

In Uganda, vulnerable children lack support at the community level, survey findings show

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 648 | Stevenson Ssevume Male

Summary

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development vision of “a world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation” cuts across many of its goals, from providing education and health care to eliminating poverty, child marriage, and female genital mutilation (United Nations, 2015).

In Uganda, the government has backed protection, care, and support for all children with an arsenal of policies, programmes, and guidelines, including a National Child Policy, National Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Policy, National Social Protection Policy, and National Parenting Guidelines. In addition to community-based services supported by nongovernmental organisations, government support centres exist to address particular needs (e.g. for education and physical rehabilitation), though their coverage is still limited by resource constraints (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2004, 2015, 2018, 2020; Ministry of Education & Sports, 2017; Truell, 2019).

Despite the government’s efforts, many Ugandan children confront enormous barriers to a healthy upbringing. According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey, almost three in 10 children under age 5 are stunted due to malnutrition, 85% of children under age 15 experienced a violent disciplinary action during the previous month, and 43% of women aged 25-49 married before they turned 18 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The Uganda Violence Against Children Survey reported that one in three girls and one in six boys experience sexual violence, while six in 10 girls and seven in 10 boys suffer physical violence (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2017).

Between 2016 and 2021, the Uganda Police Force recorded 169,632 cases of violence, abuse, and neglect involving children (Uganda Police Force, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

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

In Uganda, findings show that a majority of citizens oppose the use of physical force to discipline children and say the practice is not common in their community.

More than half also describe child abuse and neglect as infrequent, though a substantial minority disagree. Out-of-school children are more widely seen as a common problem.

Fewer than half of Ugandans say help is available in their community for children who are abused or neglected, children with disability, and children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

Overall, a majority of citizens give the government poor marks on promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

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. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 7 and 25 January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

Key findings

- More than half (54%) of Ugandans say parents are “never justified” in using physical force to discipline their children. Opposition to the practice has risen by 5 percentage points since 2017.
- About the same proportion (55%) say the use of physical force to discipline children is an infrequent occurrence in their community, though 45% disagree.
- Nearly six in 10 Ugandans (57%) say child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are “not very frequent” or “not at all frequent” in their community, while 42% describe it as common.
- But almost two-thirds (64%) say out-of-school children are a common problem.
- Fewer than half of Ugandans say help is available in their community for abused, mistreated, or neglected children (47%), children with disability (44%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (36%).
 - Poor citizens and rural residents are particularly likely to report that such assistance and support are not available in their community.
- A majority (54%) of Ugandans say their government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

Use of physical force to discipline children

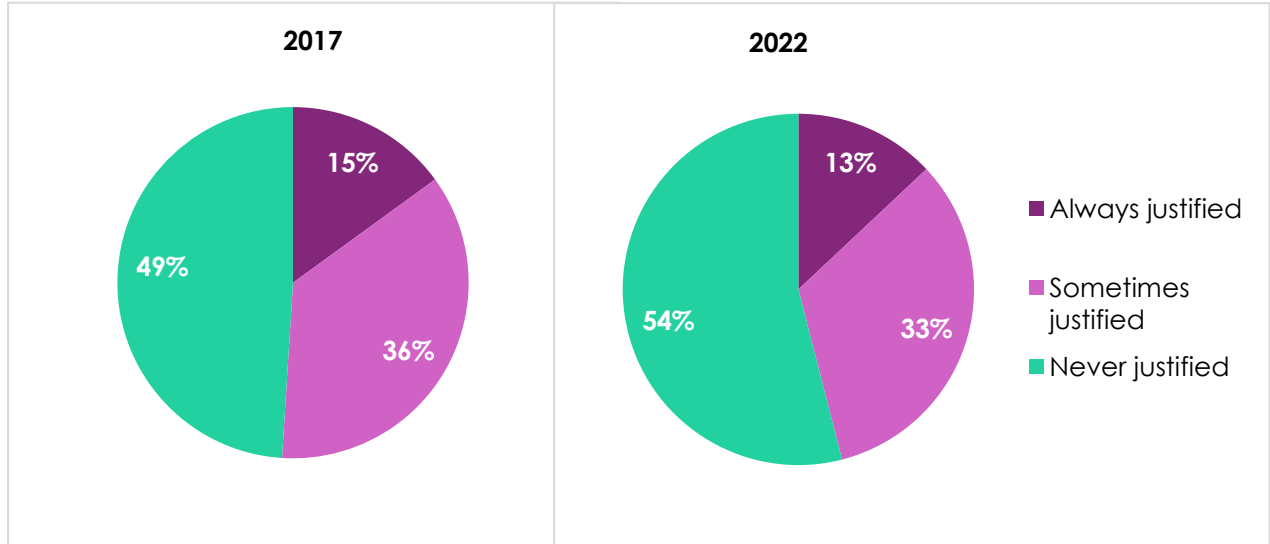
Discipline is an integral part of raising children. But should the use of physical force to discipline children be considered appropriate or abusive?

