



Dispatch No. 608 | 23 February 2023

Majority of Sierra Leoneans say vulnerable children lack needed support

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 608 | Fredline A. O. M'Cormack-Hale and Lucy Emmanette Alieu

Summary

Children in Sierra Leone grow up facing multiple threats, including violence and abuse. In 2019, a quarter of reported sexual abuse cases involved minors (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, 2020; Sierra Express Media, 2021). A 2021 study noted that sexual violence and harassment were key barriers to school attendance for girls (UNICEF and Irish Aid, 2021).

A 2019 survey found that about nine in 10 students experienced being beaten in school (Jalloh, 2022). Home environments are also unsafe: According to UNICEF's 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 86% of children under age 15 experienced "violent discipline," defined as physical punishment or psychological aggression, at home during the month before the survey (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018).

Although the 2009 teachers' code of conduct prohibits corporal punishment in schools, organisations such as End Corporal Punishment point to the existence of legislation that makes punishment of children legal in Sierra Leone. For example, the 1926 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act gives parents and teachers, among others, the right to "administer punishment" to a child. The Child Rights Act (2007) also allows for correction that is "reasonable" and "justifiable" (End Corporal Punishment, 2021). In the home, 47% of mothers and caretakers believe it is acceptable to discipline their children using physical punishment (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018).

However, things are changing. In recent years, Sierra Leone has instituted several progressive child-related laws and policies. These include a revised sexual offences act increasing penalties for sexual abuse of minors (Martin & Koroma, 2020) and an end to the exclusion of pregnant girls from school (BBC, 2020). In October 2021, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education banned corporal punishment in schools and followed up with an Anti-Corporal Punishment Initiative to provide teachers with alternatives to the cane (Jalloh, 2022).

The prohibition against corporal punishment is one step toward implementing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2004) recommendation that called for banning all forms of corporal punishment at home and in school.

In this evolving context, how do Sierra Leone citizens see efforts to protect and nurture vulnerable children?

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' attitudes and perceptions related to child welfare.

Notwithstanding government efforts to ban corporal punishment, a majority of citizens believe that parents are justified in using physical force to discipline their children, although opposition to corporal punishment is growing and majorities say that it is not a frequent

occurrence in their community. Most Sierra Leoneans also say that child abuse and neglect are infrequent problems in their community.

While a majority of Sierra Leoneans think that the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of children, few report that their community has available resources to help abused and neglected children, children with disability, and children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999, and Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 13 June and 9 July 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A solid majority (60%) of Sierra Leoneans say parents are “sometimes” or “always” justified in using physical force to discipline their children. But opposition to physical discipline has increased, from 33% in 2018 to 40% in 2022.
 - The use of physical discipline receives above-average support from urban residents (64%), more educated citizens (63%-65%), and those who are economically better off (66%).
- Six in 10 respondents (61%) say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their community.

Abused, neglected, and out-of-school children:

- Most Sierra Leoneans say child abuse and neglect (75%) and out-of-school children (60%) are infrequent problems in their community.
 - Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to see child abuse and neglect as widespread problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Only three in 10 Sierra Leoneans say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (29%) and children with disability (27%). Even fewer (19%) say children and adults with mental or emotional problems can get help.
 - Rural residents are considerably less likely than urbanites to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

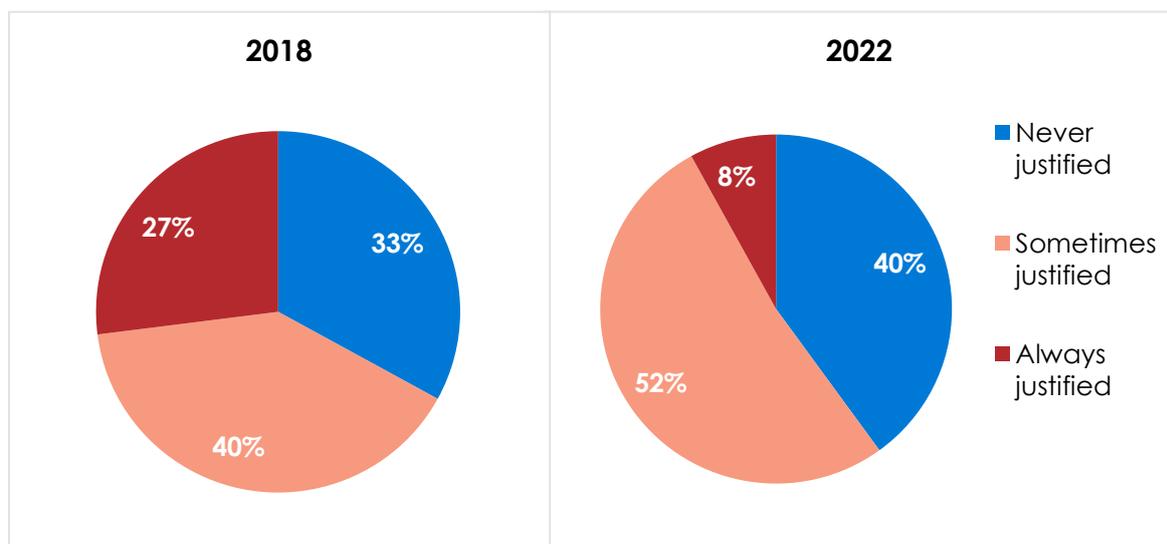
- A majority (58%) of Sierra Leoneans say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, but 37% disagree.
 - Poor and young citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

Disciplining a child

Discipline is an integral part of raising children. But should the use of physical force to discipline children be considered appropriate or abusive?

