



Dispatch No. 618 | 22 March 2023

Zimbabweans voice dissatisfaction with government performance on child welfare

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 618 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Zimbabwe's children have the right to be protected against violence, sexual and economic exploitation, child labour, neglect, and all other forms of abuse under the Constitution, the Children's Act and Children's Amendment Bill currently being tabled in Parliament, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013; Veritas, 2022; ChildrenandAids.org, 2017).

But despite these legal provisions and the efforts of the government and other stakeholders to make them a reality, children in Zimbabwe face a wide range of vulnerabilities. One-third of young women experience sexual violence before their 18th birthday. About the same proportion of 5- to 17-year-olds are engaged in child labour (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). Economic decline and the massive exodus of parents/guardians to other countries have left many children susceptible to neglect and abuse (Chronicle, 2019; Feltoe, 2017).

Childline Zimbabwe, a telephone hotline, reported that it handled 25,000 cases of child abuse in 2018 (Moyo, 2022), and Zimbabwe's national statistics office reported that 22 children were killed by their parents or guardians in 2019-2020 (Butaumocho, 2022). The prevalence of child abuse may have contributed to the Zimbabwe High Court's ban on the use of corporal punishment to discipline children both at home and at school (Shaban, 2017).

President Emmerson Mnangagwa has publicly warned religious organisations against accepting child marriages (Murwira, 2021), and his deputy, Constantino Chiwenga, has said the government will pursue stiffer penalties for child abusers (Mutongwiza, 2022). After media reports about two 9-year-old pregnant girls, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission (2022) issued a statement calling for harsher punishments for the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls.

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' attitudes and perceptions related to child welfare.

In Zimbabwe, survey findings show that a majority of adults support the use of physical force to discipline children, and about half say this practice is common in their community.

While a majority say child abuse and neglect are infrequent occurrences in their community, more than half say it is common to see school-age children who are not in school.

Fewer than half say that support services are available in their community for abused or neglected children, for children with disability, and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems. And a majority of Zimbabweans are dissatisfied with the government's performance on child welfare. Poor citizens are particularly unlikely to say that help is available and that the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 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 Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- About seven in 10 Zimbabweans (69%) say parents are “sometimes” or “always” justified in using physical force to discipline their children.
 - The use of physical discipline receives above-average support from women (72%), rural residents (74%), and citizens above age 35 (72%-73%).
- Almost half (47%) of survey respondents say the use of physical force to discipline children is “somewhat” or “very” common in their community.

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

- A majority (58%) of Zimbabweans say child abuse and neglect are infrequent problems in their community, but 36% disagree.
 - More than half (51%) say it is common to see school-age children who are not in school.
 - Rural and poor respondents are more likely to see child abuse and neglect as frequent problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Only minorities say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (40%), children with disability (35%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (28%).
 - Citizens who are poor are considerably less likely than their better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

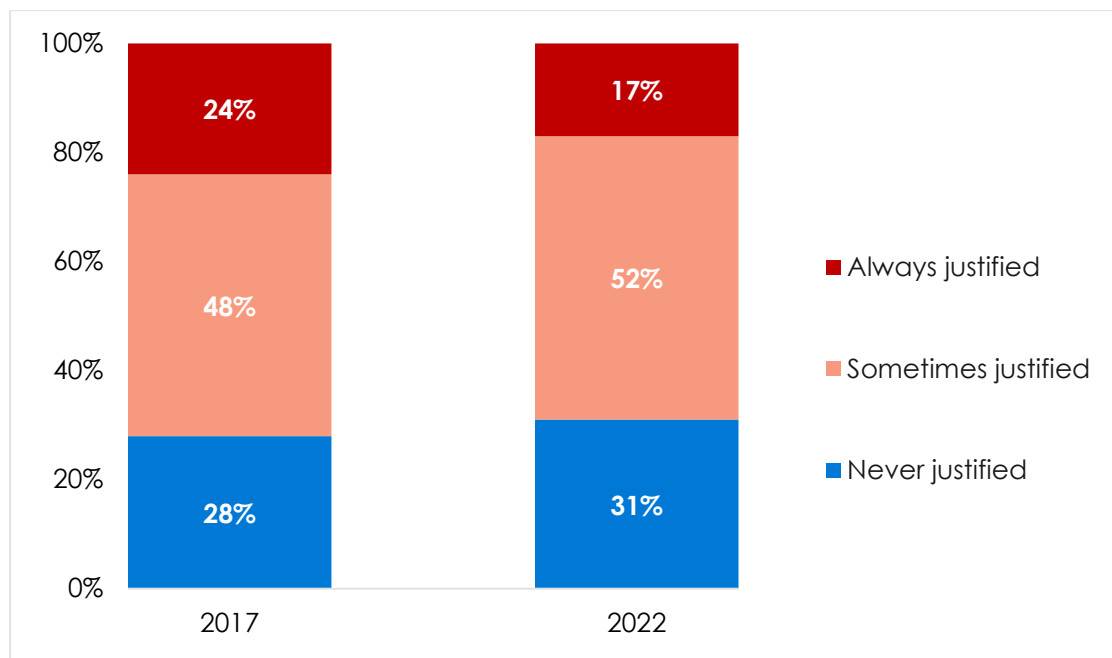
- A majority (54%) of Zimbabweans say the government is doing a poor job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.
 - Urban and poor citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

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?