More than one half of Ugandans (54%) say it is “never justified” for parents to use physical force as a measure to discipline their children, while 46% believe it is “sometimes” or “always” justified (Figure 1).

Opposition to physical discipline of children has increased by 5 percentage points since 2017.

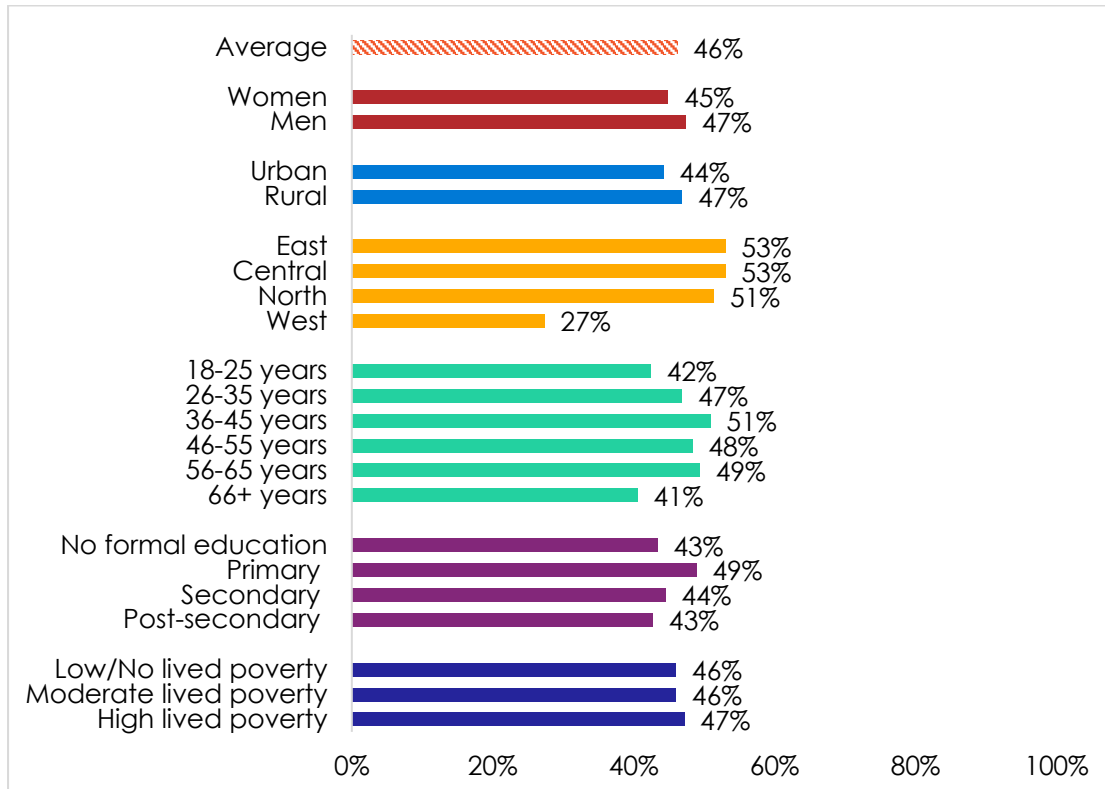
Residents in the West region stand out: Only 27% endorse the use of physical force to discipline children, compared to 51%-53% in other regions (Figure 2). The youngest (42%) and oldest (41%) are less supportive of physical discipline than other age groups (47%-51%). But men and women hold similar views, as do urban and rural residents, and respondents' education and economic levels show no clear pattern in support for the practice.

Figure 1: Should parents use physical force to discipline children? | Uganda
 | 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?

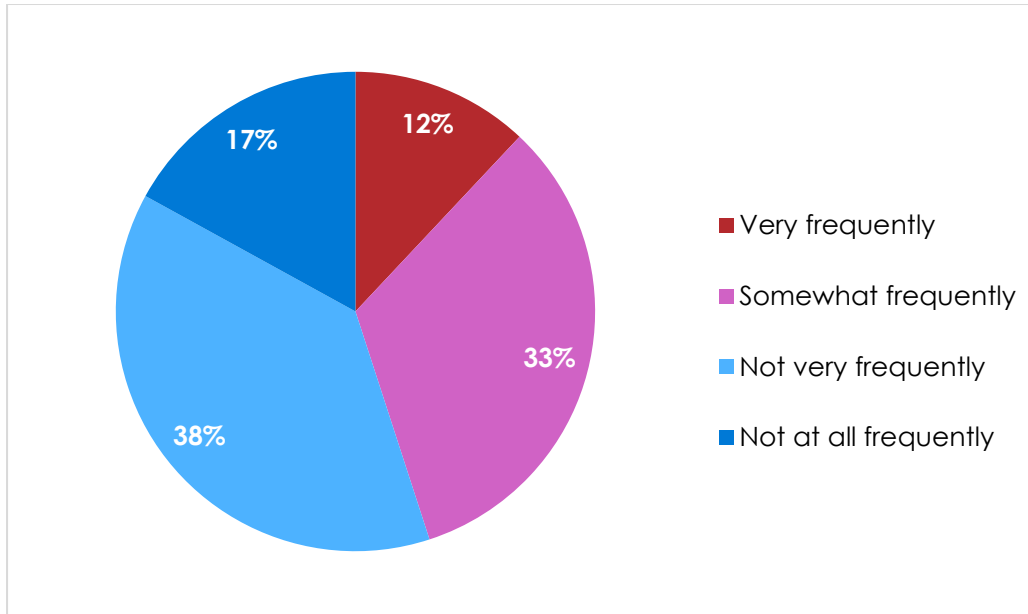
Figure 2: Parents justified in using physical force to discipline children | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