A majority (60%) of Sierra Leoneans believe it is “sometimes justified” (52%) or “always justified” (8%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. But the proportion of Sierra Leoneans who say this practice is “never justified” has increased since 2018, from 33% to 40% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Sierra Leone | 2018-2022



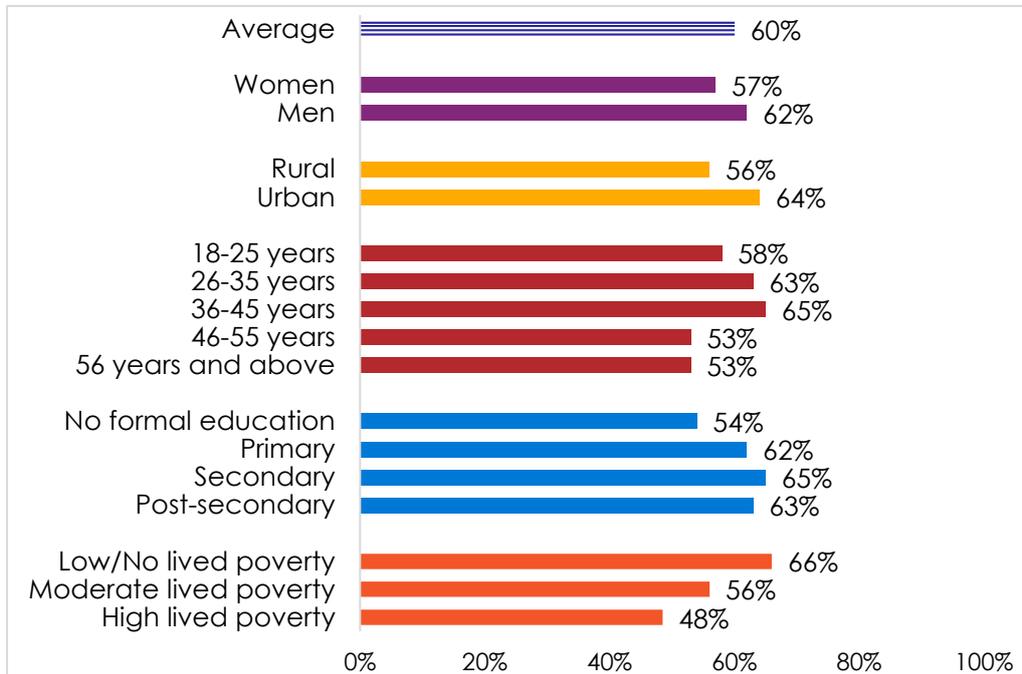
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children?

More men than women endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (62% vs. 57% who say it is sometimes or always justified) (Figure 2). However, the practice is less widely accepted among older respondents (53% of respondents aged 46 and above), those with no formal education (54%), and the poorest respondents (48% of those experiencing high lived poverty¹) than among their respective counterparts.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
 for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

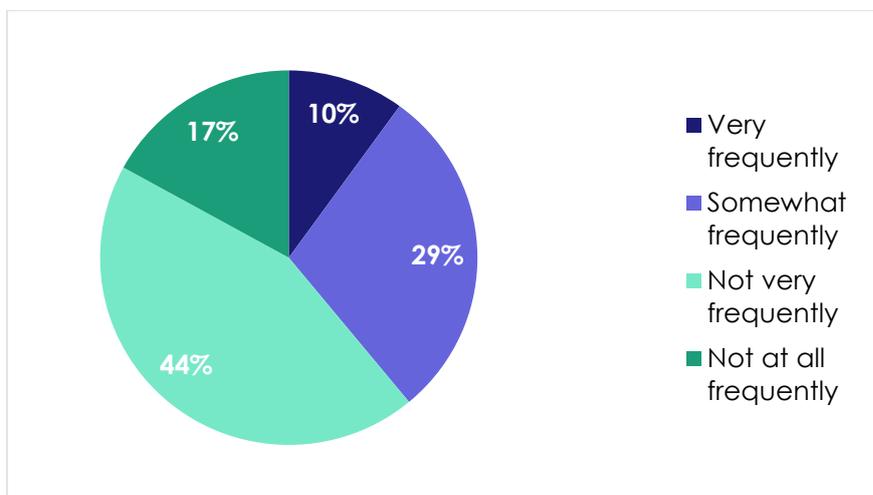
Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say “sometimes justified” or “always justified”)

In practice, six in 10 Sierra Leoneans say that adults in their community do “not very frequently” (44%) or “not at all frequently” (17%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3). But four in 10 see this as a “somewhat frequent” (29%) or “very frequent” (10%) occurrence.