About seven in 10 Zimbabweans (69%) believe it is “sometimes justified” (52%) or “always justified” (17%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. The proportion of Zimbabweans who say this practice is “never justified” has increased only marginally since 2017, from 28% to 31% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Zimbabwe | 2017-2022



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?

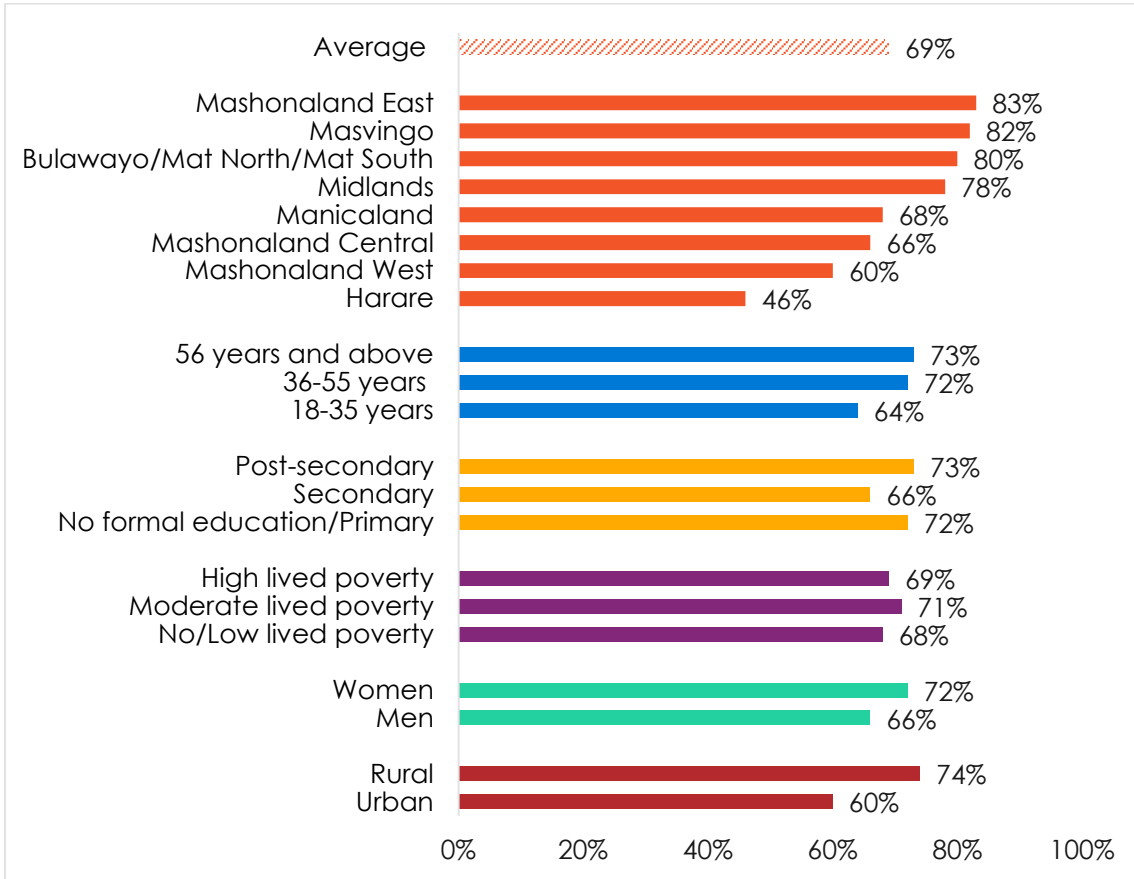
Women are more likely than men to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (72% vs. 66%), as are rural residents compared to urbanites (74% vs. 60%) (Figure 2). The practice is less widely accepted among young respondents (64% of 18- to 35-year-olds) than among their elders (72%-73%).

Geographically, Harare Metropolitan Province residents are far less likely to approve of physical discipline for children (46%) than citizens in other provinces.

Assessments of how often Zimbabweans use physical force to discipline their children are about equally divided: 47% say this happens “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently,” while 48% think it’s not a common occurrence (Figure 3).

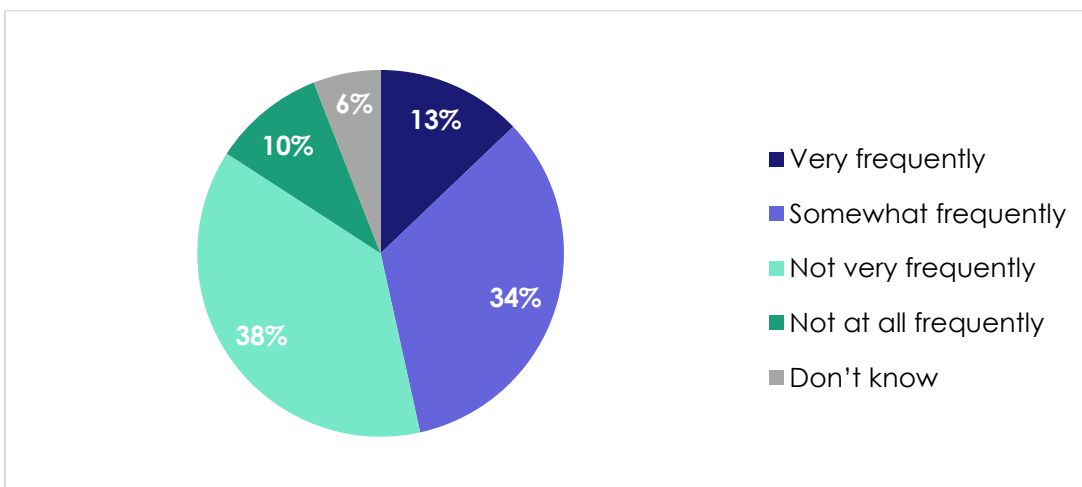
Rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to report that people in their community often use physical force to discipline children (53% vs. 37%) (Figure 4). In Harare, only 15% of respondents agree. The perception that physical discipline is a frequent occurrence is less widespread among citizens with post-secondary education (29%) than among those with less schooling (50%-59%).

