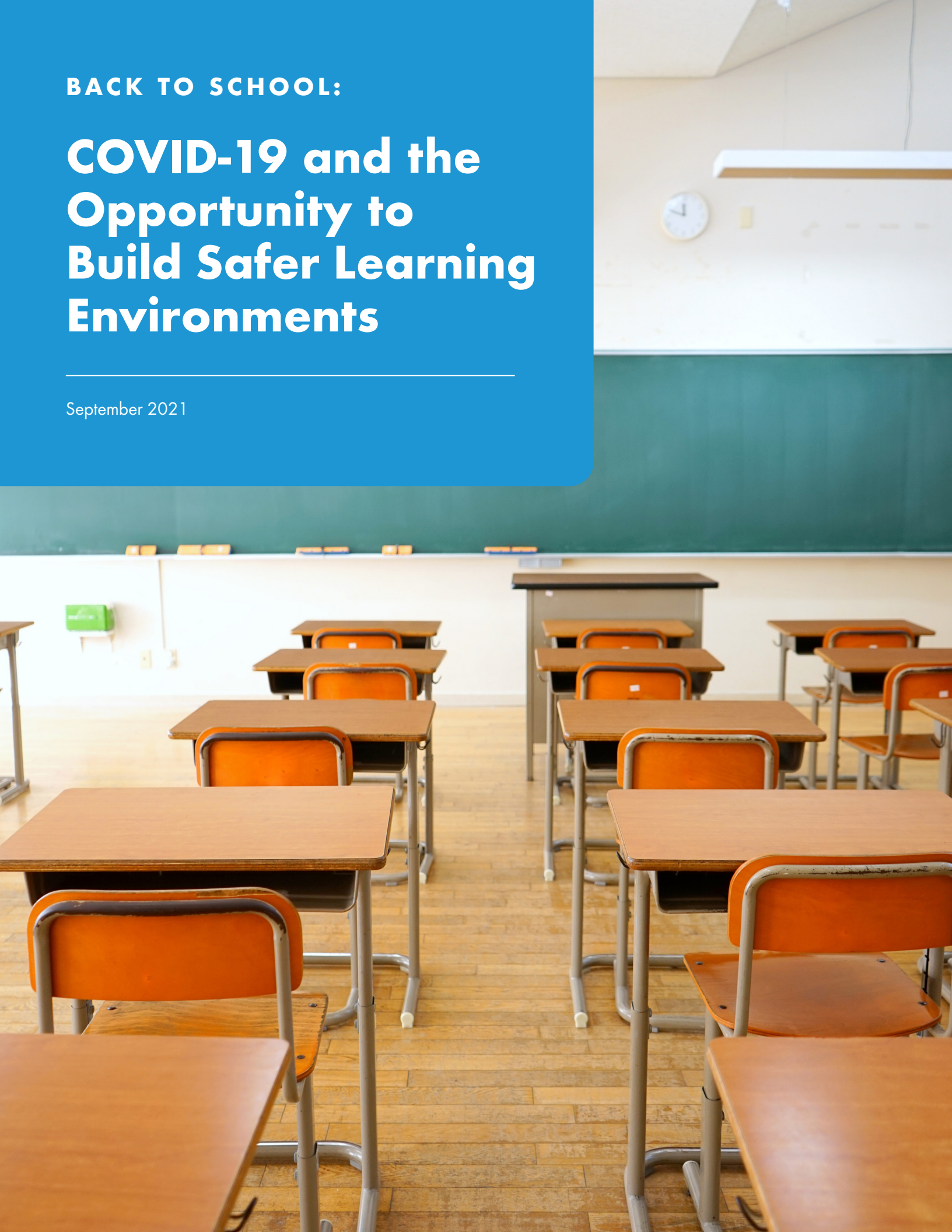


BACK TO SCHOOL:

COVID-19 and the Opportunity to Build Safer Learning Environments

September 2021



Understanding the relationship between schools, violence, and the COVID-19 pandemic