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children? | Sierra Leone | 2021

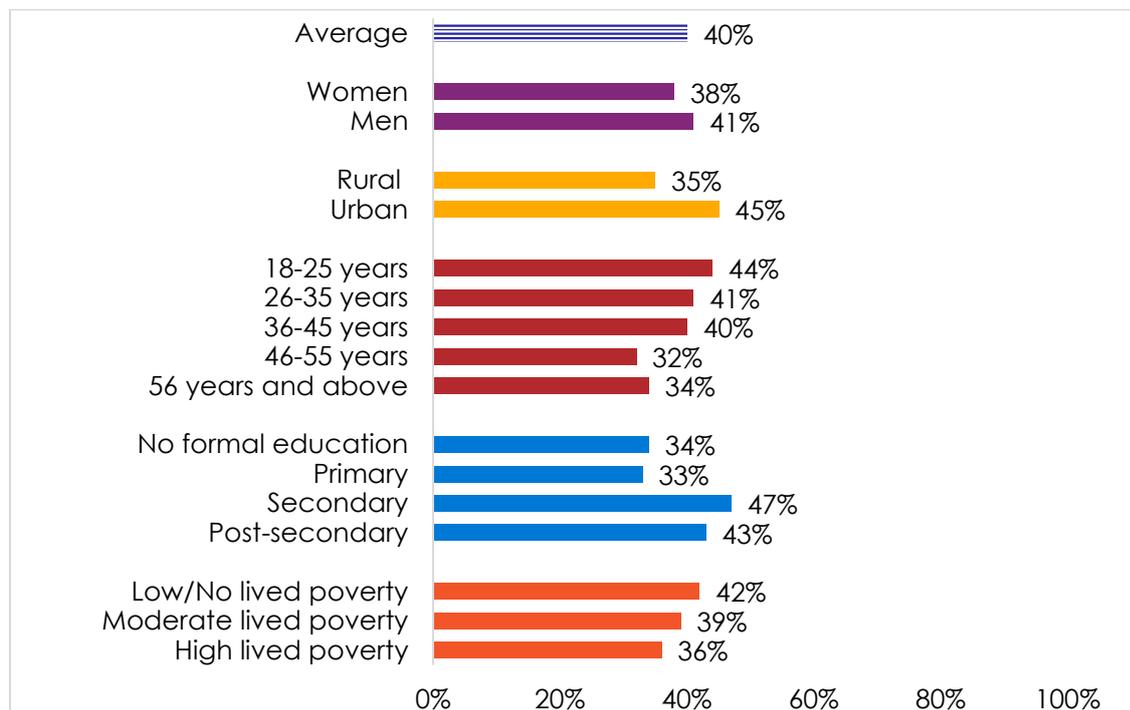


Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Urbanites (45%) are more likely than rural residents (35%) to report that people in their community use physical force to discipline children (Figure 4). This perception is also more common among respondents with secondary (47%) and post-secondary education (43%) than among those with less schooling (33%-34%), and increases with respondents' economic status, ranging from 36% of those experiencing high lived poverty to 42% of the best-off citizens.

Younger respondents (44%) are also more likely than older folks (32%-34%) to report that children are frequently disciplined using physical force.

Figure 4: Perception that adults frequently use physical force to discipline children
 | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Abuse and neglect

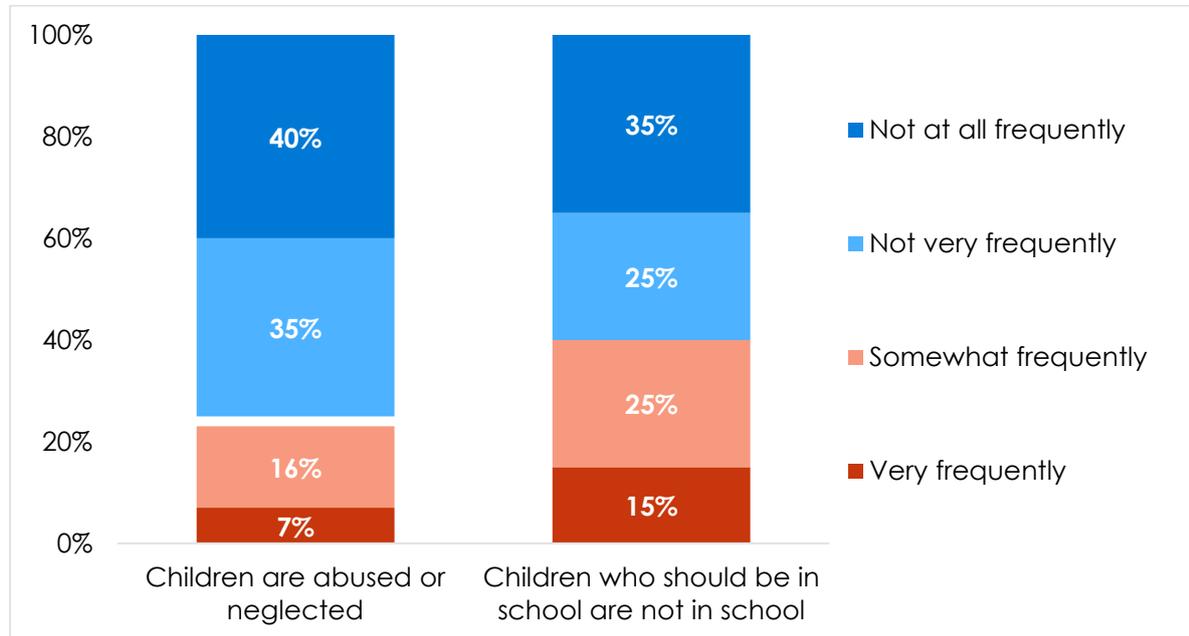
Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, three in four Sierra Leoneans (75%) say this is "not at all frequent" (40%) or "not very frequent" (35%), while 23% report that abuse and neglect are "somewhat" or "very" common (Figure 5).

