

Gambians see limited support for vulnerable children, call for stronger government action

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 729 | Walleign S. Hassen

Summary

In developing countries, an estimated 250 million children under age 5 are at risk of not reaching their development potential due to adverse experiences in early life (Black et al., 2017). More than 80 million of these children live in sub-Saharan Africa, which corresponds to two-thirds of all children in the age group in the region (Blimpo, Carneiro, Jervis, & Pugatch, 2022). The World Bank (2020) estimates that because of limited education, health care, and social safety net services, children in the Gambia achieve only 40% of their full productivity potential.

The Gambia has a diverse legal and policy arsenal to protect and promote the welfare of its children – and faces an equally varied set of threats to child well-being and development, ranging from poverty and violence to sexual abuse and child marriage. Analyses by UNICEF (2022) estimate that nine out of 10 Gambian children are poor and deprived of sanitation, nutrition, and/or education, and that 89% of children experience violence such as sexual abuse, bullying, and physical punishment or psychological aggression by caregivers. A 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey found that 50.6% of girls under age 15 had undergone female genital mutilation, and 34.2% of women aged 20-49 had married before age 18 (UNICEF, 2019).

The United Nations (2019) has called on the Gambian government to increase prosecutions for child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in order to break the “culture of silence” that allows these to continue at alarming rates.

Complementing the Gambia's Children's Act 2005, Trafficking in Persons Act 2011, Domestic Violence Act 2013, and Sexual Violence Act 2013, the African Child Policy Forum (2020) cites a number of recent advances in child protection, including the Women's Amendment Act 2015 (addressing sexual violence and female genital mutilation), a minimum marriage age of 18, and the country's first National Social Protection Policy (2015–2025). But it also notes severe challenges when it comes to implementing or enforcing these laws and policies.

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Africans' attitudes and perceptions related to child well-being.

Findings show that a majority of Gambians endorse parents' use of physical force to discipline their children, though opposition to the practice has increased since 2018.

Most Gambians say that child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children are infrequent problems in their community. But only about half report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community, and a majority think their government is doing an inadequate 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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2022/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 30 August and 19 September 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 the Gambia in 2018 and 2021.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- Two-thirds (66%) of Gambians say parents are "sometimes" or "always" justified in using physical force to discipline their children. Opposition to corporal punishment has increased by 12 percentage points since 2018, to 34%.
 - A strong majority (65%) say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their community.

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

- Most Gambians say child abuse and neglect (79%) and out-of-school children (61%) are infrequent problems in their community.
 - Child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children are more widely seen as common problems in cities than in rural areas.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Roughly half of Gambians say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (54%), children with disabilities (47%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (45%).
 - Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to report that such support services are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

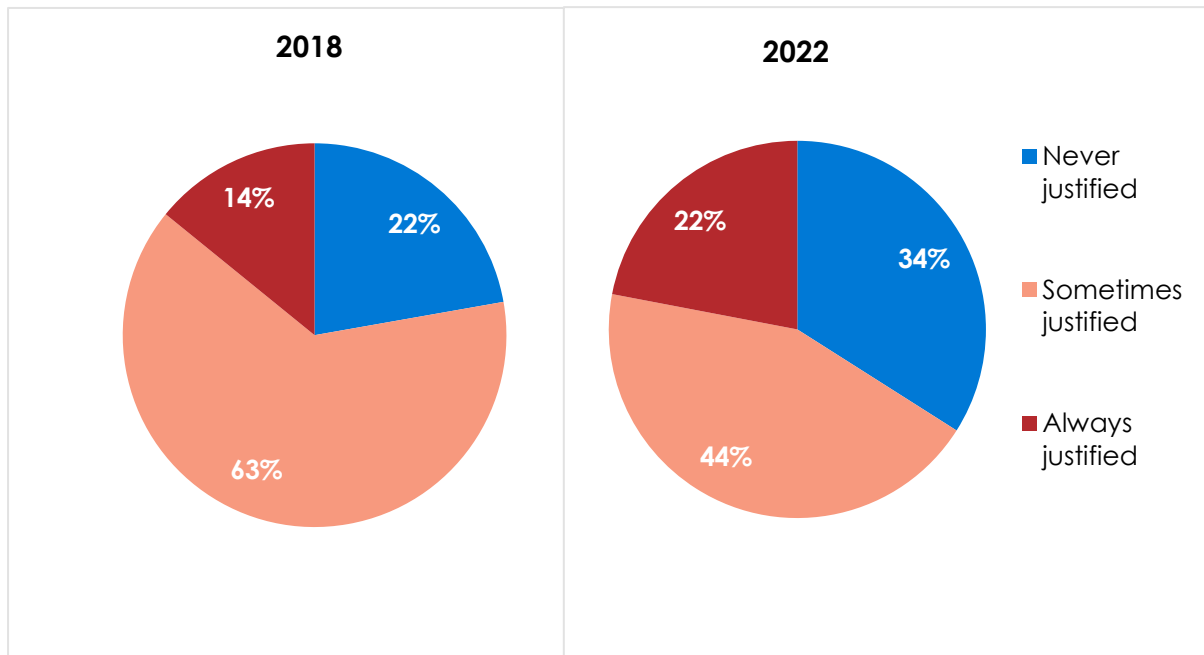
- Six in 10 Gambians (60%) say the government is doing a poor job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