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? (% say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

Ugandans are also divided as to how often adults in their community discipline their children using physical force: 45% say this happens “fairly” or “very” often, while 55% say it’s an infrequent occurrence (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Frequency of the use of physical force to discipline children | Uganda
 | 2022



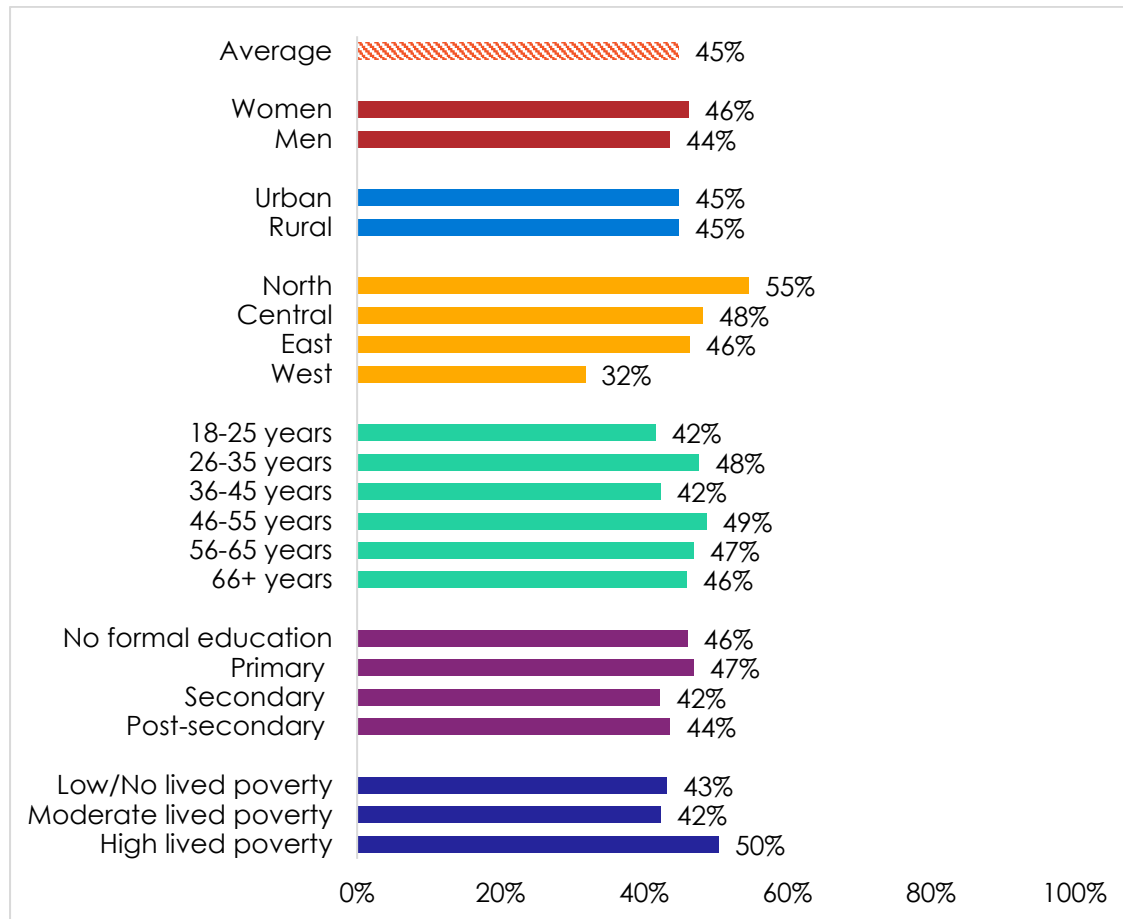
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Again the West stands out, with only 32% of residents reporting that the use of physical discipline is common, compared to 46%-55% in other regions (Figure 4). Citizens experiencing high levels of lived poverty¹ (50%) are more likely to report that physical disciplining is a common occurrence than their better-off counterparts (42%-43%).

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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 and Patel (2022).