A solid majority (60%) also say it's not common to see school-age children who are not in school, though four in 10 respondents (40%) disagree.

Age groups differ only slightly in their assessments of the frequency of child abuse and neglect. But older respondents are significantly less likely to say children are frequently not in school (33%) than the youngest respondents (40%-47%) (Figure 6).

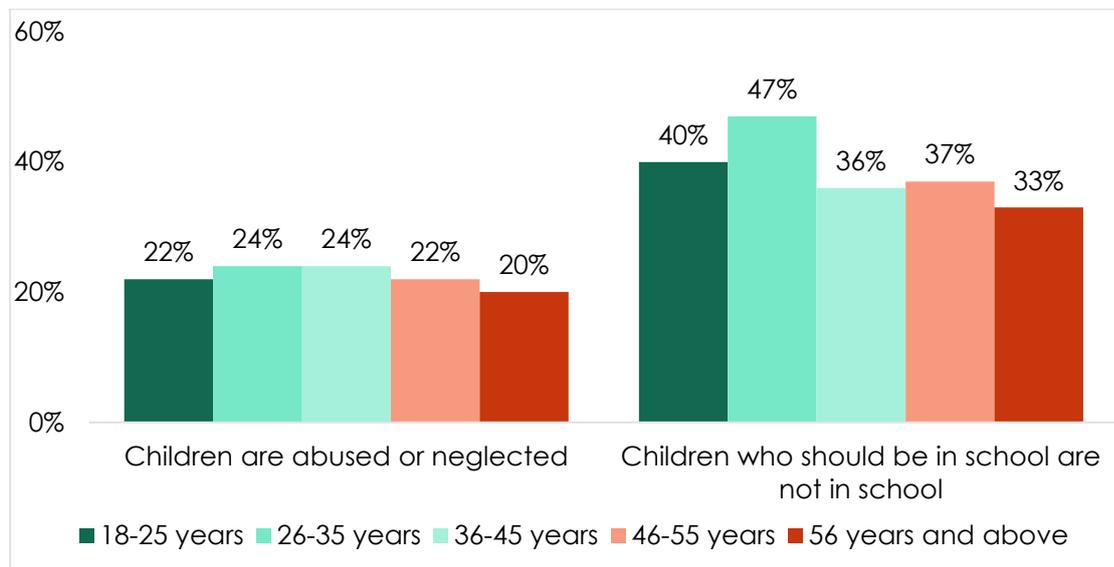
Child abuse and neglect are considerably more commonly reported as a frequent problem in cities (33%) than in rural areas (14%). Similarly, concern about out-of-school children is higher in cities (44%) than in rural settlements (36%) (Figure 7).