Disciplining a child

Most parents agree that discipline is important in child upbringing, though their views may differ on the best means to realise it. The use of physical force to discipline children has long been the subject of debate.

Two-thirds (66%) of Gambians believe it is "sometimes justified" (44%) or "always justified" (22%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. Since 2018, the proportion of adults who say this practice is "never justified" has increased by 12 percentage points, from 22% to 34% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Gambia | 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?

While women and men see eye to eye on this question, rural residents are considerably more likely than urbanites to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (71% vs. 62%) (Figure 2). The practice is also more widely accepted among older respondents (74%) and among those with no formal education (72%) than among their respective counterparts, while economically well-off citizens (56%) are less likely to approve of it than those experiencing various levels of lived poverty¹ (62%-72%).

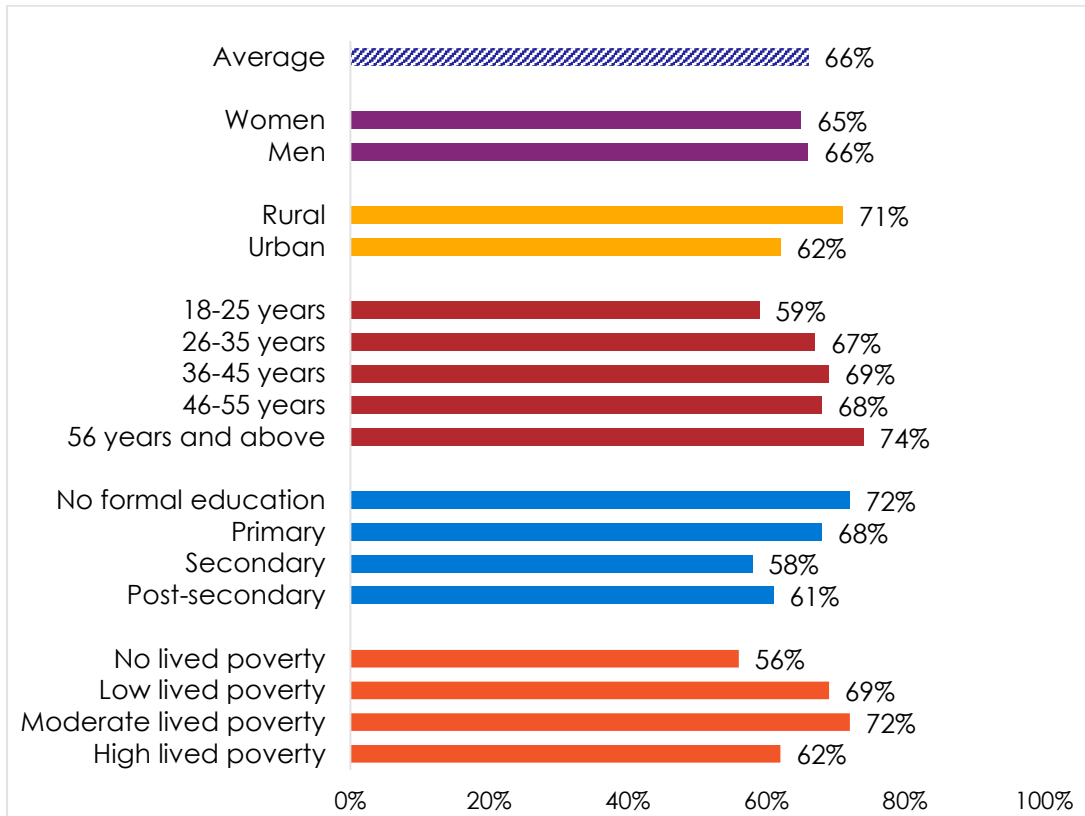
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Despite majority acceptance of the practice, about two-thirds (65%) of Gambians say that adults in their community do “not very frequently” (42%) or “not at all frequently” (23%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3). About one-third see it as a “somewhat frequent” (20%) or “very frequent” (14%) occurrence.

Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to report that people in their community frequently use physical force to discipline children (37% vs. 30%) (Figure 4). This perception is also more common among respondents with post-secondary education (47%) than among those with less schooling (29%-36%).

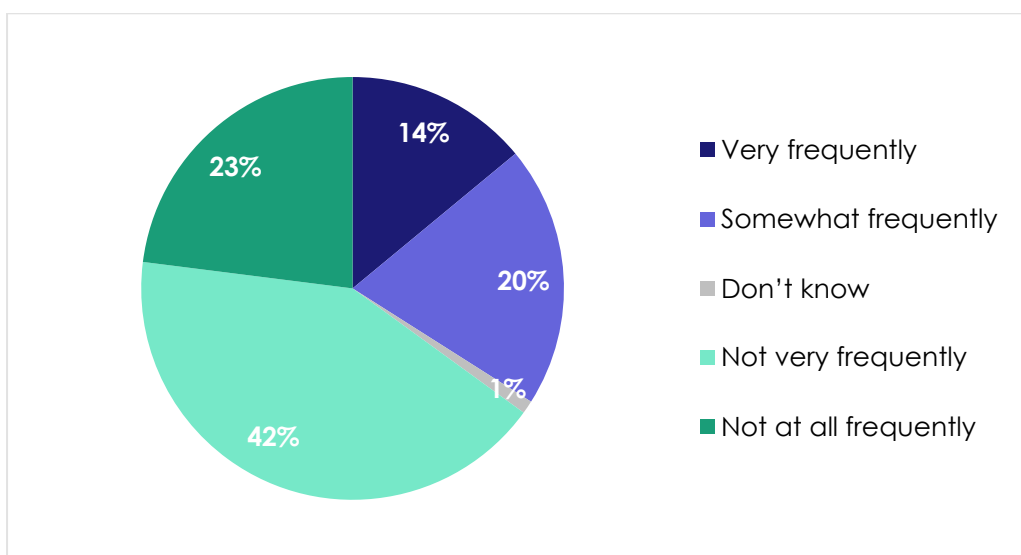
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

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



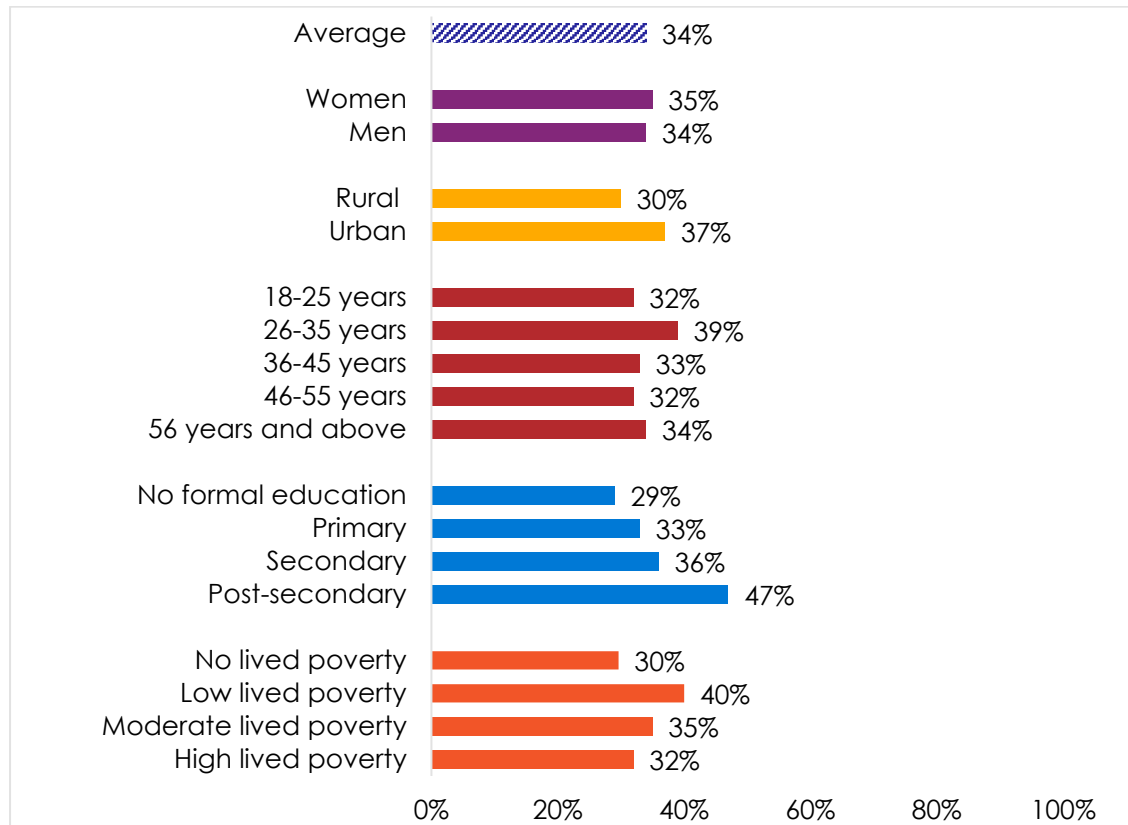
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