Figure 4: Parent frequently use physical force to discipline children | by demographic group | Uganda | 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”)

Child abuse and neglect

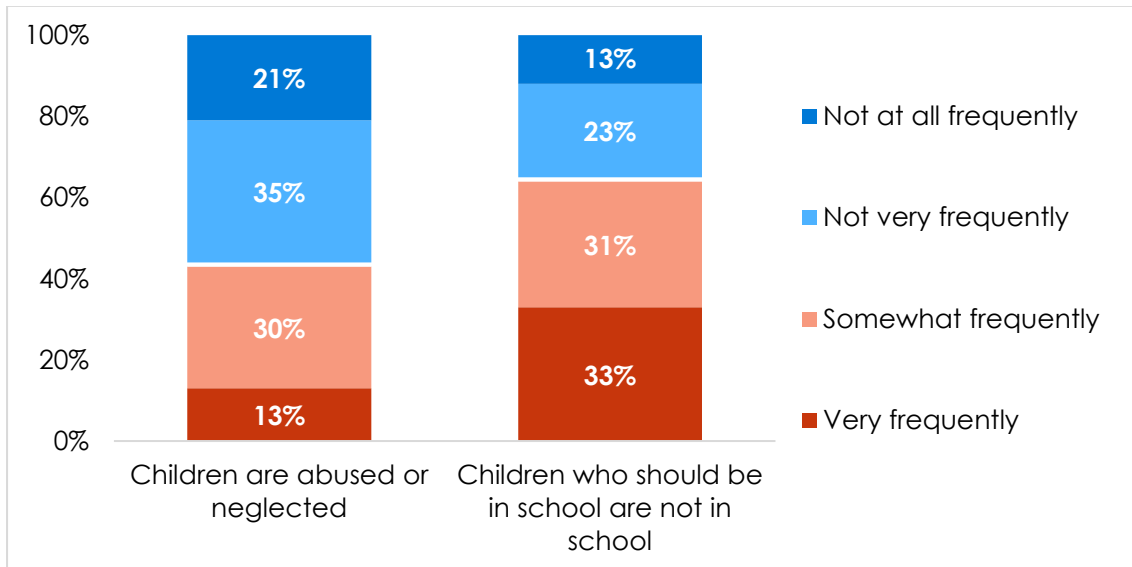
Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, a majority (57%)² of Ugandans say this is “not very frequent” (35%) or “not at all frequent” (21%). But a substantial proportion (42%) describe abuse and neglect as frequent occurrences (Figure 5).

And almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens say out-of-school are “somewhat frequent” (31%) or “very frequent” (33%) in their community.

Perceptions of child abuse and neglect as frequent occurrences are least common in the Western region (30%) and most common in the North (50%) (Figure 6). Urban and rural residents hold similar views on the frequency of abuse and neglect, and women and men differ only marginally. The youngest respondents are least likely to see widespread abuse and neglect (39%), a perception that is more common among the poorest citizens (49%) than among their better-off counterparts (40%).

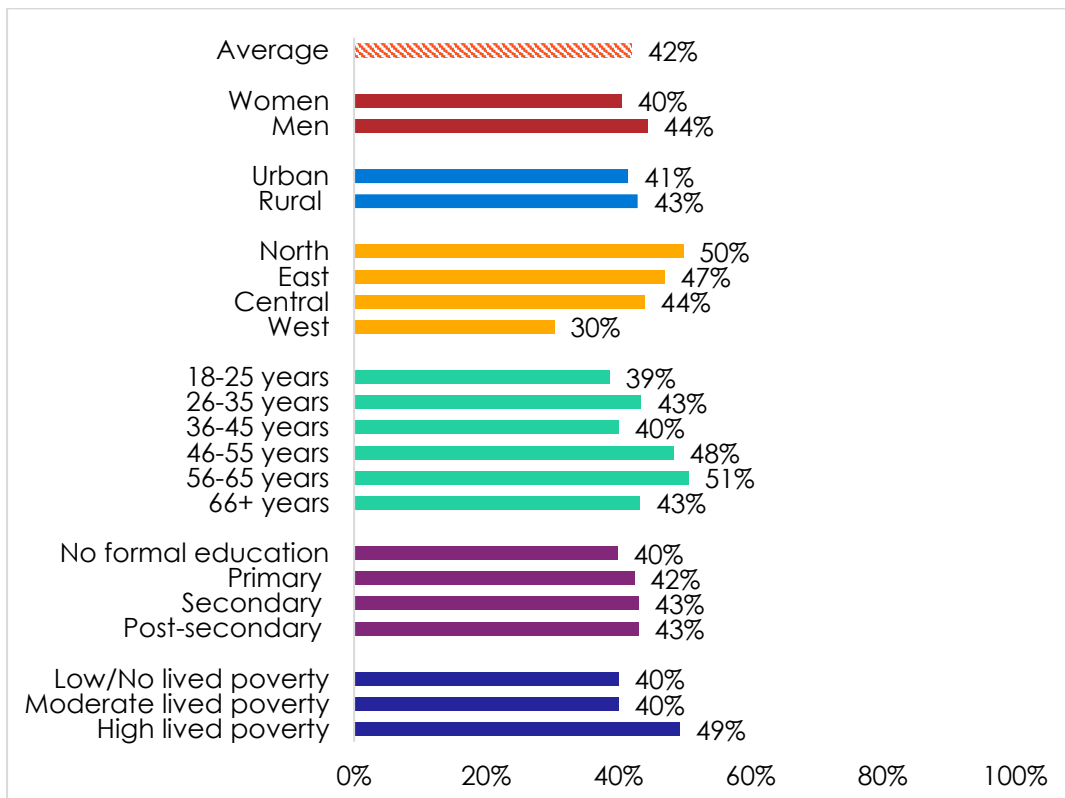
² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures.