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Sierra Leone
 | 2022



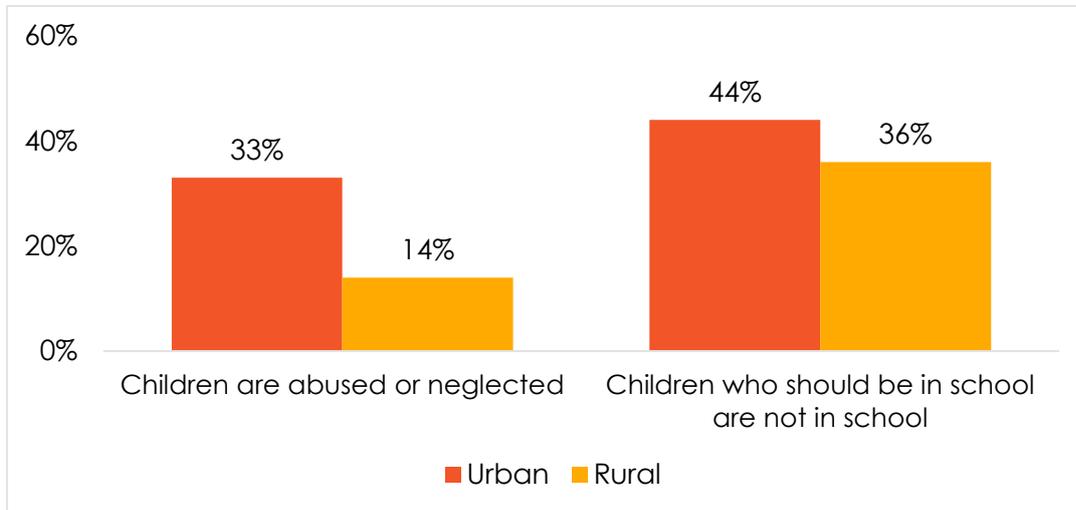
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group
 | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Figure 7: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Sierra Leone | 2022



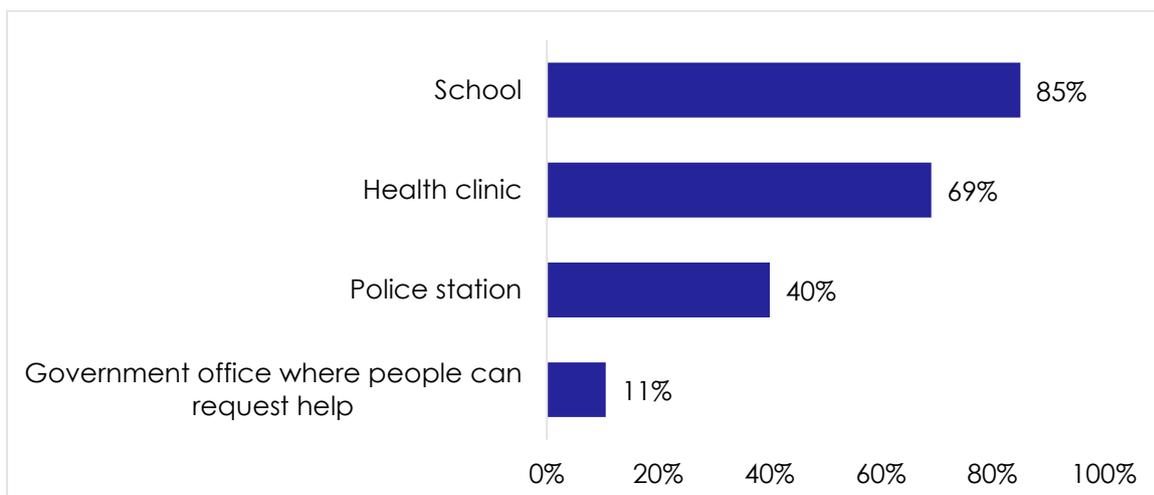
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Support for vulnerable children

For children facing major challenges, support services can be crucial in preparing them for full, successful lives. To what extent are such services available at the community level?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all enumeration areas they visited, most Sierra Leoneans live within walking distance of a school (85%), and more than two-thirds (69%) have a nearby health clinic (Figure 8). Four in 10 (40%) live within easy reach of a police station. But only one in 10 (11%) have a nearby social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems.

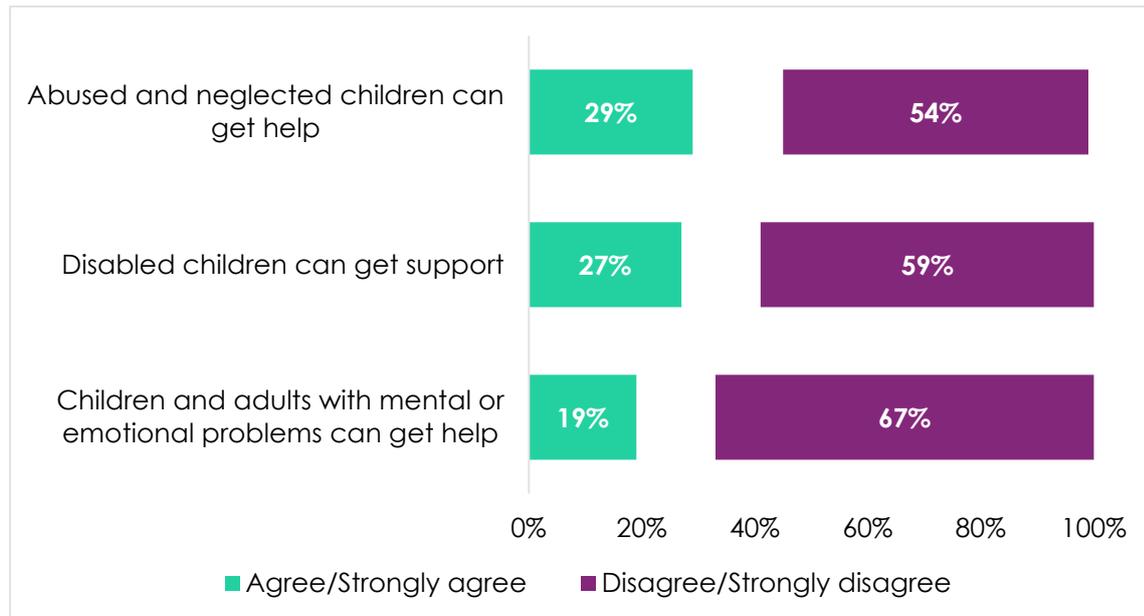
Figure 8: Availability of public services at the community level | Sierra Leone | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Police station? Health clinic (private or public or both)? A social centre, government help centre, or other government office where people can request help with problems? (% "yes")

