence if they witness them.

Figure 8: Proportion of pupils who would report incidents of violence in school (2022)

Would report one of the three actions

Would report all three actions

Source: LASS II survey 2022

The actual reporting rate for pupils who have ever reported violence has also not changed since last year, and although school based channels continue to be most frequently used, girls are increasingly reporting to adults outside school. Just under a quarter (24%) of pupils say that they have ever reported an incident of violence in school or in the community. Most pupils say that they had used a school-based reporting channel to do this, which is similar to last year, but there was a notable increase in pupils reporting to school mentors (60% of pupils who made a report did so via mentors, up from 46% last year). The proportion of girls who said they reported a case of violence to adults in their household has also markedly increased from 13% to 22% of girls who made a report. This is consistent with the earlier finding that girls are more likely to be aware of this reporting mechanism than boys.

Box 1 below looks at whether membership of Girls and Boys clubs (GBCs) affects pupils awareness or reporting of cases of abuse.

Box 1: Does being a member of a GBC help to improve awareness or reporting of violence?

Some pupils attend Girls and Boys clubs (GBCs) or an equivalent school safety or anti-violence club. GBCs are intended to help pupils learn about different types of violence and what to do if they witness or experience abuse. Leh Wi Lan has supported the MBSSE to distribute radios to schools together with information cards containing child-friendly recordings of safety information and activities to be shared with pupils during GBC meetings.

22% of pupils say that their school has a GBC while **50%** of principals report this

As seen last year, the prevalence of active1 GBCs in schools is very low, but pupils who attend these clubs have slightly better knowledge of reporting channels and are much more likely to have ever made a violence report. Unlike last year's findings though, attendance at a GBC is not associated with better understanding of the different types of violence. (1)

The key findings are:

- Just under a quarter (22%) of pupils say that their school has a GBC; while 50% of principals report this.

- Only 6% of pupils have ever attended a GBC meeting, and just under half of this group (44%) reported that safety information was conveyed via radio recordings in the last meeting.

- Pupils who have ever attended a GBC meeting have greater confidence to say that they know what violence in school is, but this group were no more likely to be able to identify physical, sexual or psychological violence than other pupils.

- Awareness of at least one potential reporting channel is slightly higher among pupils who have attended a GBC compared to other pupils (1 percentage point gap), and the GBC group are better informed about suggestion boxes.

- Pupils who have attended GBCs are twice as likely to have ever reported violence compared to those who haven't attended GBCs (44% vs 22%).

Note: (1) An active GBC is a school safety club for boys and girls that meets regularly according to respondents. (2) The 2022 sample size is very small for pupils who have attended a GBC (n=64) so results should be read with caution, even though they are fairly consistent with the 2021 results where the sample size was larger (n=159).

5 What safety and reporting systems do schools have in place?

The MBSSE Reducing Violence in School (RVS) Guide is still available in the majority of schools, three years after it was first distributed.[15] The RVS Guide is a practical manual that describes the safety systems that should be in place in schools, as well as strategies for improving violence awareness, prevention, reporting and response. Two-thirds (67%) of school principals confirmed access to an RVS Guide. This means that this key reference material is available to new principals as well as those who may have received training on RVS previously. This is helpful for sustaining good practices.

In general, most schools do have some violence prevention and response systems in place, but there are sometimes challenges with functionality and understanding of roles. The results below shed light on the status of key elements of the systems and initiatives set out in the RVS Guide. For simplicity, only the 2022 survey results are presented because there is little evidence of change since last year.

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15 The RVS Guide was distributed to JSS in February 2019, and to SSS in September 2019.

Violence reporting and response systems

Most schools have mentors for pupils to report violence to confidentially, but female mentors are in short supply. As per the RVS Guideline, there should be at least one female and one male mentor in every secondary school so that pupils have the choice of reporting violence to a trusted adult of the same sex. While 85% of schools had mentors, only 67% of these schools had at least one female mentor whereas male mentors were present in 99% of these schools. A major barrier to addressing the shortage of female mentors is the acute gender imbalance in the secondary school teaching force in Sierra Leone. The LASS survey finds that about one in ten (11%) secondary teachers are female, and this also applies to principals.