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



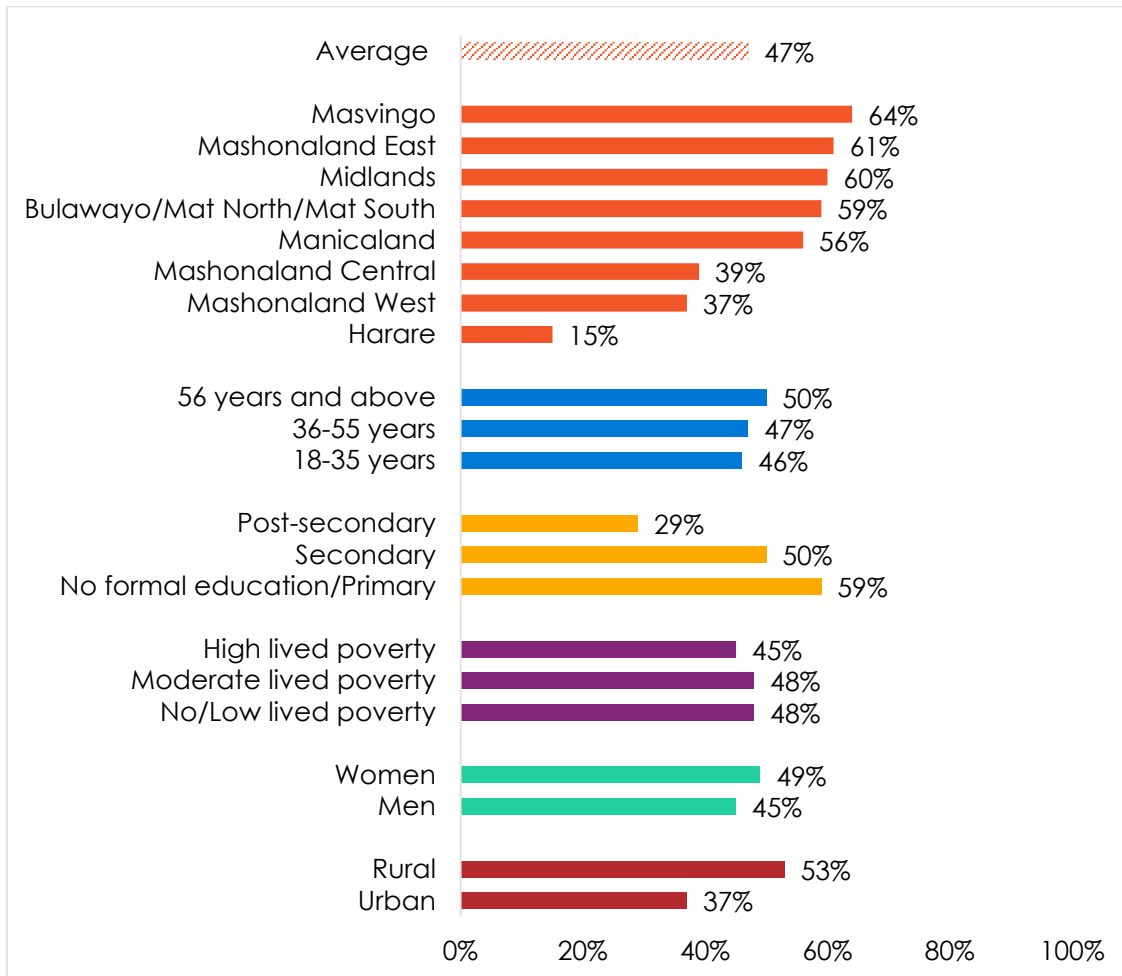
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children?
 | Zimbabwe | 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?

Figure 4: Perception that adults frequently use physical force to discipline children
 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 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, almost three-fifths (58%) of Zimbabweans say this is "not very frequent" (41%) or "not at all frequent" (17%), while 36% report that abuse and neglect are common (Figure 5).

More than half (51%) say it is common to see school-age children who are not in school, though 47% disagree.