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

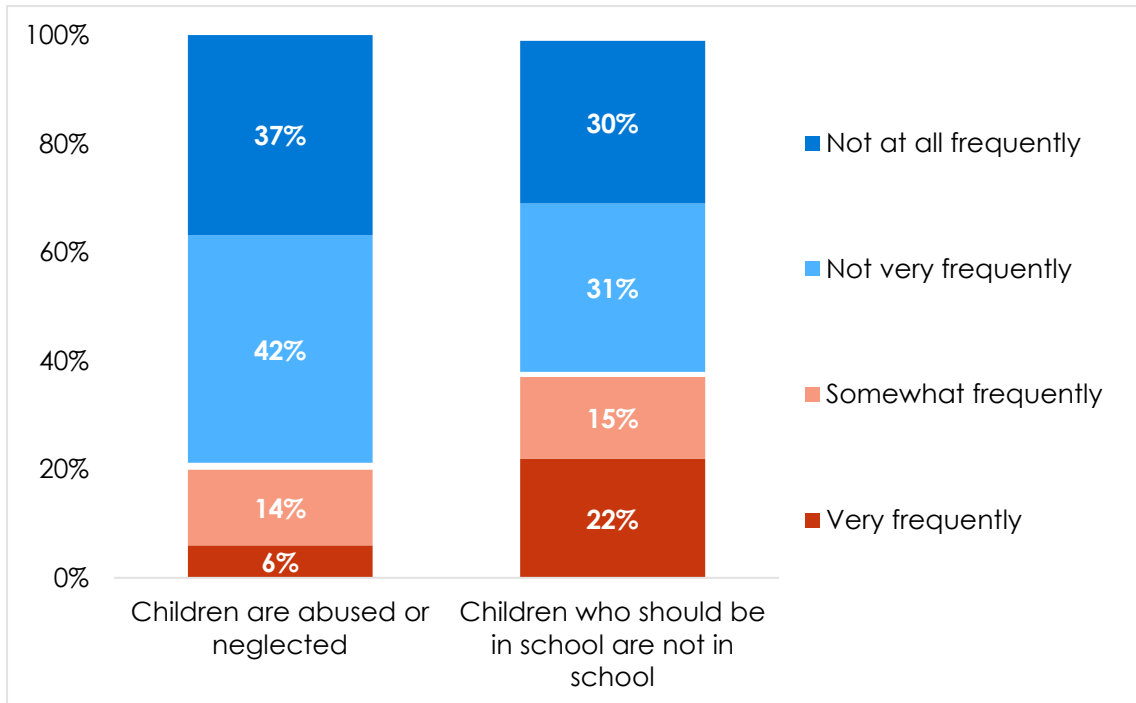
Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, eight in 10 Gambians (79%) say this is "not at all frequent" (37%) or "not very frequent" (42%), while 20% report that abuse and neglect are "somewhat" or "very" frequent (Figure 5).

Six in 10 (61%) also say it's not common to see school-age children who are not in school, although 37% disagree.

Child abuse and neglect are more commonly reported as a frequent problem in cities (25%) than in rural areas (15%). Concern about out-of-school children is also higher among urbanites (41%) than among rural respondents (33%) (Figure 6).