Only a minority of respondents report that more specialised support services are available in the community as well (Figure 9). Three in 10 (29%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected. A similar number (27%) say support is available for children with physical disabilities. Even fewer (19%) say children and adults with mental or emotional problems are able to get help in the community.

Figure 9: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree.

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

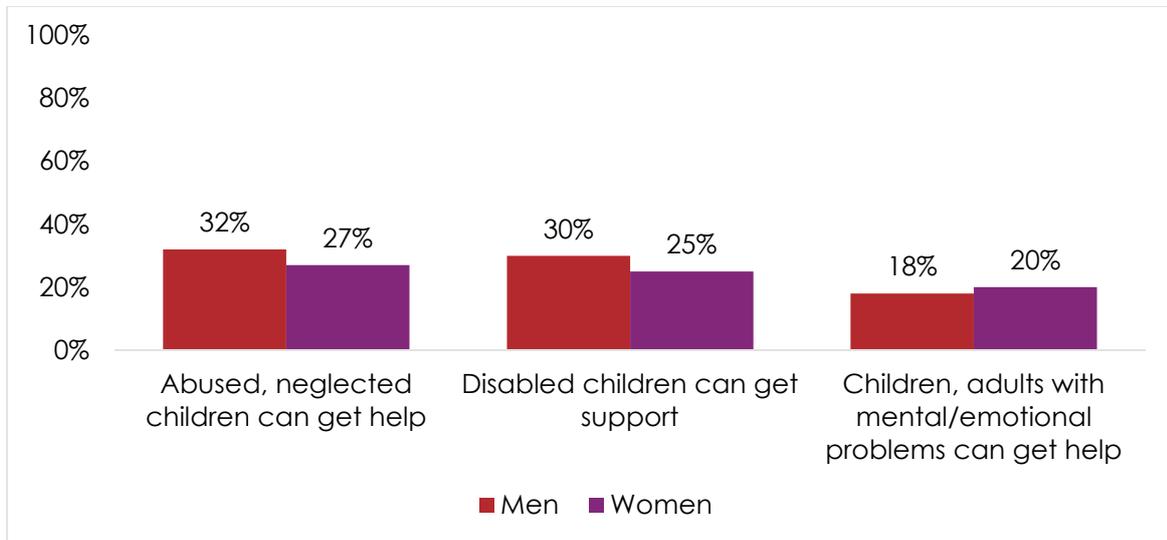
In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Assessments of the availability of support services differ by respondents' gender, location, and education level. Women are less likely than men to say that help is available in their community for abused and neglected children (27% vs. 32%) and for disabled children (25% vs. 30%) (Figure 10).

Across the board, rural residents are less likely than urban residents to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community: 28% compared to 32% for abused and neglected children, 22% to 34% for disabled children, and 16% to 23% for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (Figure 11).

Similarly, the least educated citizens are less likely than the most educated to report available support for abused and neglected children (a 4-point gap) and disabled children (7 points), although there is no significant difference with regard to services for people with mental or emotional problems (Figure 12).

Figure 10: Help is available for vulnerable children | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