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

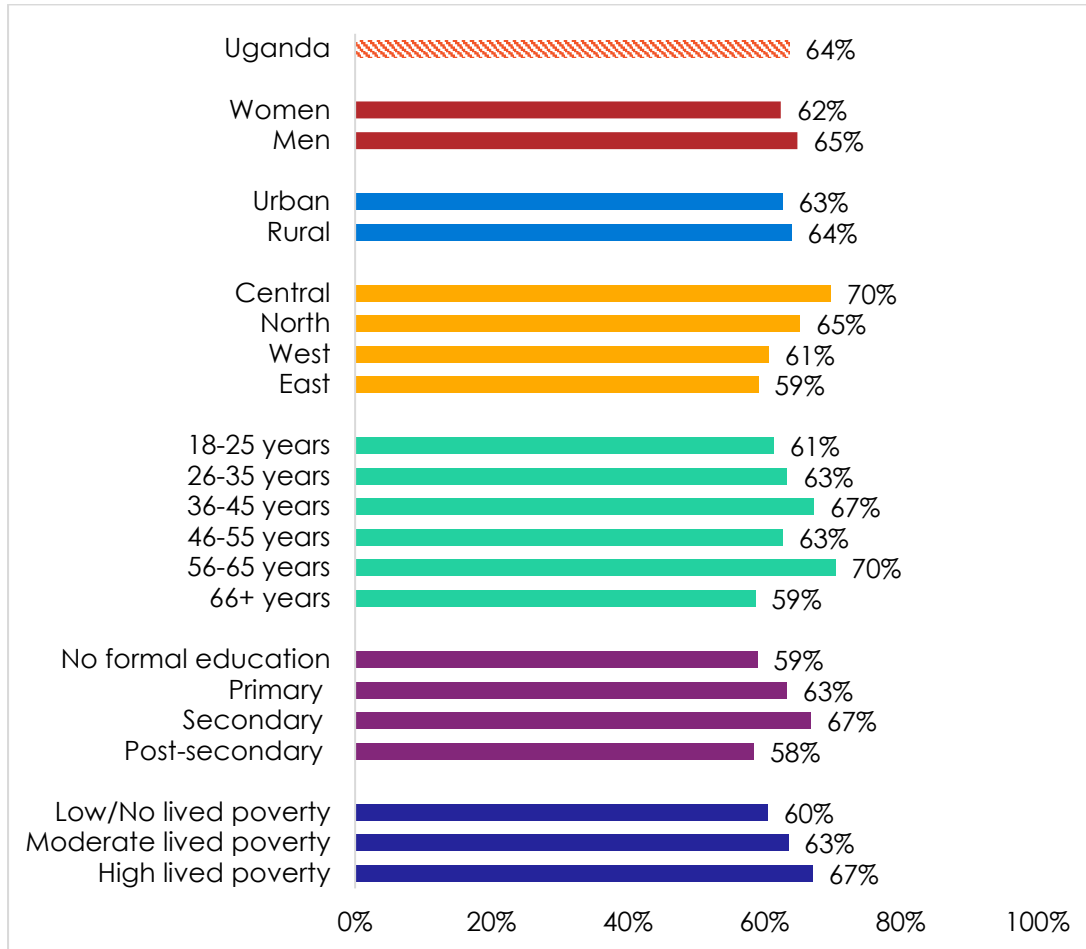
Figure 6: Child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are frequent | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

With regard to out-of-school children, again perceptions differ little by gender or urban-rural location (Figure 7). Residents in the Central region (70%) are more likely to see this as a widespread problem in their community than citizens living in other regions (59%-65%). This perception increases modestly with respondents' level of lived poverty, ranging from 60% among well-off citizens to 67% among the poorest.