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of children and adolescents all around the world, with particularly devastating consequences for those in low- and middle-income countries. As of March 2021, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 168 million children missed out on learning in school for an entire year, as classrooms in 14 countries around the world were closed. More than 888 million children still face uncertain school access as a result of the pandemic.¹ This represents a significant rollback of gains made in ensuring access to safe, equitable, and quality education for all children and adolescents, particularly among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The pandemic also may have exacerbated the already-high risk of violence against children and adolescents as a result of various factors including isolation, lockdowns, disruptions to family life, economic stress, more time online, and a lack of access to social services. Many students who missed school will never re-enroll, and those students who return to school may do so having experienced violence at home and in the community.

The increased risk of home and community violence underscores the necessity of safe schools. Access to

safe education is a fundamental human right. However, even before the pandemic, our research shows that schools are not always safe: violence in and around educational settings was already a serious and universal problem. Through secondary analyses of the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS), we’ve shown that students across the globe experience unacceptably high rates of school-related physical, sexual and psychological violence. Our research also demonstrates that schools have a critical role to play in violence prevention and response. Schools can serve as protective spaces for children, acting as an important arena for broader social change to end violence, both in and out of the classroom.

As schools around the world start to re-open, education policymakers and school administrators must prioritize creating safe, equitable learning environments so that all students can thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic upended education systems around the world, but in rebuilding from the pandemic we have a unique opportunity to create better schools, ensuring that every student is safe from the virus and from violence.



Violence by teachers and classmates was widespread prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

As we work to rebuild safer school systems in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must first understand the issue of school-related violence. All children have the right to education, but our research shows that across the globe, many students experience school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). SRGBV includes any act or threat of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.²

Through support from the Government of Canada and the USAID Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and AidData conducted a secondary analysis of twelve Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) to better understand school-related violence and the relationship between level of schooling and key outcomes. The results showcase the wide prevalence of SRGBV, and that few students who experience violence get the support services they need.

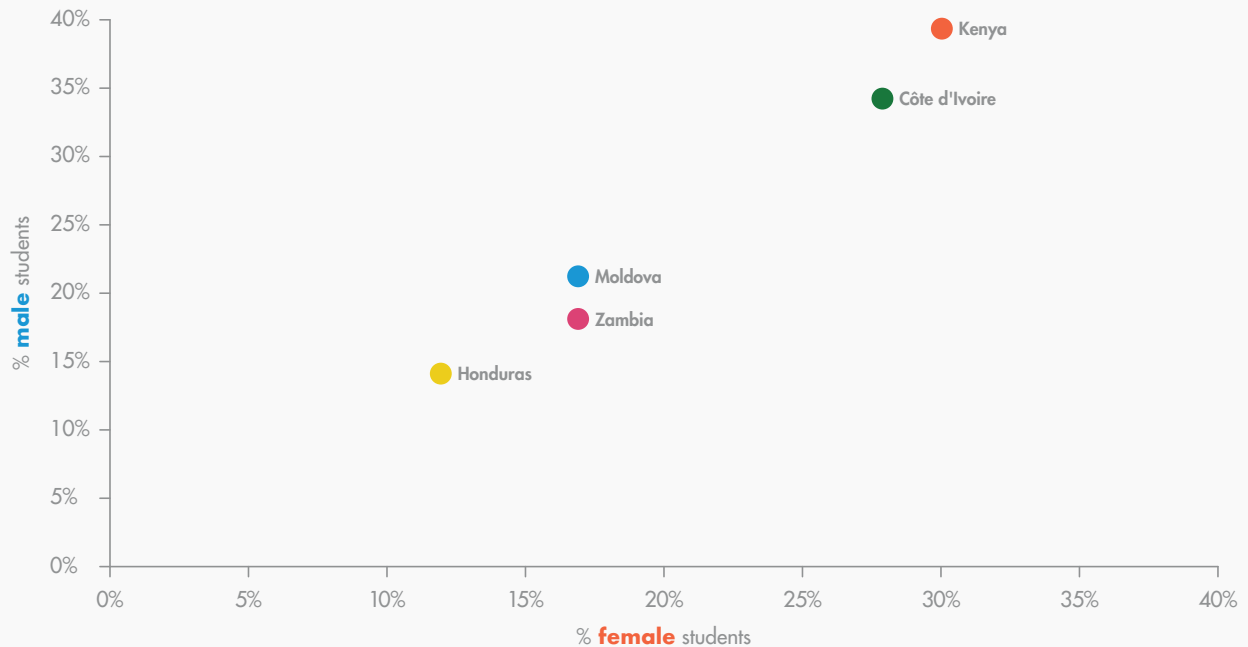


What are the VACS?

Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) are nationally representative household surveys of males and females ages 13 to 24 that measure sexual, physical, and emotional violence in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. The surveys also provide important data on factors associated with violence, consequences of violence, and access to services. The VACS are led by national governments, with technical assistance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and support from other partners as part of the Together for Girls partnership.

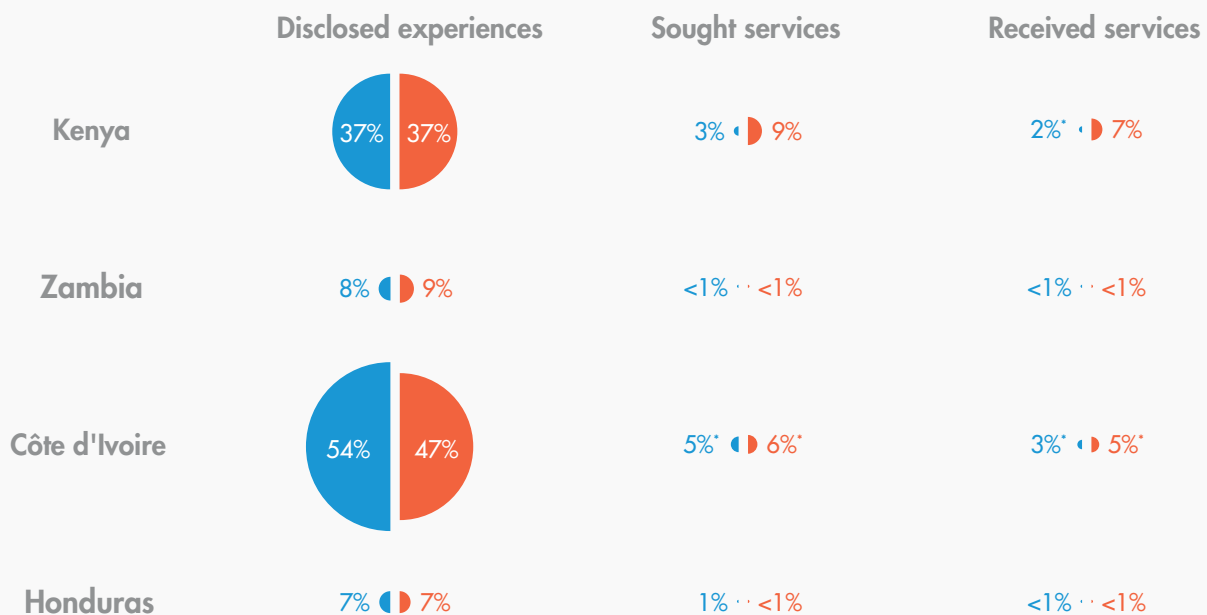
School-related physical and/or sexual violence impacts many students

% of **males** and **females** ages 13-24 who ever attended school and experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a teacher or classmate/schoolmate



Few students who experience school-related violence are getting the support services they need

% of 13-24 year-old **males** and **females** who disclosed experiences of physical violence, sought services, and received them, among those who ever attended school



*Estimate may be unreliable (RSE>30%)