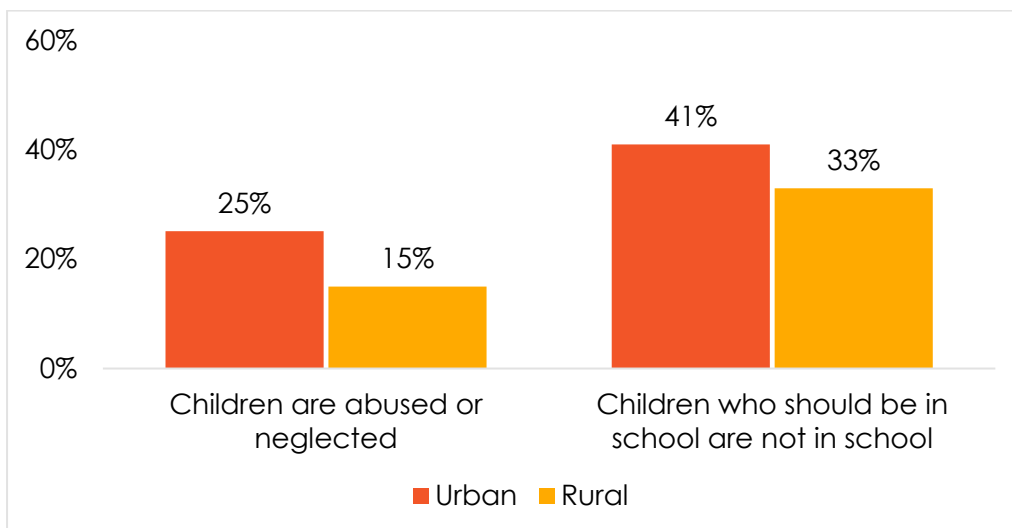
The perception of child abuse and neglect as a widespread problem is similar across different economic groups, while well-off respondents are less likely to see out-of-school children as a common issue in their community (29%) than those experiencing low, moderate, or high levels of lived poverty (36%-43%) (Figure 7).

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



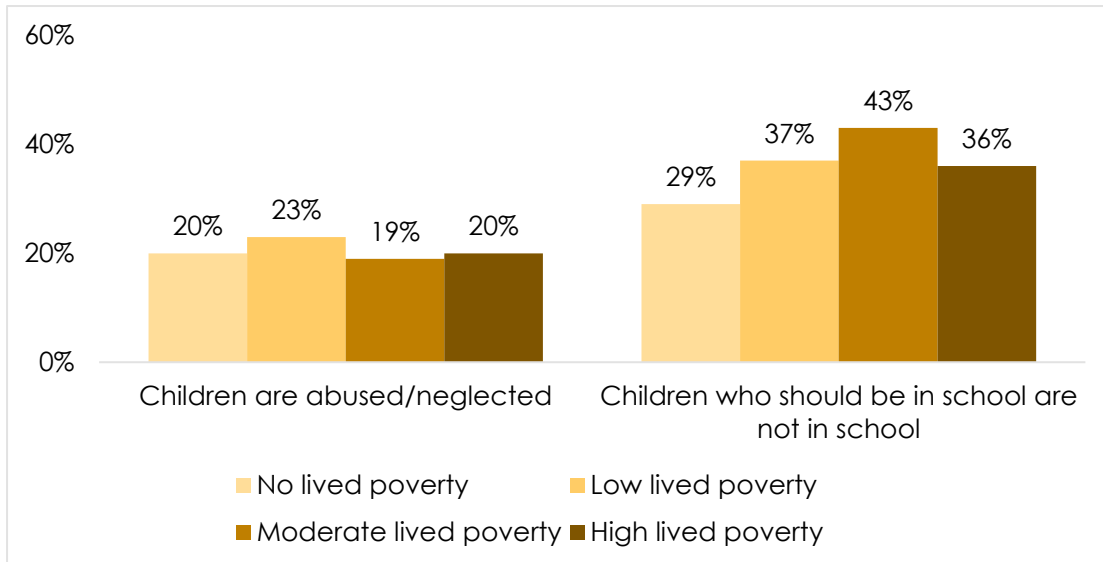
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Gambia | 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 lived poverty | Gambia | 2022



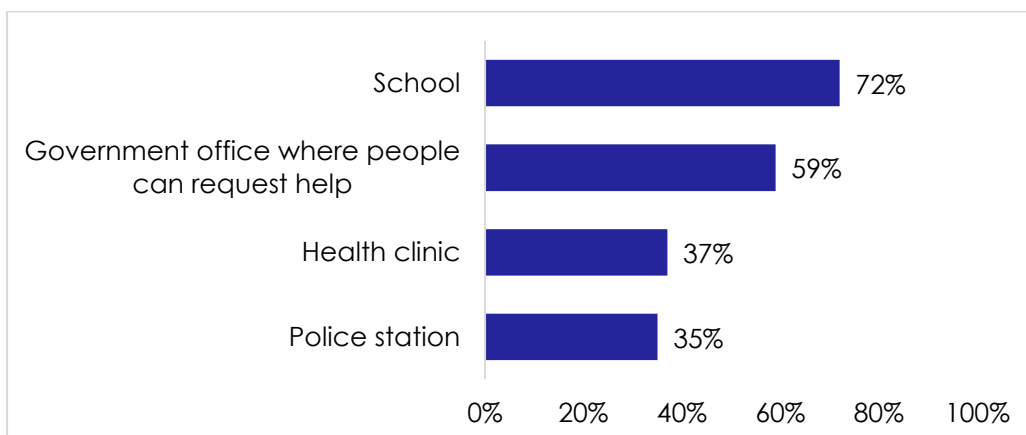
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Support for vulnerable children