Figure 7: Children are frequently out of school | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



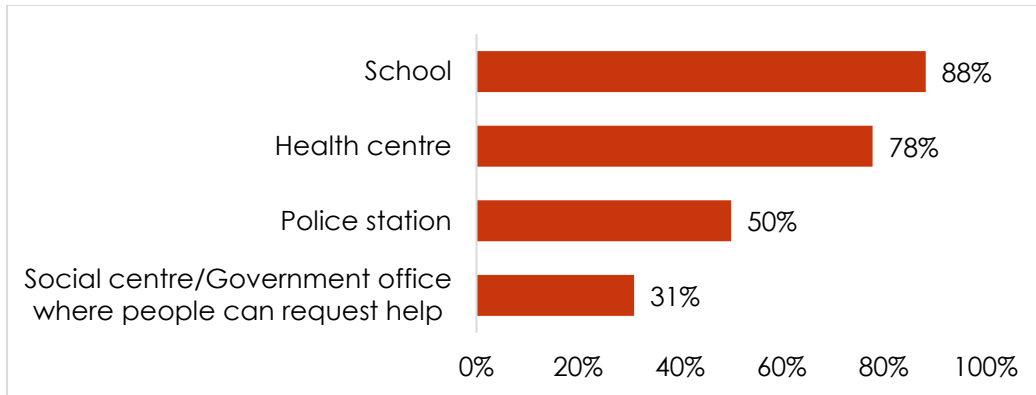
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Availability of support for vulnerable children

In its National Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Policy, the government of Uganda aims to focus on services that are cost-effective and have the greatest impact on reducing vulnerability and improving the welfare of vulnerable children. To what extent are services available in local communities?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all enumeration areas they visited, a majority of citizens live within walking distance of a school (88%) and a health centre (78%) (Figure 8). Half (50%) have a nearby police station, while fewer than one-third (31%) live within walking distance of a social centre or government office where people can request help with problems.

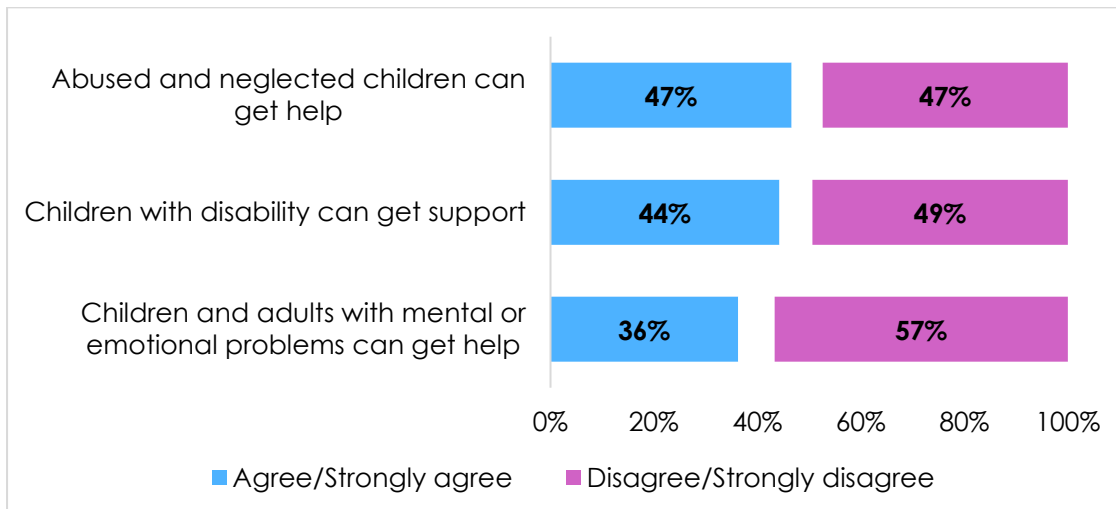
Figure 8: Availability of public services in the community | Uganda | 2022



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

When it comes to more specialised services, fewer than half of Ugandans say help is available in their community for abused, mistreated, or neglected children (47%), children with disability (44%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (36%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Uganda | 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.