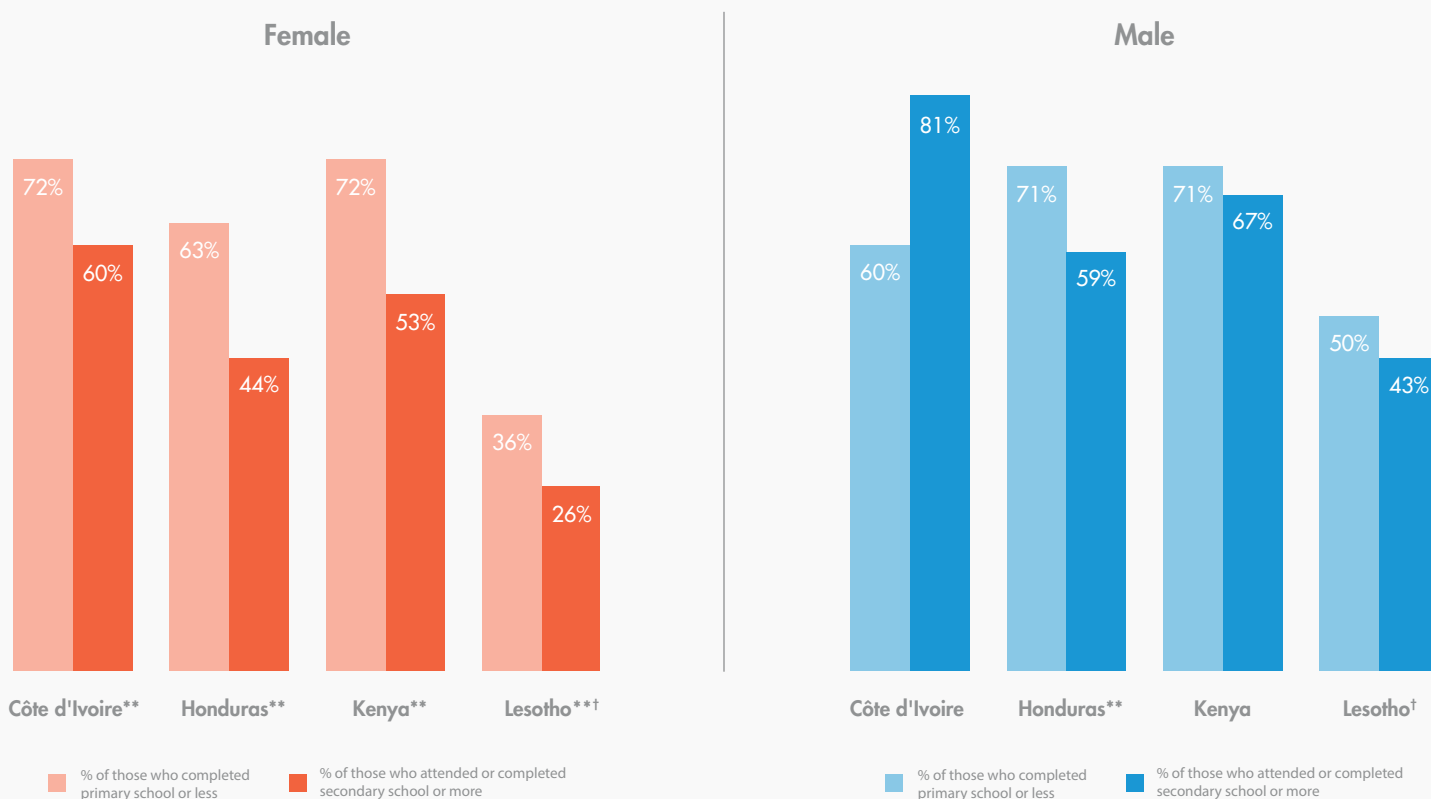
VACS data illustrates the relationship between education and gender norms

Gender unequal norms and attitudes that condone violence drive gender-based violence in and around schools. However, VACS data show that these attitudes are less common among those who complete more years of education. While school settings can serve as enabling environments for the perpetration of gender-based violence, they can also serve as uniquely impactful venues for transformative social norms change.

This research underscores the opportunity that school environments provide to interrupt gender unequal attitudes, the norms that condone violence, and to ultimately prevent gender-based violence, and in doing so, improve educational, health and economic outcomes for students, particularly adolescent girls.

