



African Population and
Health Research Center

POLICY BRIEF



SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN KENYA: GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) (2016) define school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) as acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around school, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. In the school setting, SRGBV takes many forms, such as corporal punishment, bullying, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, and sexual violence, many of which are a result of harmful gender norms and inequality. Unfortunately, these various forms of SRGBV often intersect and reinforce each other without intervention. Studies show that exposure to one form of violence increases the likelihood of experiencing different forms of violence. For instance, children who experience emotional violence are 3 times more likely also to experience physical violence, and those who experience physical and/or emotional violence are twice as likely to experience sexual violence (Smiley et al., 2021).

Gender-based violence is not only an infringement of fundamental child rights but also a key contributor to poor education outcomes. For example, a study using the third round of data from the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) covering over 60,000 Grade 6 learners across 14 countries found that sexual harassment perpetrated by teachers significantly increased learners' absenteeism

for both boys and girls (Lee & Rudolf, 2022). Studies also show that gender-based violence negatively impacts academic aspirations and performance and results in increased school dropout (Geppert et al., 2024). A reversed relationship between learning outcomes and violence in school is also evident, with students who may be having learning difficulties experiencing physical and emotional violence from teachers and peers (Smarrelli et al., 2024). Further, children who experience childhood violence are also less likely to complete school, with some studies predicting a 13% probability (Fry et al., 2018).

In addition to academic outcomes, evidence also indicates that exposure to physical or emotional violence is negatively associated with social-emotional skills and self-efficacy and that exposure to sexual violence has a pronounced negative relationship with children's mental health and an increased likelihood of early marriage (Smiley et al., 2021).



Global and National Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Several international legal conventions and treaties address gender equality and seek to end all forms of violence against children, including SRGBV. Some of these include [the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(1979\)](#), [the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#), [the Sustainable Development Goals \(2015\)](#), and [the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies 2021-2025 Road Map](#). In addition to these initiatives, UNESCO & UN Women (2016) Global Guidance on Addressing School-Related Gender-Based Violence provides a comprehensive resource on the definition and recommended framework to address SRGBV at the national level.

At the national level, the Constitution of Kenya stipulates that all children have the right to be **“protected from abuse, neglect, harmful cultural practices, all forms of violence, inhuman treatment and punishment, and hazardous or exploitative labor”** (Republic of Kenya, 2010). This pronouncement is also articulated in the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) code of conduct and ethics, which entrusts teachers with the duty of care to ensure this right is met (Republic of Kenya, 2015). Further, the Children’s Act highlights the safeguards for the child’s rights and best interests, including protection from abuse, violence, or exploitation (Republic of Kenya, 2022). The National Prevention and Response Plan on Violence Against Children in Kenya 2019–2023, launched in 2020, aims to reduce the prevalence of childhood violence by providing strategies to ensure all children in Kenya are protected from physical, sexual, and emotional violence. It also ensures that children who experience violence have access to care, support, and services (Republic of Kenya, 2020).

Global and National Situational Analysis on SRGBV

Globally, an estimated 246 million girls and boys experience violence in and around schools annually, with girls disproportionately affected compared to boys. Approximately **70–80%** of all boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 11 have been victims of emotional abuse by other students (Devries et al., 2018). Additionally, about **20–37%** of 11 to 17-year-olds experience some form of emotional, physical, and sexual violence in and around school (UNGEI, 2020). Although data on violence committed by schoolteachers by age or sex is scarce worldwide, available evidence highlights that physical violence by teachers against students is common. For instance, evidence from a recent systematic review showed that about **46–95%** of primary school students experienced corporal punishment at school (Tanton et al., 2023).

Estimates from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2022 show that teachers (**33%**), mothers/stepmothers (**25%**), fathers/stepfathers (**17%**), and schoolmates/classmates (**14%**) were the most common perpetrators of physical violence against women aged 15–49 who have never been married or never had an intimate

partner. On the other hand, teachers (**46%**), schoolmates/classmates (**22%**), mothers/stepmothers (**13%**), and fathers/stepfathers (**14%**) were the most common perpetrators of physical violence against men of the same age group (KNBS and ICF, 2023).