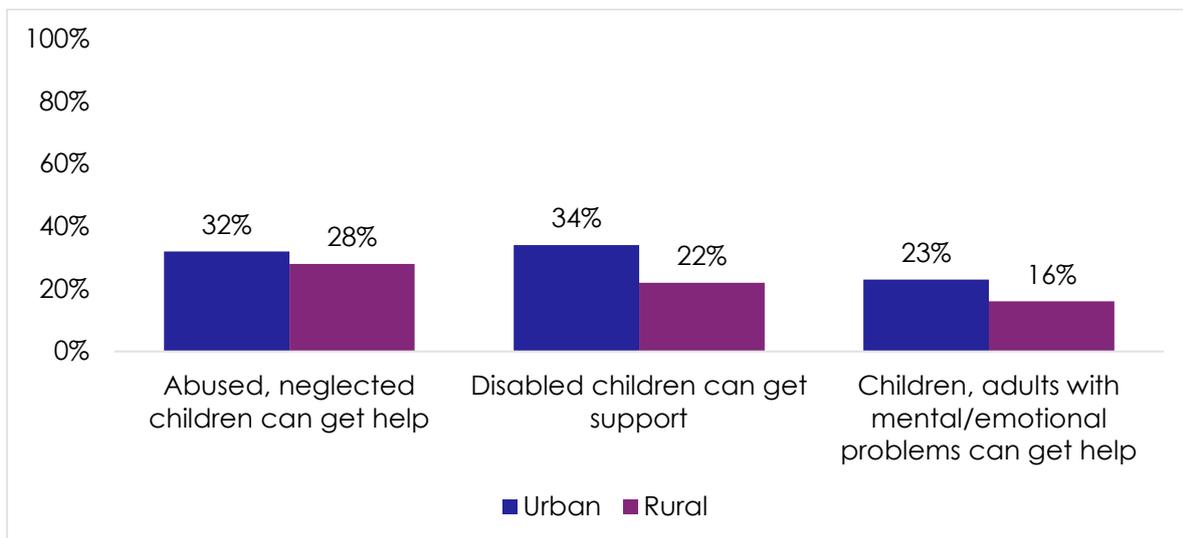
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Figure 11: Help is available for vulnerable children | by urban-rural location | Sierra Leone | 2022



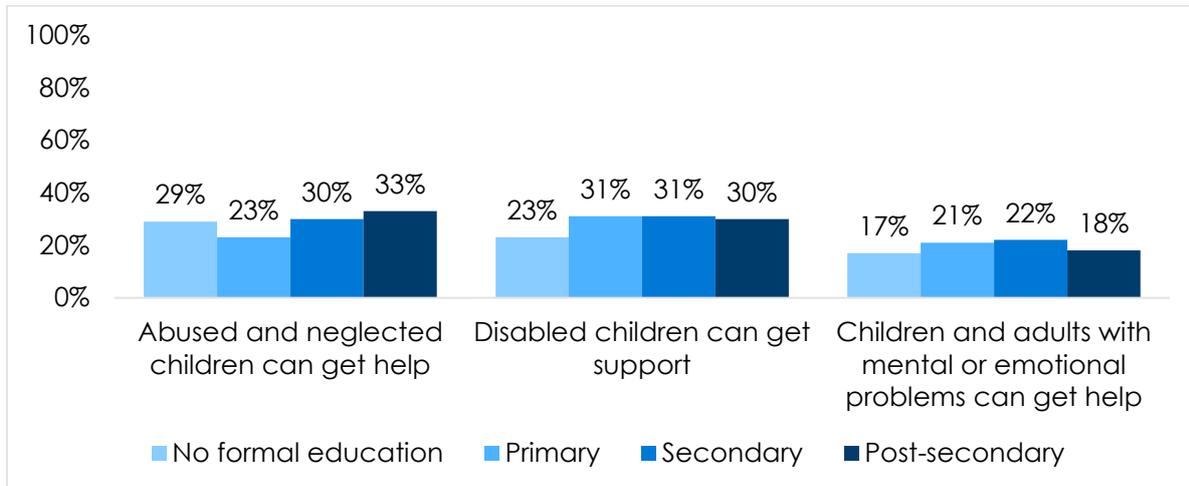
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who “agree” or “agree strongly”)

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Figure 12: Help is available for vulnerable children | by education | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who “agree” or “agree strongly”)

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

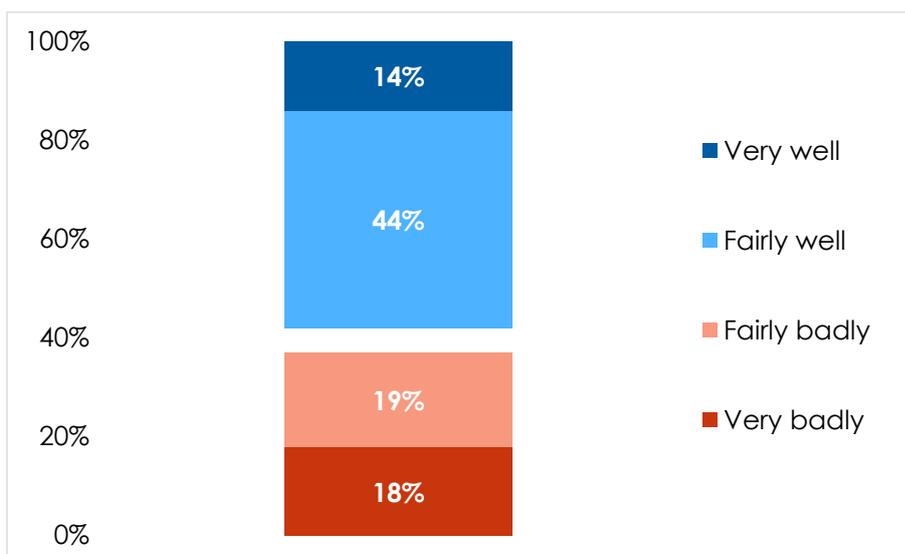
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority of Sierra Leoneans give the government a passing grade on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 58% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 37% believe it is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance on child welfare | Sierra Leone | 2022