Students, especially girls, who go on to attend secondary school are less likely to endorse gender unequal norms

% of 13-24 year-old **females** and **males** who endorsed inequitable gender norms*, by level of school attainment



*To learn about attitudes toward gender, survey respondents were asked if they believed a series of questions about gender roles, such as “only men, not women, should decide when to have sex” or “a woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together.”

**Statistically significant difference between those who completed primary school or less and those who attended or completed secondary school or more

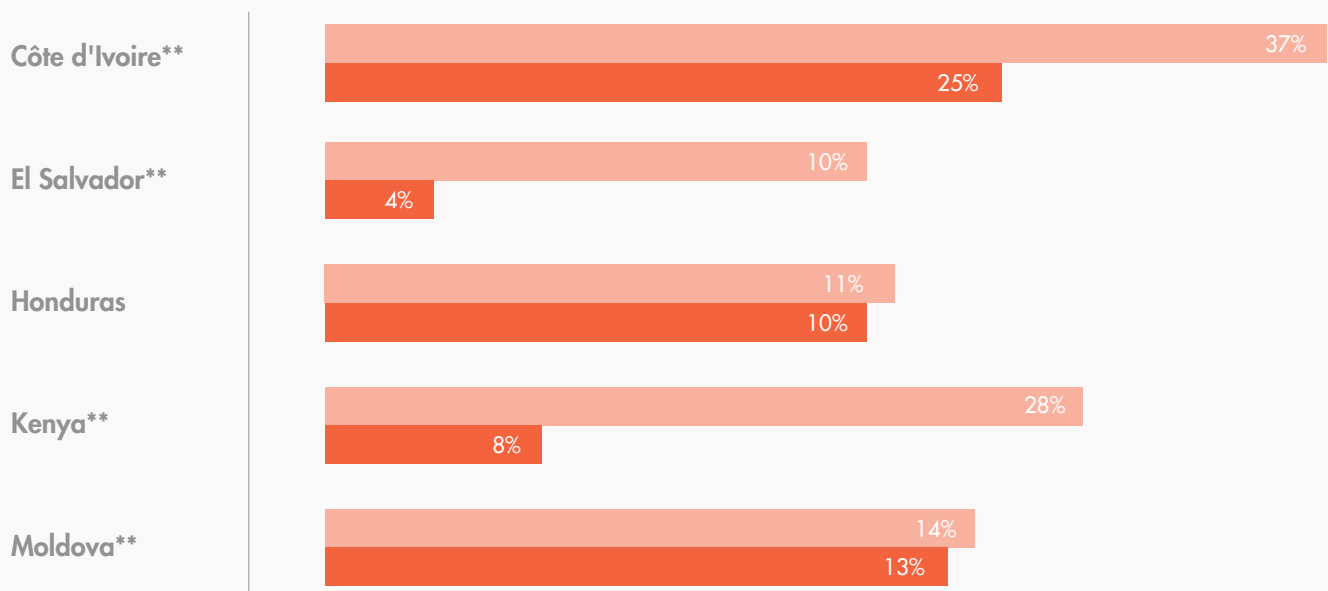
†Data among 14-24 year-olds Lesotho

For adolescent girls, attending school can lead to positive health and social outcomes

Girls who attend secondary school report experiencing less intimate partner violence, youth pregnancy, and child marriage

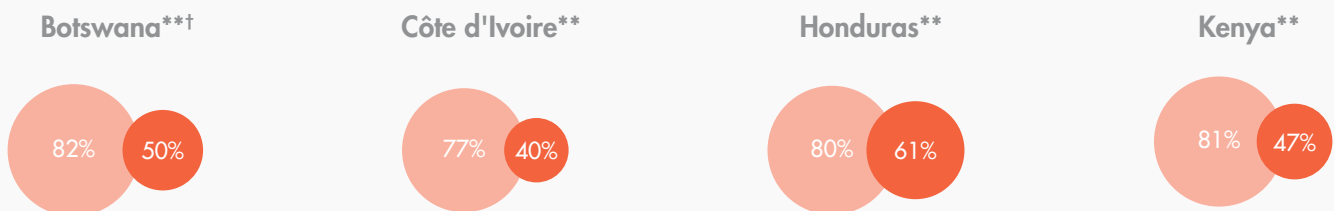
■ % of those who completed primary school or less
 ■ % of those who attended or completed secondary school or more