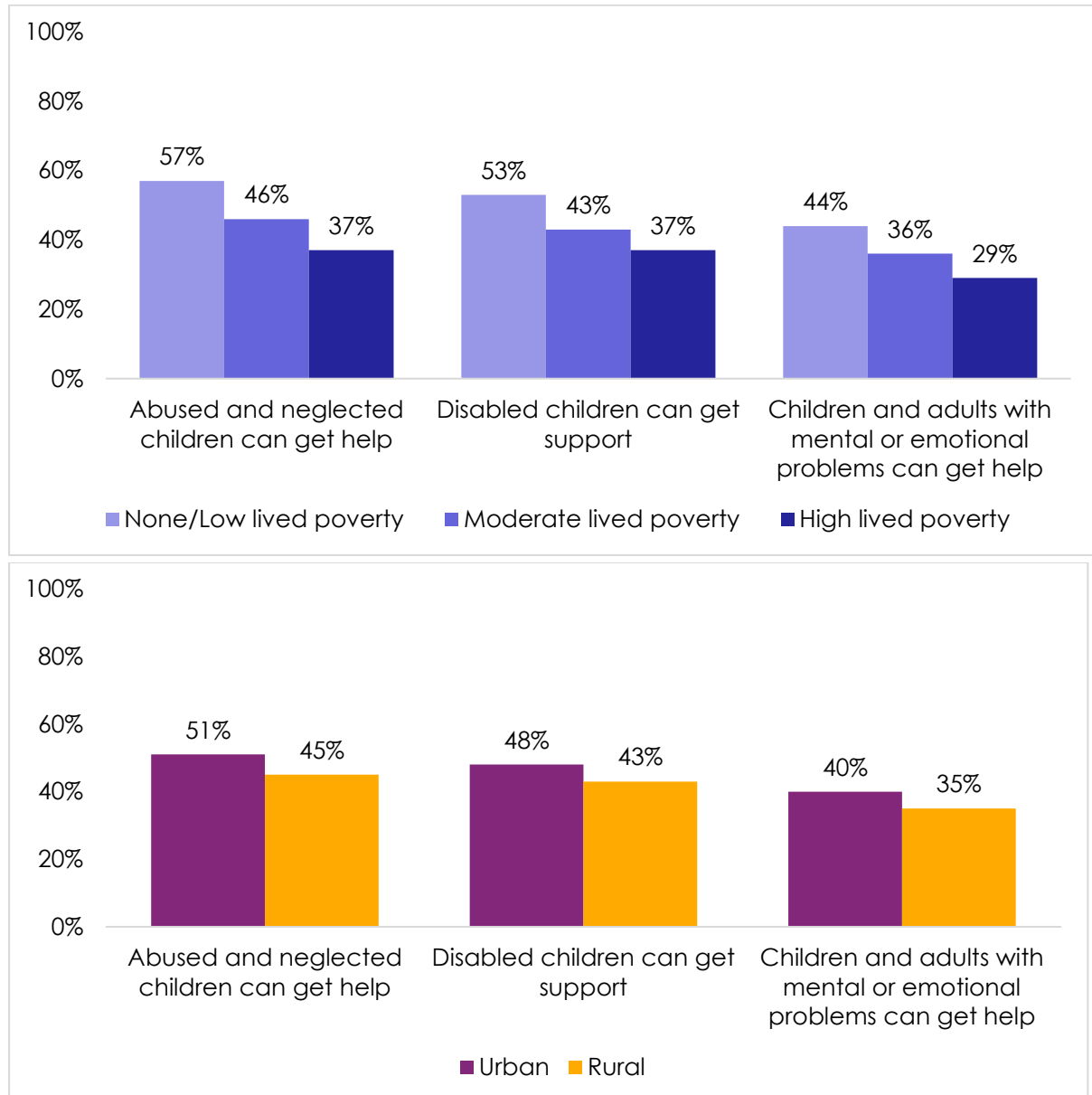
In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

For all three groups, poor citizens are far less likely than wealthier respondents to say that help and support are available in their community (Figure 10). While 57% of the best-off respondents say help is available for abused and neglected children, only 37% of the poorest

respondents agree. The pattern is the same with regard to children with disability (53% vs. 37%) and to children and adults with mental or emotional problems (44% vs. 29%).

Resources to help vulnerable children are also reported more commonly in cities than in rural areas, with a gap of 5-6 percentage points separating the two.

Figure 10: Help is available for vulnerable children | by lived poverty and urban-rural location | Uganda | 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.

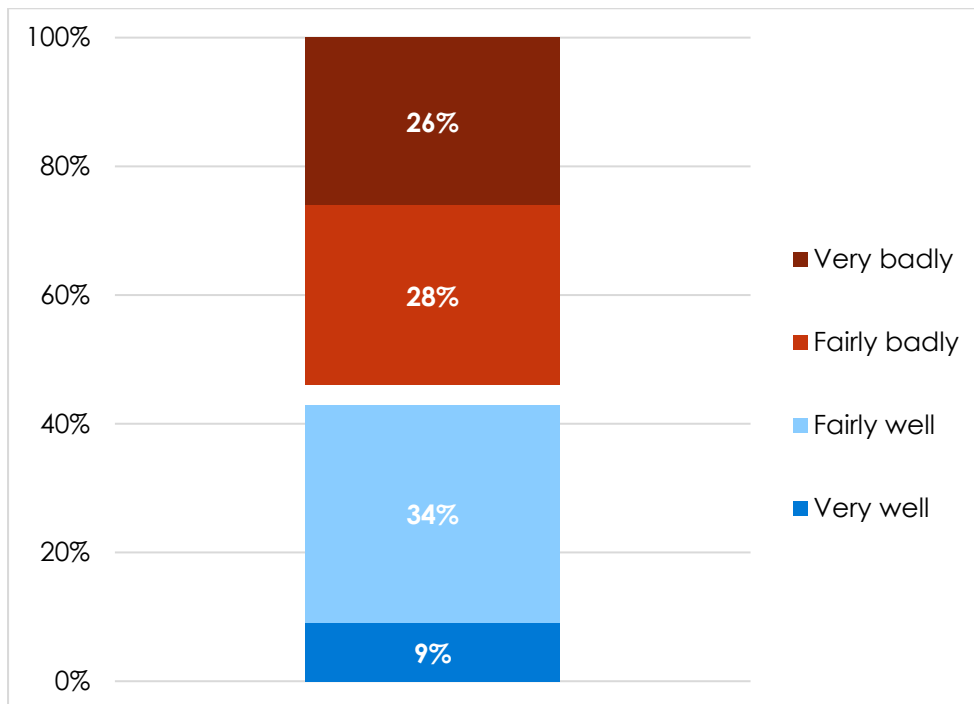
In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