Only a small minority of schools have suggestion boxes in a secure location where pupils are unlikely to be seen if they want to report violence anonymously. Suggestion boxes are intended to be locked boxes where pupils can place written notes into a small opening without being seen by others. Although 40% of schools have a suggestion box, only 4% of schools have suggestion boxes that are in a discreet location within the school compound (for example, not outside the principal's office or the teachers' staff room). As discussed above, the limited availability of this reporting channel is a concern because during the qualitative research last year pupils recommended having more suggestion boxes to facilitate anonymous reporting.
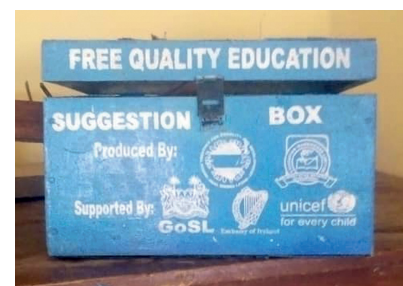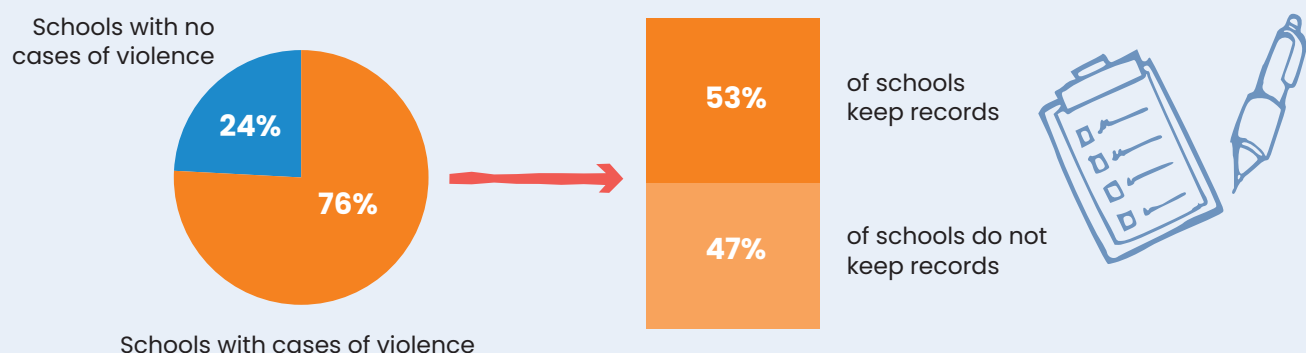

Suggestion box
Source: LASS data collection team

School Safety Committees (SSCs) are in place in 77% of schools, but most are not active enough, or structured properly, to review and respond to violence reports in a timely way. Although nearly eight in ten schools have an SSC, only 16% of SSCs had met in the last two weeks and 11% had not yet met this school term.[16] Given SSCs intended role of meeting weekly to discuss and take appropriate action in response to violence reports, this suggests that only a small minority of schools have a sufficiently active SSC to fulfil this role. The composition of SSCs also does not typically appear to include all the prescribed participants (only 5% of SSCs comply[17]) and many include a broader array of stakeholders such as Community-Teacher Association members (35% of SSCs) and pupils (16% of SSCs). Having a broad membership makes maintaining confidentiality of violence reports much more difficult which may mean that pupils are less likely to trust the reporting systems.

Documenting violence is a critical part of a school's safety system, but this is only happening in about half of schools that have reported cases. Nearly a quarter of principals (24%) reported they did not keep records, because no cases of violence had ever been reported in their school (**Figure 9**). Of the remaining schools, just over half of the principals (53%) reported maintaining a log or register of cases, which leaves a sizeable share of schools (47%) without any practice of documentation. Poor or non-existent school-level record keeping increases the risk that perpetrators of abuse are not held to account, and survivors of violence are not given appropriate support.