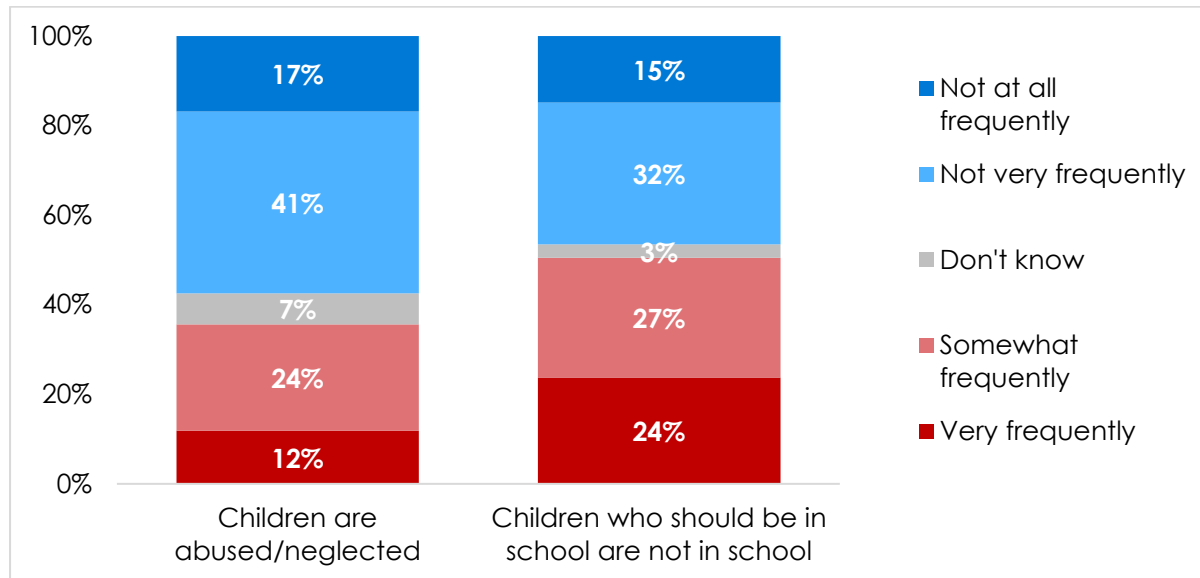
Young respondents are somewhat more likely than the middle generation to see child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children as frequent problems in their community, but the young differ little from seniors in their assessments (Figure 6).

Child abuse and neglect are more commonly reported as a frequent problem in rural areas (39%) than in cities (31%). Similarly, concern about out-of-school children is more widespread among rural residents (56%) than their urban counterparts (42%) (Figure 7).

The perception of child abuse and neglect as a widespread problem is also higher among poor respondents, ranging from 31% of the best-off to 38% of those experiencing high lived

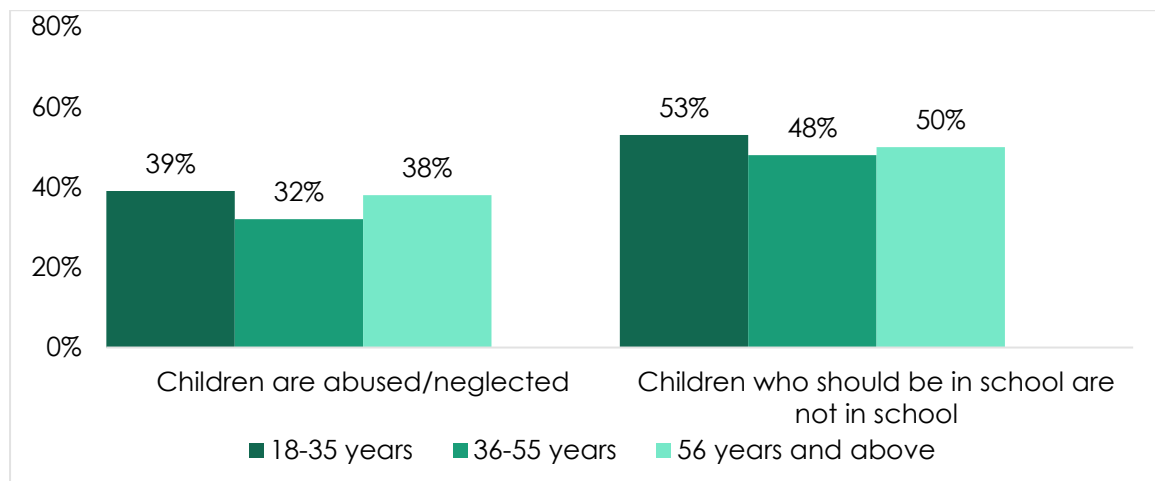
poverty.¹ A 14-percentage-point gap separates the wealthy from the poor when it comes to the issue of out-of-school children (44% vs. 58%) (Figure 8).

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Zimbabwe | 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?

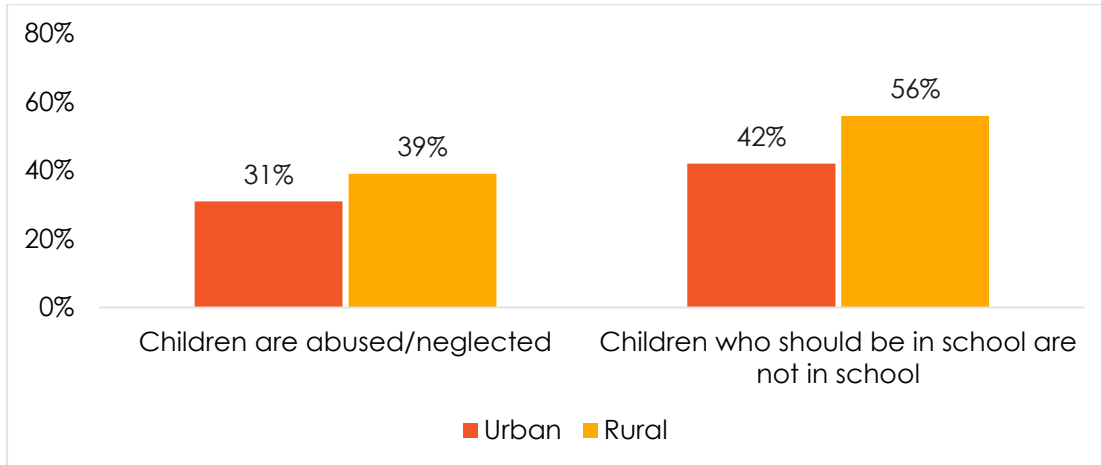
Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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")