Support services are vital for vulnerable children. The availability, proximity, and quality of support services can determine children's ability to build a successful future. To what extent are such services available at the community level?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all enumeration areas they visited, almost three-fourths (72%) of Gambians live within walking distance of a school, while six in 10 (59%) live near a social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems (Figure 8). Somewhat fewer have a health clinic (37%) and a police station (35%) within walking distance.

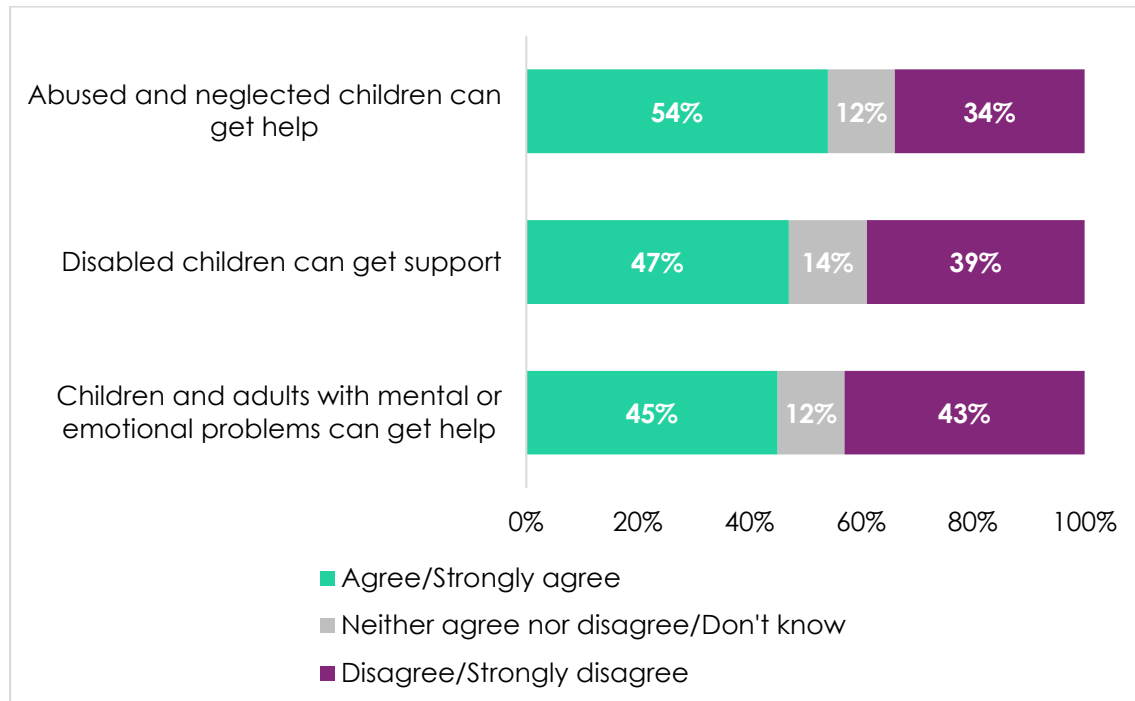
Figure 8: Availability of public services at the community level | Gambia | 2022



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")

When it comes to more specialised support services for vulnerable children, roughly half of survey respondents say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected (54%); for children with physical disabilities (47%); and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (45%) (Figure 9).