Figure 9: Record keeping in schools

Schools with no cases of violence

24%

76%

Schools with cases of violence

53% of schools keep records

47% of schools do not keep records

Source: LASS II survey 2022

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16 According to the RVS Guide (page 15 and 24), SSCs must meet once a week to review reports from mentors and the suggestion box.
17 The RVS Guide (page 15) states that SSCs should comprise the principal, vice principal, male and female mentors, and guidance counsellor.

The newly introduced National Referral Protocol (NRP)[18] aims to guide schools in supporting survivors of violence, but it is not yet widely understood by principals. About six in ten schools (59%) participated in MBSSE's training on NRP[19] in August 2022. Most schools who attended this training sent their principal to participate (89%); some schools sent female mentors (26%) as a second participant as intended, but many sent male mentors (51%) or other teachers (22%). Furthermore, only a small minority (7%) of principals who attended the training could describe the four steps[20] involved in implementing the NRP at school-level. Apart from training, another approach to communicating the NRP to school stakeholders was via a poster that depicts the steps that should be taken to support a survivor of violence, and leaves space for schools to fill in contact details of local referral services. Only 30% of schools had an NRP poster, and of these, only about half of the posters (51%) have complete details of local service providers that pupils could be referred to.

Violence awareness and prevention systems

Three quarters of schools have teacher learning circles (TLCs), and most of these are active in the sense of having met recently. The high prevalence of active teacher learning circles (TLCs) in schools are a potential channel to communicate messages and actions that are needed to reduce violence in school. TLCs are a form of professional development for teachers based on peer-to-peer discussion and support. 75% of principals reported that their school had a TLC, and 35% of TLCs had met in the last two weeks, with a further 57% having met within the current term. TLCs were initially set up to discuss the RVS Guide, but last year's LASS qualitative research last found that TLC discussions tended to focus more on teaching and pedagogical matters, than school safety and violence.

Only a small proportion of schools display their Teacher Code of Conduct publicly as a painted mural. The RVS Guide makes numerous references to the Teacher Code of Conduct which sets out standards for the behaviour of education professionals in the 'promotion of a safe, conducive and positive teaching and learning environment'. The idea is that the Teacher Code of Conduct needs enforcing to try and reduce cases of abuse, especially where teachers are perpetrators of violence. The first step to this teachers being aware of their code of conduct. Teachers may have discussed the Code of Conduct in their TLC as part of RVS discussions, and it was observed that about 16% of schools have a painted mural depicting key messages from the Code of Conduct.

Teacher Code of Conduct
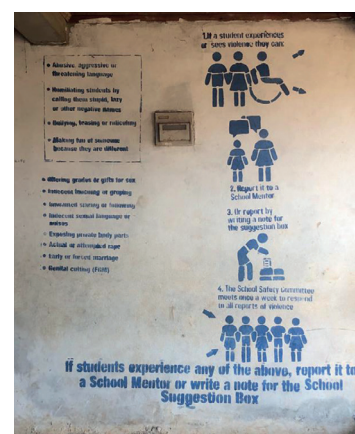**Source:** LASS data collection team

Communication of RVS messages via painted murals is also not very common in schools. Just under a quarter of schools (24%) have a mural painted on a wall in a public place about reporting violence in school. The vast majority of these murals (91%) provide information on how to report violence via a school-based channel. Some display outside institutions and community reporting mechanisms but this is far less common. Furthermore, it was observed that visibility of the information is a problem on one in five of these painted murals (19%).

Under the RVS Guidelines, schools are supposed to undertake a comprehensive safety assessment each year, and a majority of schools have completed this exercise since the start of the previous school year. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of principals reported that their school had carried out a safety assessment after September 2021. Last year the qualitative research found that pupils, parents, and school staff frequently associated the concept of a safe school with better infrastructure. This notion perhaps helps to explain why the most common priority, identified in 83% of recent safety assessments, is improving the school environment and facilities. Actions related to violence awareness, prevention and response came up as priorities in about 30-40% of assessments. Very few assessments concluded that improving documentation of cases of violence was a priority.