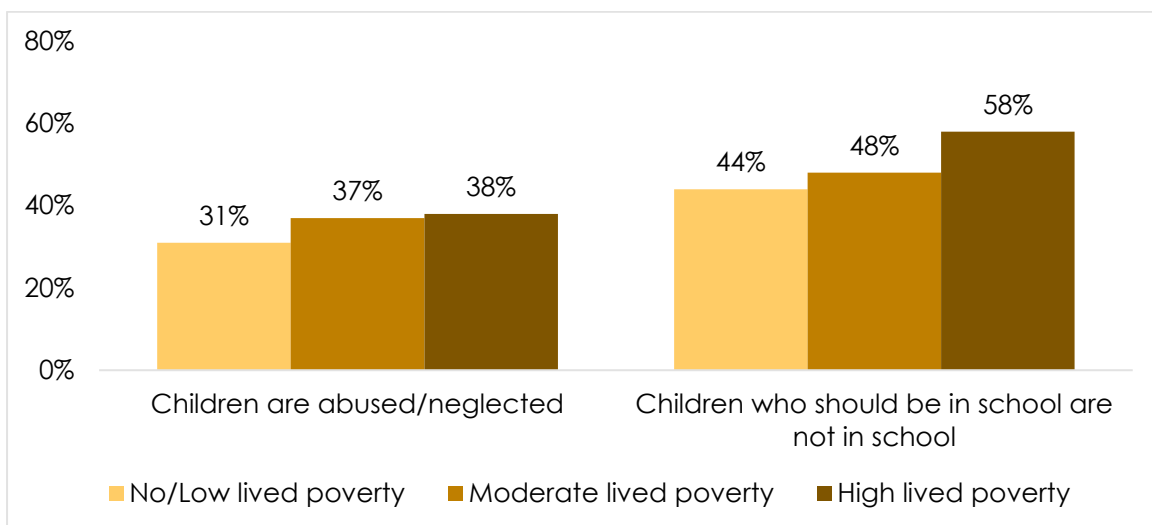
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without five basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived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

Figure 7: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Zimbabwe | 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 8: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 2022



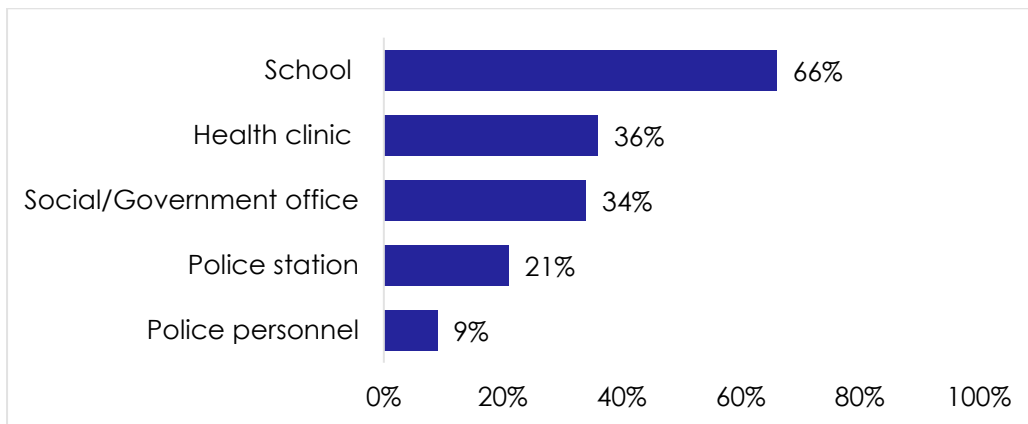
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

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, two-thirds (66%) of Zimbabweans live within walking distance of a school (Figure 9). About one-third have a nearby health clinic (36%) and social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems, and 21% have a police station in the enumeration area.