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

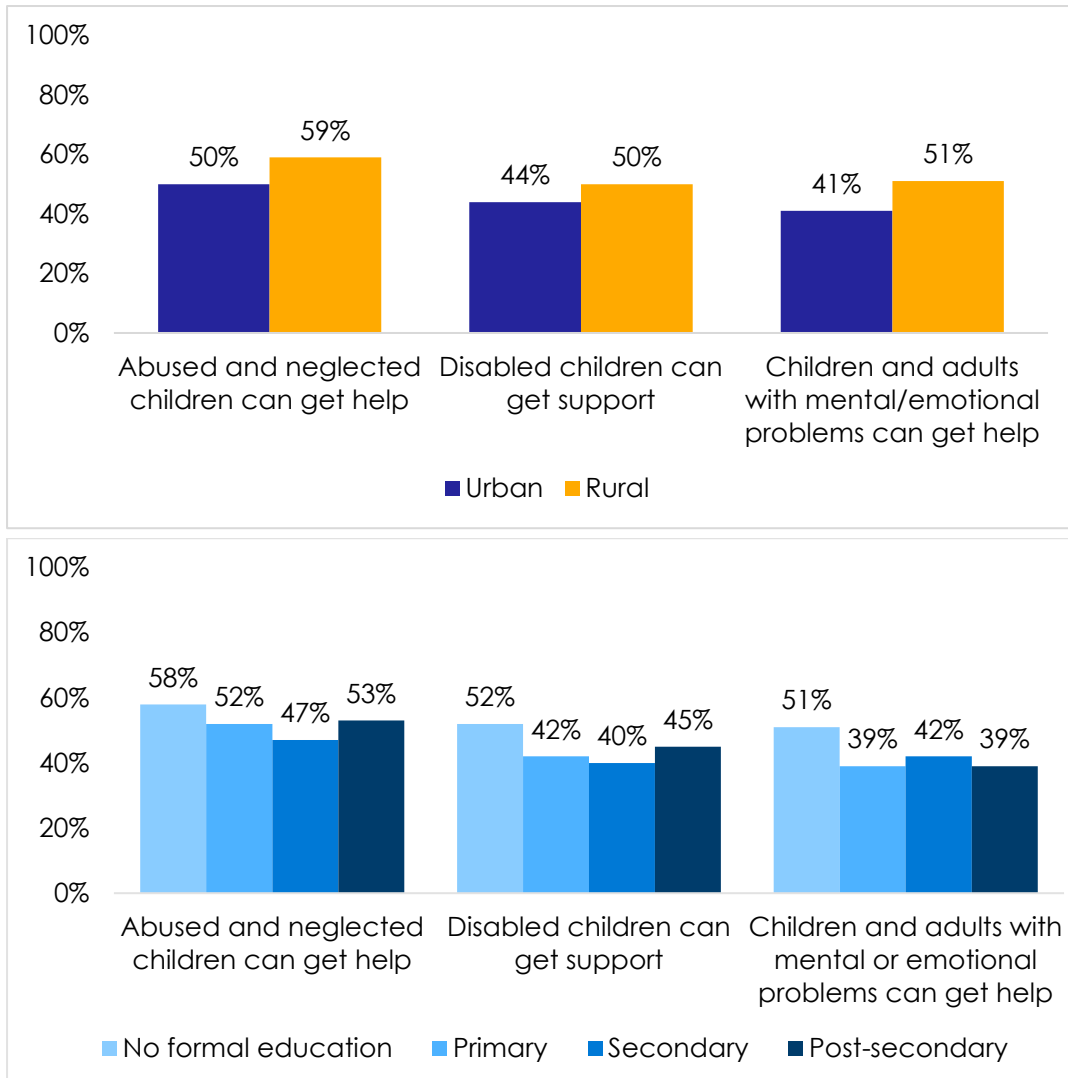
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

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.

While women and men offer similar assessments of the availability of help for vulnerable children, urban residents are less likely than their rural counterparts to say that support is available in their community for abused and neglected children (50% vs. 59%), children with physical disabilities (44% vs. 50%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (41% vs. 51%) (Figure 10).

The view that support for vulnerable children is available in the community is somewhat more common among respondents with no formal education, showing gaps of 5-12 percentage points in comparison with the most educated respondents. Patterns by economic status are less clear.

Figure 10: Help is available for vulnerable children | by urban-rural location and education | Gambia | 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.