A recent study by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) assessing gender mainstreaming practices in Kenya’s basic education and teacher training also found gaps in the availability, access, and sensitization of the school community on gender-based violence (GBV) guidelines (APHRC & MoE, Kenya, 2024). The study targeted 250 basic education institutions spread over 10 counties in Kenya, including Busia, Garissa, Mandera, Marsabit, Tana River, Turkana, Samburu, Wajir, Nairobi, and West Pokot, and seven teacher training institutions. Some of the key findings included:

- In terms of availability, nearly half of the primary and secondary schools did not have guidelines on gender-based violence for teachers, students, and non-teaching staff. See Figure 1.
- Less than **20%** of school heads at the primary and **26%** at the secondary school levels reported having the guidelines on gender-based violence and being able to present them to the study team. This means that these guidelines were also not readily available for reference and use by the rest of the school community.
- Among the schools that reported having institutional guidelines on gender-based violence, over 95% of primary and **92%** of secondary schools reported that they sensitized teachers and students on the guidelines’ contents and requirements.
- Qualitative findings with teachers, curriculum support officers, and quality assurance officers revealed that while the availability of institutional guidelines on gender-based violence was a challenge, this issue was addressed in the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) and civil servants’ code of conduct, which they followed.
- Qualitative findings revealed that most of the teacher trainees and their trainers were aware of GBV guidelines within their institutions. However, the inadequate sensitization of these guidelines was highlighted as a key barrier to implementation. As a result, these guidelines were not given the seriousness they merited and were merely perceived as standard school rules they had to follow.
- Some teacher training institutions also reported having gender committees tasked with developing and reviewing institutional gender mainstreaming policies and guidelines. However, they reiterated that these committees were not adequately trained to implement gender mainstreaming policies effectively.