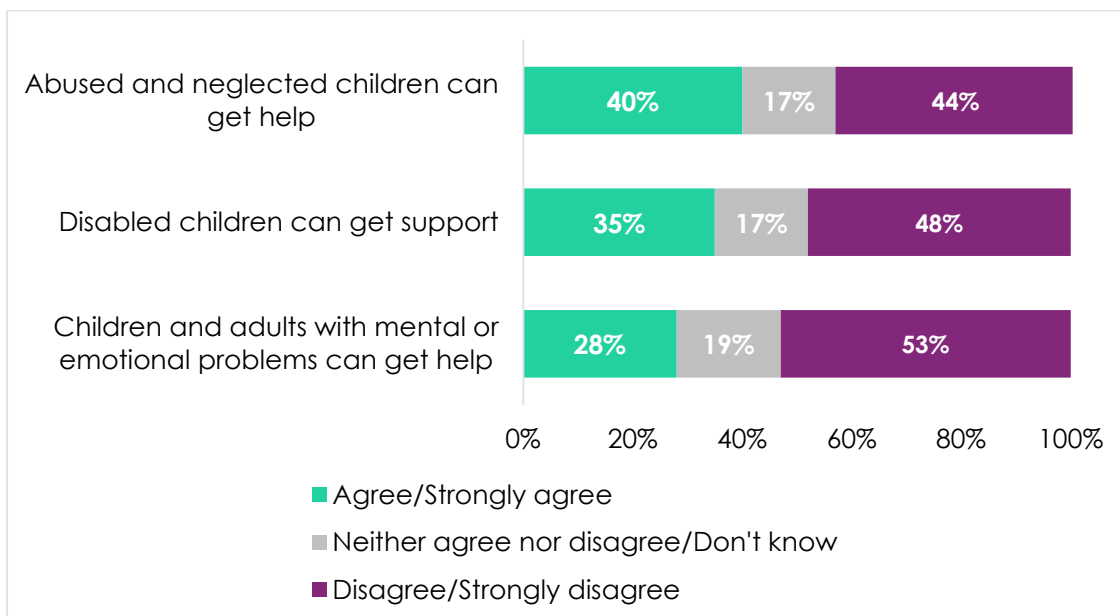
Figure 9: Availability of public services at the community level | Zimbabwe | 2022



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")

As for more specialised support services, only minorities report that they are available in the community (Figure 10). Four in 10 respondents (40%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected. Fewer say support is available for children with physical disabilities (35%) and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (28%).

Figure 10 : Is help available for vulnerable children? | Zimbabwe | 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.

Men and women hold similar views on these questions. But assessments of the availability of support services differ significantly by respondents' location, economic level, and education.

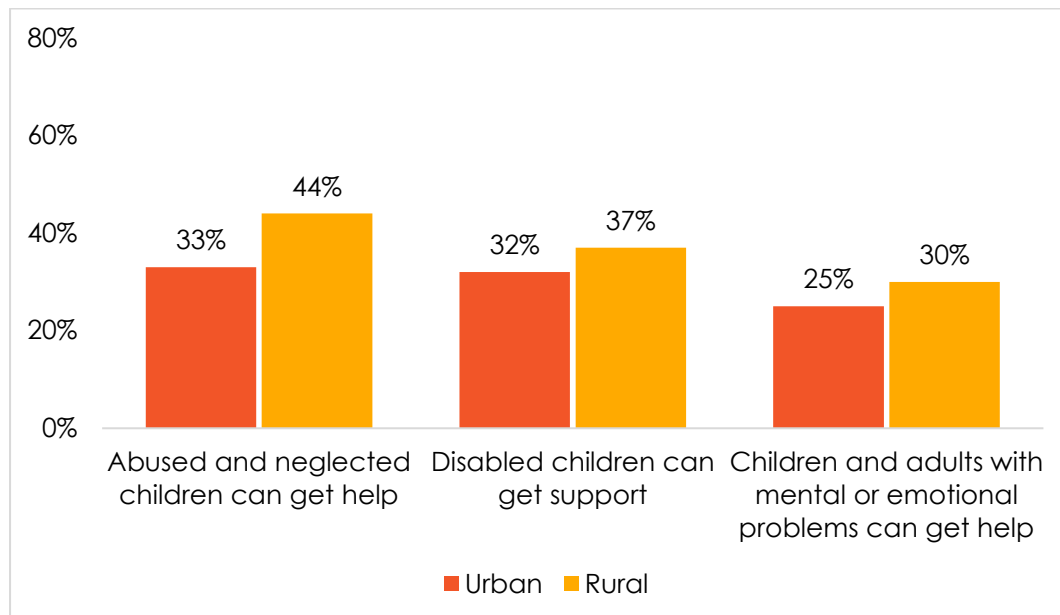
Across the board, citizens who live in urban areas and those experiencing high lived poverty are less likely than their rural and better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

For example, while 44% of rural residents say help is available for abused and neglected children, only 33% of urbanites say the same (Figure 11). Gaps of 5 percentage points separate rural and urban views when it comes to support for disabled children (37% rural vs. 32% urban) and people with mental or emotional problems (30% vs. 25%). Since it is unlikely that formal support services are more widely present in rural areas than in cities, this finding may reflect rural residents' greater reliance on informal support or urban residents' higher expectations of what constitutes assistance for vulnerable children.

The pattern is clear when it comes to lived poverty: The poorest citizens are significantly less likely to report available support for abused and neglected children (a 28-point gap), disabled children (24 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (14 points) (Figure 12).

By education level, respondents with primary education or no formal schooling are somewhat more likely than those with post-secondary qualifications to say that help is available in their community for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (29% vs. 23%) and disabled children (38% vs. 34%) (Figure 13).