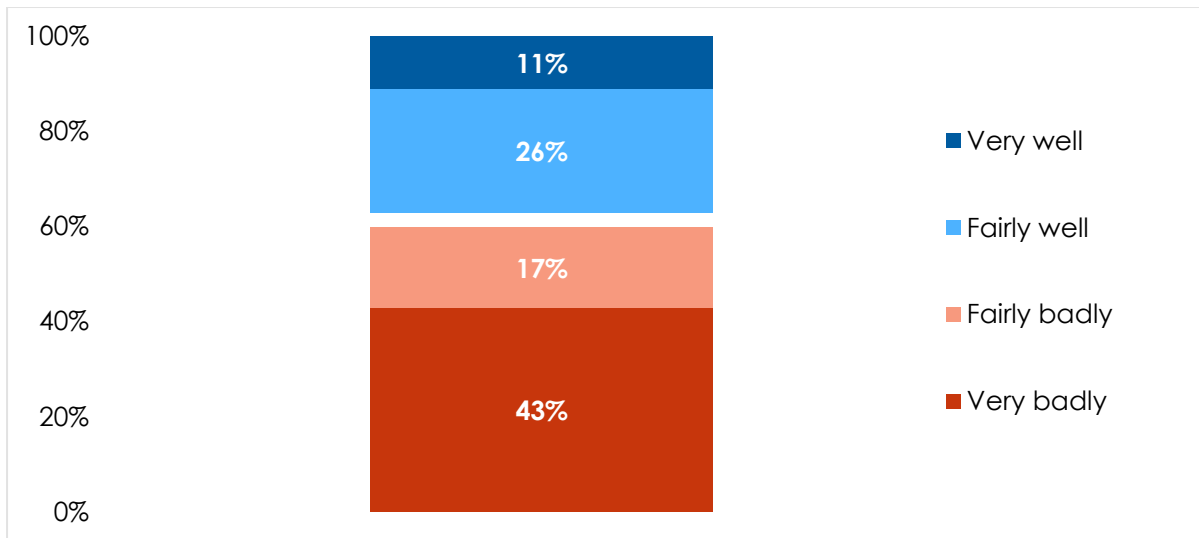
In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

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

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority (60%) of Gambians assess the performance of their government in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children as "fairly bad" or "very bad," while only 37% give their government good marks on this issue (Figure 11).

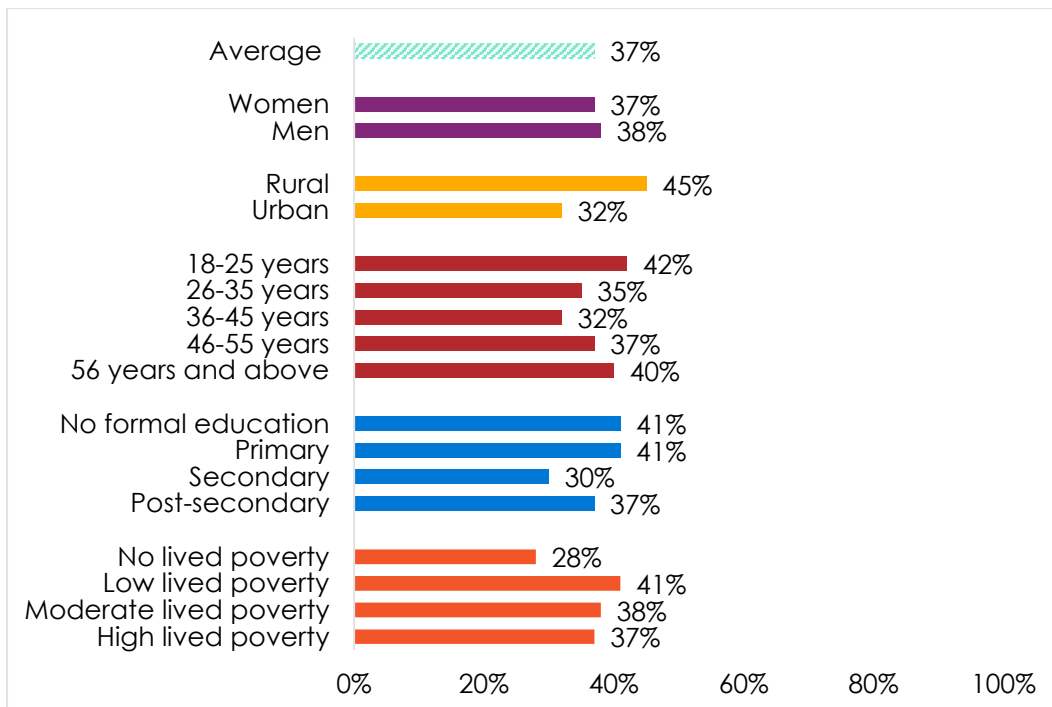
Figure 11: Government performance on child welfare | Gambia | 2022



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?

Approval of the government's performance on child welfare is more common in rural areas (45%) than in cities (32%) and somewhat more widespread among respondents with primary schooling or less (41%) than among those with more education (30%-37%). Economically well-off citizens are least positive about the government's efforts (28%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Gambia | 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

Survey findings show that support for parents' use of physical force to discipline their children is widespread but declining in the Gambia.

Most Gambians see child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children as infrequent in their communities. However, survey findings highlight the absence of support services in many communities for children in difficult situations, and a majority of Gambians are dissatisfied with the government's performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

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Walleign S. Hassen is a third-year political science student at the University of Florida. Email: whassen@ufl.edu.

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 - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 729 | 8 November 2023