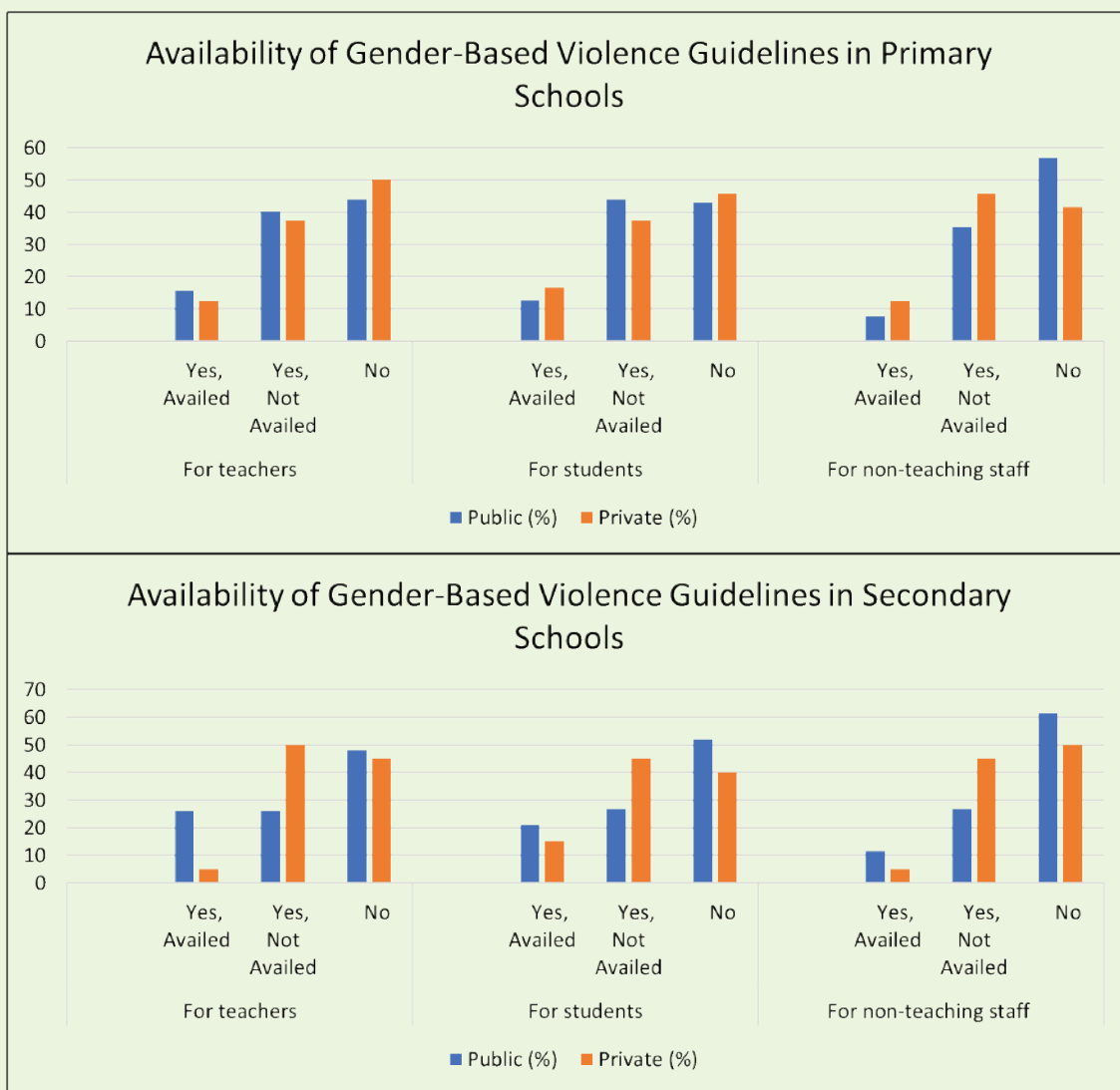


Figure 1: Availability of Gender-Based Violence Guidelines in Primary and Secondary Schools

SRGBV Data Gaps

Whereas data on GBV is captured in the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), there is inadequate data on sexual harassment and sexual violence from children below 15 years old (Tanton et al., 2023). In most cases, the available data captures sexual abuse by intimate partners as the most frequent perpetrators of sexual abuse against females between the ages of 15 and 49. However, there is inadequate systematic data on other perpetrators of sexual violence against children.

This gap is also alluded to by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, who highlight the inadequate evidence on the type and extent of violence in and around schools, especially on gendered norms and drivers of violence (UNGEI & UNICEF, 2021). Further, the documentation of response mechanisms for SRGBV is insufficient, with some reports indicating that only a third of SRGBV victims know where to seek assistance (Republic of Kenya, 2019).

Conclusion

Whereas the Kenyan legislative and policy framework is strong on protecting children against all forms of harm, deliberate steps should be taken to develop and implement policies and guidelines on SRGBV as envisioned in the National Education Sector Strategic Plan. The availability of clear national SRGBV policies and guidelines that are accessible to the school communities is one of the essential measures to make the school environment safe, secure, and free from gender-based violence. However, to bring systemic changes within the education system to address SRGBV, the policies and guidelines need to be effectively implemented and enforced. Robust sensitization and monitoring strategies should be implemented to ensure that students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff are safeguarded against GBV and that they support the implementation of the policies and guidelines.

Policy Recommendation

To address the highlighted SRGBV gaps, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with development and program actors, should embark on developing SRGBV guidelines for the basic education and training levels. This recommendation is in line with the National Education Sector Strategic Plan 2023 - 2027, which seeks to develop a framework to address gender-based violence as one of its critical activities geared towards mainstreaming gender in education and training under the key results areas on cross-cutting, pertinent, and contemporary issues (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Considering the inadequacy of data on SRGBV, the development of the SRGBV guidelines should be preceded by the generation of primary evidence on the prevalence of various types of SRGBV in schools and the awareness levels of the reporting mechanisms within the school and community.

Once the guidelines are developed, robust sensitization strategies should be implemented to build the capacity of various education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), school heads, teachers, non-teaching staff, students, parents, and community members.



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