Violence reporting mural painted on school wall
Source: LASS data collection team

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18 The NRP was launched in 2019.
19 The training covered the NRP and the MBSSE's Radical Inclusion Policy.
20 The four steps outlined in the NRP are (i) providing a caring and supportive response; (ii) contact a trusted adult; (iii) explain the next steps; and (iv) maintain confidentiality.

6 What support facilities are available to pupils outside of school for reporting and referral after an incident of violence?

Community health centres (CHCs),[21] Family Support Units (FSUs[22]), One-Stop Centres[23] and Rainbo Centres[24] are community institutions that have mandates to support survivors of violence including through investigation and provision of medical services. Ideally all children, caregivers and teachers should be aware of the nearest location of these facilities.

Similar to the pattern observed in previous years, pupils are most aware of CHCs, followed by FSUs, and then One-Stop or Rainbo Centres. Nearly three-quarters of pupils (71%) reported that they knew where their nearest CHC was, and awareness has increased compared to last year. Knowledge of the whereabouts of FSUs, One-Stop Centres and Rainbo centres among pupils was much lower (36%, 7% and 6% respectively). Of pupils who were aware of the institution of a CHC, 68% had ever visited one in the past. This is lower than might be expected given that this provides all types of primary health care. On the other hand, the fact that 36% of pupils who knew of their nearest FSU had visited this institution - which specialises in dealing with violence and abuse, suggests that at least some pupils (or their family members) are using the support services provided by FSUs.
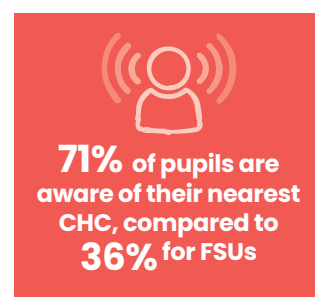
The Government of Sierra Leone is also promoting the use of national toll-free numbers (called 'hotlines') for reporting violence and providing counselling, however awareness of specific hotline numbers is very limited among pupils. A quarter of pupils (24%) say that they are aware of hotlines for reporting violence, but when asked to recall the specific toll-free numbers, only 24% and 3% of those who said they were aware of hotlines could state 116 (Child Hotline) and 8060 (MBSSE helpline) respectively. Some pupils also remembered the number for police, fire, and ambulance (112) and for reporting corruption (515).

71% of pupils are aware of their nearest CHC, compared to **36%** for FSUs

7 Concluding remarks

Main takeaways

The LASS 2022 study shows that little has changed in Sierra Leone in the last 12 months in terms of perceptions of violence against girls or in the status of school safety and reporting systems. Violence in secondary schools is common, and most school safety systems are only partially equipped to play their role in stopping this. Even with the MBSSE's lead in setting conducive policies and coordinating implementation via a range of partners, changing this situation will take time and properly resourced structural changes.

On a positive note, this year's LASS findings show that pupils increasingly feel they can report violence to a trusted adult, either in school or in the community, which may be partly due to messages passed on by school staff after receiving the NRP training and materials. Nonetheless, the findings on the NRP training itself demonstrate that one-off training is not sufficient to ensure that principals understand how to implement the protocol, and that systems, processes and tools are required for monitoring and supporting school leaders, mentors and school safety committees to ensure changes are embedded within the education system.

More pupils are now able to identify corporal punishment as a form of violence, despite it remaining a widespread practice in schools and often going under-reported. This is a step in the right direction, but there is scope for much greater awareness of the MBSSE's anti-corporal punishment initiative, and its key message of zero tolerance for physical punishment. It is important to include both school and community actors in this process of change given prevailing social norms around the acceptability of corporal punishment.

This year's LASS study also demonstrates that the safety risks are not exclusive to girls, and children of both genders face considerable risks of sexual and psychological violence in school. Peer pressure among boys to join in harmful activities such as drugs and gangs is particularity pervasive.