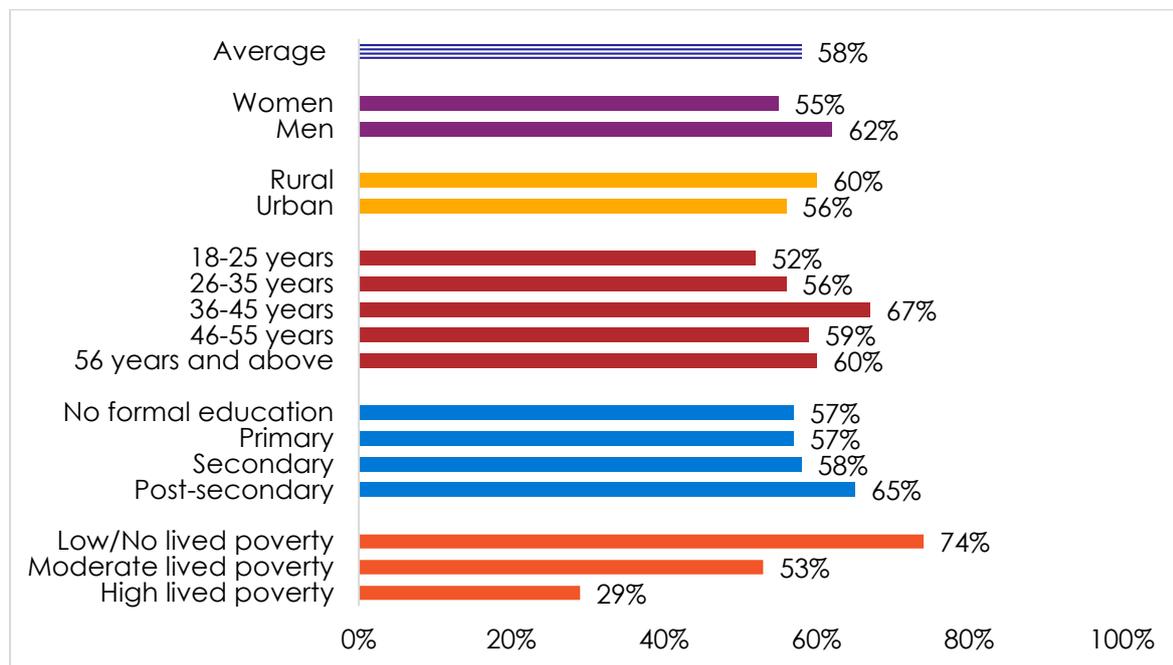


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?

Women (55%) and urban residents (56%) are somewhat less likely to approve of the government's performance on child welfare than men (62%) and rural dwellers (60%) (Figure 14). The youngest respondents are least likely to compliment the government's efforts (52%).

But assessments differ more strongly by respondents' education and economic levels. The poorest citizens are far less likely than the best-off citizens to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children (29% vs. 74%). And the most educated respondents (65%) are more likely to rate the government positively compared to their less educated counterparts (57%-58%).

Figure 14: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Sierra Leone | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

Sierra Leone continues to make legislative and policy strides on issues affecting children, and a majority commend the government's efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children.

However, survey findings point to issues that children's advocates may consider action items. Notwithstanding the new policy against corporal punishment, a majority of respondents say parents are justified in the use of physical force to discipline their children, although opposition to corporal punishment has increased.

Further, the low numbers of citizens reporting abuse, neglect, and out-of-school children as frequent problems in their community suggest the need for greater sensitisation around these issues, especially as fewer than one-third of citizens say vulnerable children are generally able to get the help they need. Rural residents are particularly likely to report that resources are lacking, suggesting a need for targeting these populations in particular.

References

- BBC. (2020). Sierra Leone overturns ban on pregnant schoolgirls. 30 March.
- End Corporal Punishment. (2021). Corporal punishment of children in Sierra Leone.
- Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone. (2020). The state of human rights in Sierra Leone 2019.
- Jalloh, I. (2022). Government of Sierra Leone to ban corporal punishment in schools.
- Martin, L., & Koroma, S. (2020). Sierra Leone declared a state of emergency over sexual violence. Did it help? African Arguments. 15 January.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.
- Sierra Express Media. (2021). Sexual and gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. 28 May.
- Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2004). Witness to truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. 2.
- Statistics Sierra Leone. (2018). Sierra Leone multiple indicator cluster survey 2017.
- UNICEF and Irish Aid. (2021). Out-of-school children study: Sierra Leone.

Fredline A. O. M'Cormack-Hale is an associate professor at Seton Hall University and Afrobarometer co-principal investigator for the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) in Sierra Leone. Email: amaybel@gmail.com.

Lucy Emmanette Alieu is media and communications officer for the Institute for IGR. Email: emmanettealieu.ea@gmail.com

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 608 | 23 February 2023