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

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority (54%) of Ugandans say their government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, while only 43% think it is doing a good job (Figure 11).

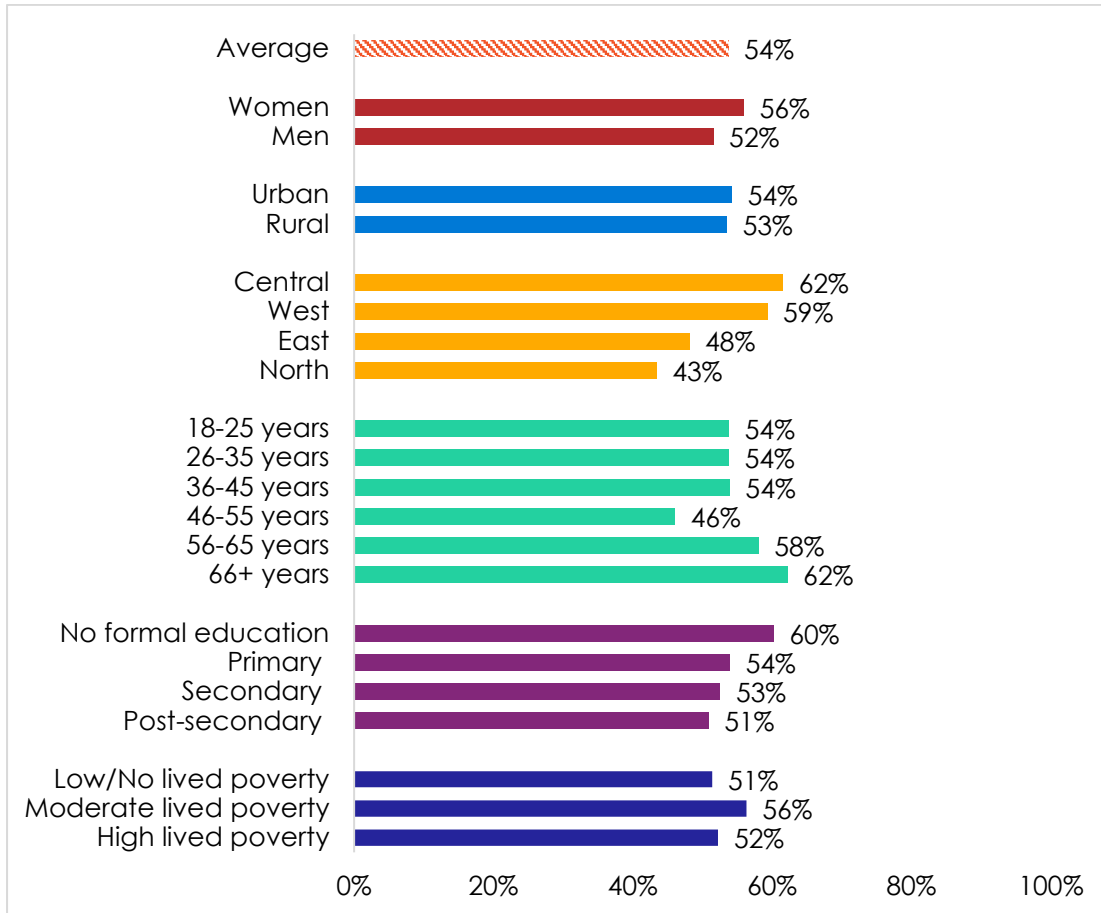
Figure 11: Government performance on protecting and promoting well-being of vulnerable children | Uganda | 2022



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?

Assessments are more critical in the Central (62% disapproval) and West (59%) regions than in East (48%) and North (43%) (Figure 12). Citizens with no formal schooling (60%) are more likely to disapprove of the government's performance than those with more education (51%-54%). Disapproval of the government's performance on child welfare is particularly high among older citizens (58%-62% among those over age 55).

Figure 12: Poor government performance on protecting and promoting well-being of vulnerable children | by demographic group | Uganda | 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 government efforts to ensure the well-being of Uganda's children, survey findings indicate that child abuse and neglect – including out-of-school children – are significant problems in many communities.

Importantly, many Ugandans report that resources to help and support vulnerable children are not available in their community – a lack that is especially felt by rural and economically disadvantaged citizens.

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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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