% of 13-24 year-old females who reported experiencing physical intimate partner violence, by level of school attainment



**Statistically significant difference between females who completed primary school or less and females who attended or completed secondary school or more

% of 13-24 year-old females who reported ever being pregnant, by level of school attainment



**Statistically significant difference between females who completed primary school or less and females who attended or completed secondary school or more

†Data among 14-24 year-olds in Botswana

■ % of those who completed primary school or less

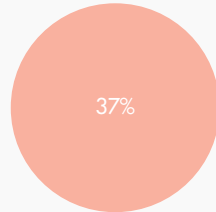
■ % of those who attended or completed secondary school or more

% of 14-24 year-old females who reported having been married or having lived with someone as if married before age 18, by level of school attainment

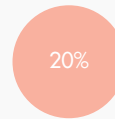
Côte d'Ivoire†



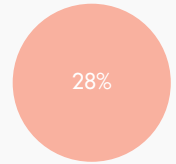
El Salvador**



Lesotho**



Uganda**



** Statistically significant difference between females who completed primary school or less and females who attended or completed secondary school or more

† among 13-24 year olds



Over the past year, COVID-19 has exacerbated violence against children, with implications for students' return to school

While working to reopen schools, policymakers must make sure school systems are equipped to support students who may have experienced violence during closures. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated violence against children in many homes and communities and limited access to critical services. Limited data and anecdotal evidence, historical patterns, and existing knowledge of the factors that exacerbate violence against children point to increases in the prevalence and severity of violence against children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limited available data

It is important to note that under-reporting and limited documentation of violence against children is compounded in emergency settings, and so reliable, representative data is almost impossible to obtain.³ Child Helpline International and UNICEF analyzed data from 48 child helplines to understand the changes in reporting data (comparing the first 6 months of 2019 and 2020).⁴ They looked at the number of contacts to child helplines and reasons for calling (e.g. COVID-19, violence, etc). Overall the number of contacts to child helplines dramatically increased since the beginning of the pandemic. However, their research shows that some countries saw an increase in contacts related to abuse/violence while some saw a decrease.

Increased risks of online sexual abuse and exploitation

Research documenting the increase in online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC) during the pandemic is also beginning to emerge. Cases of OSAEC in the Philippines, for example, increased by 264.6 percent or 202,605 more reports during lockdown from March to May 2020, compared to the 76,561 cases during the same period in 2019 based on data from the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).⁵ Overall, the NCMEC has seen a 106 percent increase in global reports of suspected child sexual exploitation in March 2020 compared to March 2019.⁶

