Emaswati dissatisfied with government efforts on child well-being

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 815 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndama

Summary

In Eswatini, children below age 17 make up 43% of the country’s population (OHCHR, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). The most recent Household Income and Expenditure Survey (2016/2017) reports that a staggering 70% of these children live in poverty, with alarming levels of exposure to hunger and health and educational disadvantages (UNICEF, 2020).

According to a 2022 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey, roughly six in 10 Emaswati girls (58.7%) and boys (62.5%) aged 13-17 years are unable to consistently access food (Kingdom of Eswatini, 2023). One-quarter (26%) of children under age 5 are stunted (World Food Programme, 2022).

Many Emaswati children are also vulnerable to violence and abuse. UNICEF (2020) found that an astounding 88% of children aged 1-14 years experienced psychological or physical punishment within the month preceding its survey, and one-third of young girls will fall victim to sexual violence before age 18.

At 27.9%, Eswatini registers the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the world (UN News, 2023; BBC News, 2023). While significant strides have been made in curbing new infections, HIV/AIDS is the most common cause of death among children below age 5 (USAID, 2023), and it has left tens of thousands of children without parents or caregivers. The COVID-19 pandemic orphaned 5,200 children, exacerbating an already dire situation (Mkhonta, 2022).

The state’s legal arsenal to protect children includes the Constitution (Section 29), the National Policy for Children (2009), the Free Primary Education Act (2010), the National Gender Policy (2010), the Children’s Protection and Welfare Act (2012), the Persons with Disabilities Act (2018), the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act (2018), the National Youth Policy (2020), and most recently, the National Plan of Action for Children in Eswatini (2023-2027) (Kingdom of Eswatini, 2005; UNICEF, 2023).


This dispatch reports on a survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore African attitudes and perceptions related to child well-being.

Survey findings show that a large majority of Emaswati endorse the use of physical force to discipline children, although opposition to the practice has increased in recent years.

While most respondents describe child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children as infrequent occurrences in their community, fewer than half of citizens say resources are
available in their community to help children who are abused or neglected, children with disabilities, and children and adults facing mental or emotional problems.

Poor citizens are particularly likely to endorse the use of physical force, to say that corporal punishment is common, to see child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children as common issues, and to report that support services for vulnerable children are not available in their community.

Overall, fewer than four in 10 Emaswati approve of the government’s performance in 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 (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer’s national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Eswatini, led by QA Strategic Information, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Emaswati in October-November 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 Eswatini in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- About three-fourths (74%) of Emaswati say parents are “sometimes” or “always” justified in using physical force to discipline their children. Opposition to the practice has nearly quadrupled since 2018, from 7% to 26%.
  - Support for the use of physical force to discipline children declines as respondents’ education level and economic status rise.
- More than one-third (36%) of citizens say the use of physical force to discipline children is “somewhat common” or “very common” in their community.

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

- Fewer than three in 10 Emaswati (27%) say child abuse and neglect are common problems in their community, while 35% say the same about out-of-school children.
  - Poor citizens are significantly more likely than well-off respondents to report that child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children are frequent problems in their community.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Fewer than half of Emaswati say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (49%), children with disabilities (42%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (37%).
  - 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:

- More than six in 10 Emaswati (62%) say the government is doing a “fairly bad” or “very bad” job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

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 three-fourths (74%) of Emaswati believe it is “sometimes justified” (47%) or “always justified” (26%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. Remarkably, however, the proportion of citizens who say this practice is “never justified” has increased nearly fourfold since 2018, from 7% to 26% (Figure 1).

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

Support for the use of physical force to discipline children declines as respondents’ economic status rises, from 84% among the poorest to 68% among well-off citizens, and as education increases, from 76% among those with primary schooling or less to 70% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 2). Women and men are equally likely to endorse the practice, as are rural and urban residents. Older respondents are more supportive of corporal punishment than younger citizens (79% vs. 71%-75%).

![Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children?](image)

1 Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 47% “sometimes justified” and 26% “always justified” sum to 74%).

2 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 and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

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In practice, more than one-third (36%) of Emaswati say adults in their community “very frequently” (11%) or “somewhat frequently” (24%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3). A majority (64%) see this practice as an infrequent occurrence.