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



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

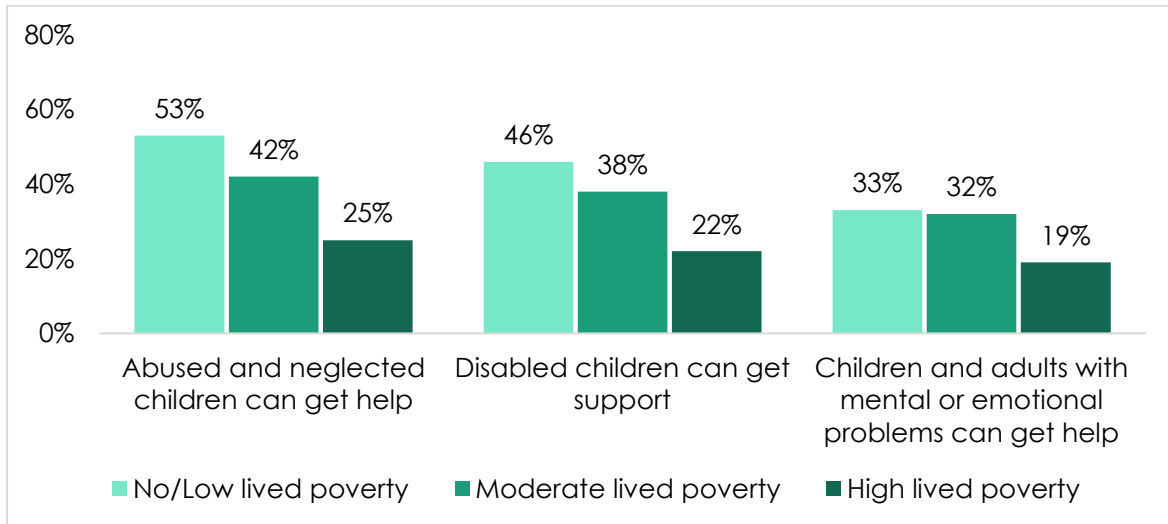
In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

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.

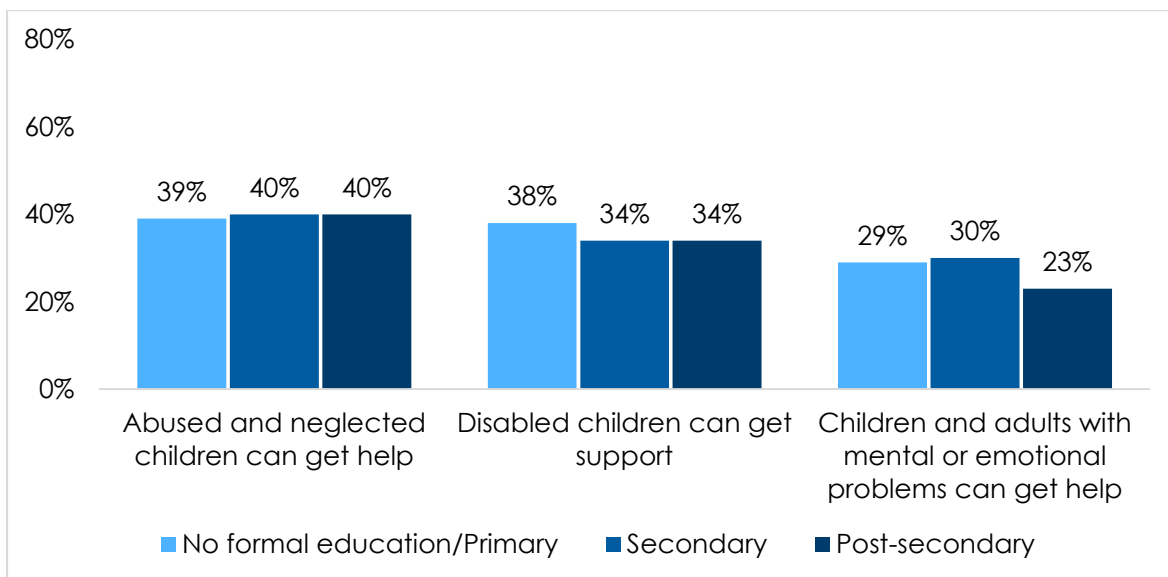
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 12: Help is available for vulnerable children | by lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 2022



(% who “agree” or “agree strongly” that help and support are available)

Figure 13: Help is available for vulnerable children | by education level | Zimbabwe | 2022



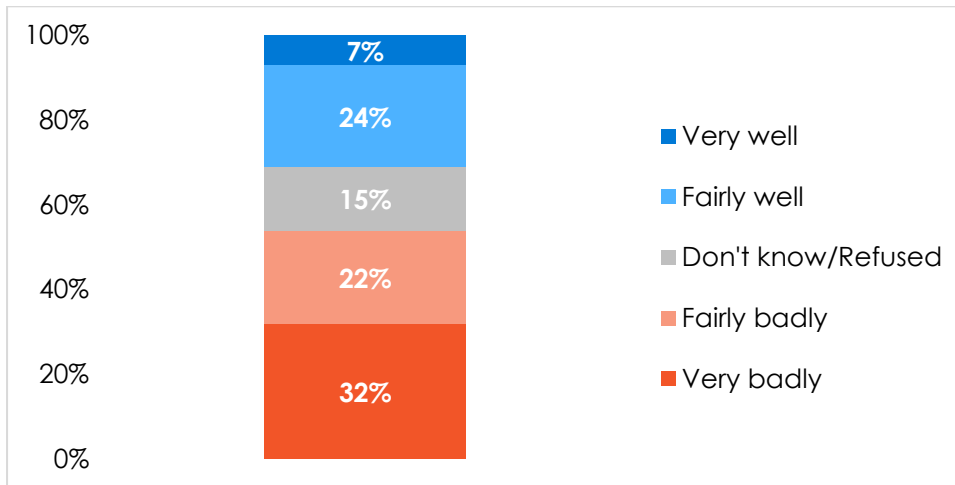
(% who “agree” or “agree strongly” that help and support are available)

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority of Zimbabweans score the government poorly on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: Only 31% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 54% believe it is doing badly (Figure 14).