Disrupted violence prevention and response services

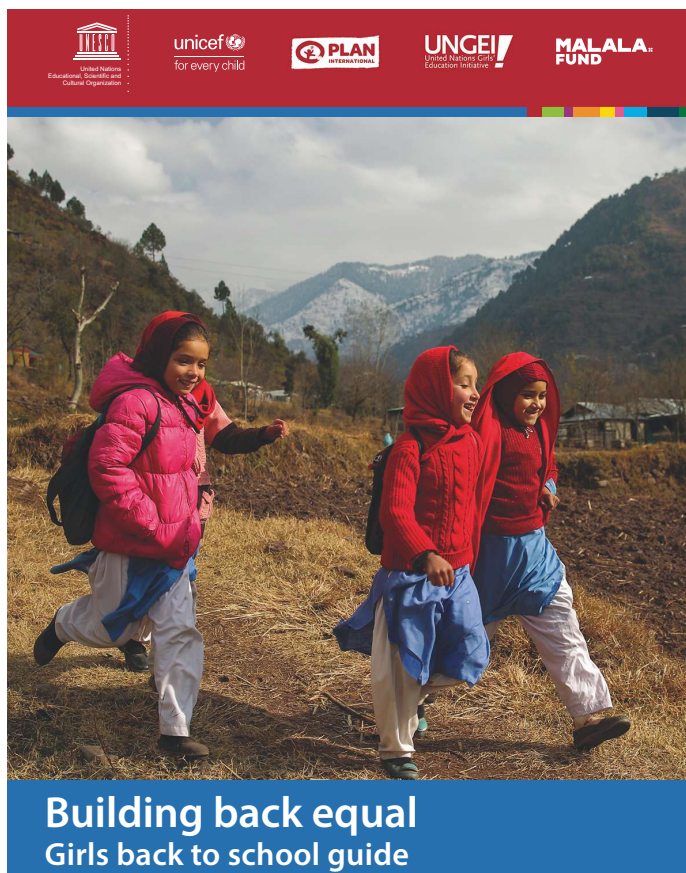
During the pandemic, children who experience violence may also have a harder time accessing support services. UNICEF estimates that 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19.⁷ They note that disrupted services include case management and home visits for at-risk children.



Implications for educators, policymakers, advocates and researchers

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in massive disruptions to learning. As policymakers work to reopen schools, ongoing pandemic response and recovery efforts must prioritize ensuring access to safe, equitable, and gender-responsive learning environments for children and adolescents.

Violence prevention and response is an education sector issue



Building back equal
Girls back to school guide

RESOURCE:

UNESCO, Malala Fund, Plan International, UNGEI and UNICEF. (2020). Building Back Equal: [Girls Back to School Guide](#).

Violence prevention should not be siloed. The consequences of students experiencing violence are profound: violence impacts learners' access to education, educational outcomes, and well-being. Policymakers, administrators, and educators must prioritize school-based violence prevention and violence response efforts should be integrated into COVID-19 recovery planning.

The Girls Back to School Guide aims to help policymakers and practitioners in Ministries of Education and their partners address the gender dimensions of COVID-related school closures. It emphasises an approach to 'build back equal' through gender-responsive measures that transform education systems, prioritise resilience, and address the key bottlenecks and barriers to girls' education.

Violence prevention efforts should take a whole-school approach to creating safe environments



A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO PREVENT SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:
Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework
UNGEI

RESOURCE:

UNGEI. (2019). A whole school approach to prevent school related gender-based violence: Minimum standards and monitoring framework.

Educators and policymakers should use an evidence-based, whole-school, and gender transformative approach to creating safe, equitable, and enabling environments for students.

The UNGEI Whole School Approach guide presents a set of minimum standards for a whole school approach to prevent and respond to SRGBV and a monitoring framework to measure the effectiveness of the approach. This guide can be used by education ministries, education authorities, schools, and non-governmental organizations to guide SRGBV prevention and response actions with a monitoring approach that allows the tracking of results and outcomes.

The effort to prevent and address SRGBV must be informed by high-quality data and evidence



RESOURCE:

USAID. (2020). School-Related Gender-Based Violence Measurement Toolkit

Despite the growing awareness of the prevalence of SRGBV, there is currently not a standard measurement to precisely and accurately assess the prevalence and extent of SRGBV globally. Additionally, national-level data may not reflect the specific context, including risk factors and drivers, in a particular geographic area.

In response, the USAID SRGBV Measurement Toolkit delivers practical guidance and resources for measuring the prevalence and extent of students' experiences of SRGBV, and provides methods for assessing key risk factors and drivers. The toolkit provides a survey to measure all forms of SRGBV—specifically, bullying, corporal punishment, and sexual violence. In addition, the survey helps identify and measure the risk factors and drivers of SRGBV, such as gender attitudes and beliefs, school climate, and teacher disciplinary practices.

Together for Girls, the AidData (a research lab at William & Mary), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with support from USAID Higher Education Solutions Network and Global Affairs Canada, conducted secondary analyses of twelve national Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) to better understand the experiences of children and youth who attended school with respect to violence in and around school settings, particularly school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV).

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