Poor respondents (40%) are slightly more likely than their better-off counterparts (33%-35%) to say that the use of physical force to discipline children is frequent in their community (Figure 4). Older respondents (29%-30%) are considerably less likely to report frequent corporal punishment than their younger counterparts (41%).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>18-35 years</th>
<th>36-55 years</th>
<th>56 years and above</th>
<th>No formal education/Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Post-secondary</th>
<th>No/Low lived poverty</th>
<th>Moderate lived poverty</th>
<th>High lived poverty</th>
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<td>71%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>84%</td>
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**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? | Eswatini | 2022**

- Very frequently: 11%
- Somewhat frequently: 24%
- Don’t know: 32%
- Not very frequently: 32%
- Not at all frequently: 1%

**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 | Eswatini | 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, about seven in 10 Emaswati (71%) say this is “not at all frequent” (39%) or “not very frequent” (32%), while 27% report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” or “very” frequent (Figure 5).

More than six in 10 respondents (64%) also say it’s not common to see school-age children who are not in school, but 35% disagree.

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Eswatini | 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?
Younger respondents (29%) are more likely than their elders (22%-26%) to see child abuse and neglect as frequent problems in their community (Figure 6). Similarly, 39% of 18- to 35-year-olds say children are frequently not in school, compared to 26%-30% of older respondents.

Residents in cities are more likely than rural dwellers to report child abuse and neglect as a frequent problem (33% vs. 24%), and concern about out-of-school children is significantly higher in cities than in rural settlements (42% vs. 32%). While only 23% of well-off citizens say children are frequently abused or neglected in their community, 33% of the poorest respondents share this view. And the poor are more likely than the well-off to see out-of-school children as a common problem (47% vs. 28%).

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group, urban-rural location, and lived poverty | Eswatini | 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, more than three-fourths (77%) of Emaswati live within walking distance of a school, while about half as many (37%) have a nearby health clinic (Figure 7). Nearly three in 10 (28%) live near a social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems, and one-fifth are close to a police station (20%).

**Figure 7: Availability of public services at the community level | Eswatini | 2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health clinic</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government office where people can</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>request help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police station</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, fewer than half of respondents say they are available in the community (Figure 8). While 49% say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected, only 42% say support is available for children with physical disabilities, and 37% say the same with regard to children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

Men and women hold similar views on support for disabled children and children and adults with mental or emotional problems, as do urban and rural residents. Regarding support for abused and neglected children, urban residents (52%) are slightly more likely to see it as available than rural residents (48%) (not shown).

Interestingly, citizens who have primary education or less are just as likely as their more educated counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community (Figure 9). Assessments of the availability of support services differ more sharply by respondents’ economic levels. The poorest citizens are significantly less likely to report available support for abused and neglected children (a 13-point gap), disabled children (10 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (5 points).
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.

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.
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 of Emaswati are not satisfied with their government’s performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 34% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 62% believe it is doing fairly/very badly (Figure 10).

Urban residents (65%) and citizens experiencing high lived poverty (75%) are particularly likely to disapprove of the government’s performance on child well-being (Figure 11).
**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 10: Government performance on child well-being | Eswatini | 2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Very well</th>
<th>Fairly well</th>
<th>Fairly badly</th>
<th>Very badly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>31%</td>
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<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>33%</td>
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**Figure 11: Government performance on child well-being | by demographic group | Eswatini | 2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Fairly badly/Very badly</th>
<th>Fairly well/Very well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High lived poverty</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate lived poverty</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No/Low lived poverty</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post secondary</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal education/Primary</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 years and above</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>36-55 years</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-35 years</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>34%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**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?
Conclusion

Survey findings show that the use of physical force to discipline children has majority support in Eswatini, although opposition to the practice is growing.

While majorities report that child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children are infrequent problems, substantial minorities of the population disagree, and fewer than half of citizens report that resources to help vulnerable children are available at the local level. Not surprisingly, the government receives mediocre performance ratings on its efforts to protect vulnerable children.

Poor citizens’ relatively bleak assessments of the frequency of corporal punishment, child abuse/neglect, and out-of-school children and of the availability of support services are especially distressing, suggesting that economically disadvantaged communities may be a key target for intensified efforts to promote the well-being of vulnerable children.
References

UN News. (2023). First person: Surviving abuse to help Eswatini’s neglected children. 7 May.
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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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 Ethiopia. Michigan State University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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