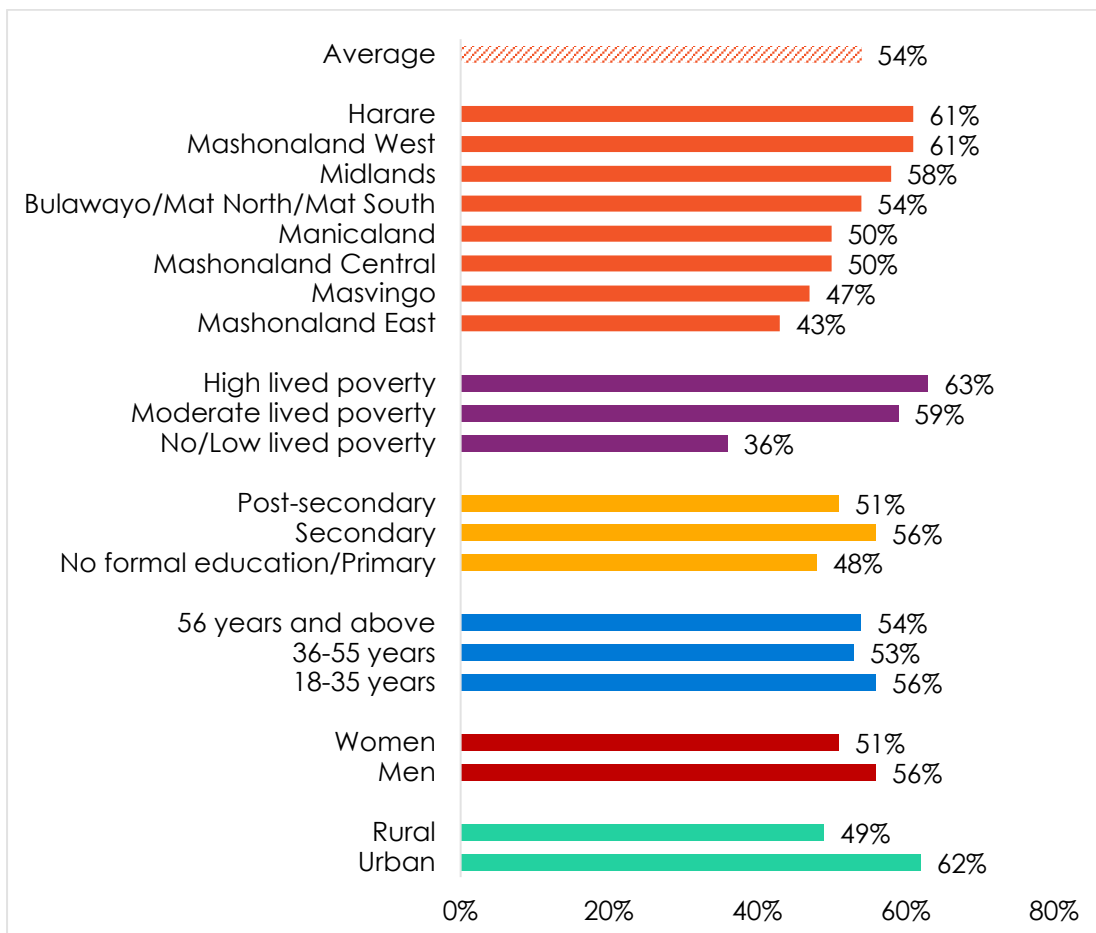
Disapproval of the government’s performance is higher among men (56%) and urbanites (62%) than among women (51%) and rural residents (49%) (Figure 15). But assessments differ more strongly by respondents’ economic level: The poorest citizens (63%) are far more likely than the wealthy (36%) to be critical of the government’s efforts to protect vulnerable children.

Figure 14: Government performance on child welfare | Zimbabwe | 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?

Figure 15: Disapproval of government performance on child welfare | Zimbabwe | 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 badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Despite the existence of a framework for the care and protection of children in Zimbabwe, survey findings point to gaps in implementation. While a majority of citizens say child abuse and neglect are infrequent problems in their community, a substantial minority disagree, especially among poor and rural respondents. And more than half say the problem of out-of-school children is widespread.

A majority of citizens endorse parents' use of physical force to discipline their children, and almost half report that this practice is common.

Disturbingly, only a minority of respondents report that resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children, children with disability, and people with mental or emotional problems. Overall, a majority of citizens think the government is doing a poor job of protecting the nation's children.

Poor citizens are particularly likely to say that abuse and neglect are common occurrences, that help for vulnerable children is not available, and that the government is performing badly in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, a clear call for the government to step up its efforts to protect economically disadvantaged children.

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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.

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