The findings also support the focus of the MBSSE's Radical Inclusion Policy on pupils who are marginalised for reasons of poverty, disability, pregnancy or motherhood, as these groups face greater risks of harassment in school.

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21 CHCs provide primary health care, counselling, and basic essential services.
22 FSUs are specialist units attached to police stations with responsibility to investigate all forms of child abuse and violence against children.
23 One-Stop Centres offer a comprehensive package of services including medical examination, treatment, and counselling of survivors of SGBV. They are provided at district level.
24 Rainbo Centres provide free clinical and psychosocial support and medical services to survivors of GBV in Sierra Leone. There are five centres in Sierra Leone located at Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Kono, and Makeni.

Future direction

The MBSSE is currently working to introduce a new National Comprehensive School Safety Policy. This initiative should build on the progress made in recent years on violence awareness and reporting in schools. The LASS studies provide further evidence on the implications for strengthening safety systems in and around schools in practice. In addition to this year's proposals, many of the recommendations from the LASS 2021 study are still relevant and are reinforced in the summary suggestions below:[25]

Make further efforts to ensure that school and other education stakeholders understand their roles in the NRP and are supported to implement it. Key messages about the need to treat information sensitively, and to keep records at the school level need emphasising. Visits to schools from institutions such as FSUs and One Stop and Rainbo Centres would help spread awareness of their role in reporting and support for survivors.

Intensify communication around the anti-corporal punishment initiative to school and community stakeholders, and provide continuous professional development and monitoring for teachers on positive disciplining strategies. MBSSE's training materials on positive discipline should reach all teachers. Most schools have active TLCs so this structure may be a useful transfer mechanism.

Promote greater visibility of the Teacher Code of Conduct at school level and provide support to the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) for case management of teachers in breach of the code. This is important to control practices like sex for grades and verbal abuse and bullying from teachers. The teacher code of conduct should be displayed in a public space in schools so that it is visible to teachers, pupils and parents. There should be a clear protocol for dealing with cases of teachers who break the code with support and monitoring provided to principals from higher authorities.

Review existing school safety structures to clarify roles, remove any duplication and create feasible protocols to ensure the system is active and fit for purpose. Investigate why School Safety Committees are typically not sufficiently active to play their intended role, and either find ways to adapt them or ensure that their function is covered by other school bodies. The role and coverage of GBCs should also be evaluated as a platform for disseminating safety messages widely and other initiatives with potentially broader reach could be considered such as integrating safety content into the curriculum and arranging whole school safety events and community campaigns. Similarly school level incentives and monitoring mechanisms for compliance with the new safety systems should be developed and shared.

Design targeted interventions to reduce violence against the core marginalised groups identified in the Radical Inclusion Policy, and provide attention and support to boys facing peer pressure to engage in harmful activities. Focus should continue on the threat of violence facing girls and pupils with disabilities, but this year's LASS results show that pupils from low-income backgrounds and pregnant and parenting girls are also at heightened (often overlapping) risk of abuse. Likewise, many boys face a number of threats to their physical and psychological safety in school and these need policy attention.

Develop clear communication about information management protocols for documenting reports of violence in schools, and how they get handled and shared. When violence does take place, alongside the NRP – which aims to support the survivor, it is important to also outline protocols for how cases are documented and shared by schools for system level improvements.

Consider initiatives to strengthen other aspects of safety systems that were identified in last year's LASS 2021 study, i.e.: (i) consultative and inclusive school safety mapping and planning; (ii) school infrastructure improvements; (iii) dissemination of safety materials and resource to pupils via multiple channels and digitisation of content; and (iv) strengthening the National Committee on Gender-based violence (NAC-GBV) structure and functioning.

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25 See LASS (2021) Briefing Note 2, p.12 for further details. Available here: LASS-Study_BN2_School-Safety_WEB_2.pdf (mbsse.gov.sl)

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