

# Violence affecting children and youth in Ethiopia:

## Insights from a qualitative study

### Key findings

#### *Different understandings and experiences of violence*

- Understandings of violence focus on corporal punishment and sexual violence, with less appreciation of emotional and psychological violence.
- In the urban sites, violence is mostly understood as gender-based, while in the rural site poverty and limited service access, as well as gender-based norms and harmful traditional practices, are emphasised.
- There are gender and age differences in all sites. Corporal punishment is more common in middle childhood (above age 8). Older girls are at greater risk of sexual harassment and older boys of exploitation at work, with exceptional cases of sexual violence.
- Certain categories of children, notably migrants, domestic workers, children living with relatives, from very poor households, or living on the streets, are seen as more at risk of abuse. This includes overwork, denial of schooling and sexual violence, especially for girls involved in domestic work, with exceptional cases of sexual violence.

#### *Types of violence and recent changes*

- Interpersonal violence is often related to structural violence, including poverty and harmful gender-based norms, in the accounts of children and adult participants.
- There is a common rejection of most forms of physical punishment, and greater awareness among children as well as adults of child rights, with children challenging corporal punishment.



However, some corporal punishment such as pinching and mild beating is seen by some participants (children as well as adults) as potentially beneficial for proper child upbringing.

- Changing economic, social and cultural contexts particularly in urban areas, notably unemployment, substance abuse and exposure to violence in media, are viewed by caregivers as new risks facing young people. These are assumed to worsen violence, particularly gender-based violence and violence between peers.

#### *Reporting and addressing violence*

- Most cases of violence still go unreported or are dealt with by informal means through family, friends, community support, informal mechanisms and religious institutions.
- Economic, social and cultural contexts are changing, and formal institutions are beginning to address violence, through school clubs and parliaments, health extension workers, Women and Children Affairs Bureaus and Justice Bureaus, social courts, and the police.
- However, vulnerable children and young people are still highly unlikely to report cases of violence, particularly rape or sexual assault.

## Introduction

This brief presents findings from a sub-study by Young Lives Ethiopia on violence affecting children and youth in three Ethiopian communities (two urban sites, one in the capital city Addis Ababa, and the other a small town in northern Amhara Region, and a third, rural, site in the Rift Valley in Oromia Region). Qualitative research used individual interviews and group discussions to explore the following questions with children (aged 16-17), young adults (aged 22-23), caregivers, and professionals: (a) how is violence defined? What constitutes violence, and what practices are acceptable or not and why? (b) how do children and young people respond to violence and what forms of support are available to them? and (c) are practices, values and norms relating to violence perceived to be shifting in relation to social, economic and cultural change?

The study was preceded by a literature review and stakeholder mapping interviews (Mulugeta 2016), and an analysis of the qualitative data gathered by Young Lives over four rounds of research (Pankhurst et al. 2016). The analysis focused on violence manifesting in interpersonal relations, whether physical, psychological or emotional (including insults and harassment) or sexual. It used the definition provided by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011: 4) whereby 'violence' is understood to mean 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse', and which includes 'non-physical and/or non-intentional forms of harm (such as, inter alia, neglect and psychological maltreatment)'. The study explored the connections between interpersonal violence and 'structural' violence, such as poverty, inequality, social exclusion and other forms of discrimination, including harmful gender norms.

The study revealed considerable variation in definitions as well as forms and consequences of violence for example in urban/rural difference, gender and age, and home, school, at work and community settings, with particular groups being more at risk. Moreover, the context of violence has been changing, with global influences, urbanisation, and changing economic, social and cultural contexts facing youth. Alongside wider links with poverty and persistent structural factors, new risks, especially of gender-based violence (mainly related to sexual harassment of girls, abduction, rape and child marriage), have arisen. Stresses on youth resulting

from unemployment, sometimes leading to addiction and involvement in crime as well as exposure to violence in films and through the internet were perceived as posing threats to child upbringing and socialisation, leading to intergenerational tensions and presumed to aggravate violence.

## Conclusions

### *Definitions of violence*

The study found that definitions of violence affecting children and youth were broad, with differences between the urban sites and the rural one regarding how violence was understood reflected in the terms commonly used. In the urban sites, violence was understood mainly in terms of gender-based violence and physical punishment, whereas in the rural site violence was seen as largely related to poverty, with a lack of basic needs and access to services rendering children vulnerable to violence. Youth unemployment, substance abuse and addiction were perceived to be contributory factors also leading to the harassment of girls. Customary practices of abduction and early marriage were also defined as forms of gender-based violence and expressions of patriarchal values, and were primarily a rural phenomenon. The risk of bullying, harassment and even rape of girls was viewed as a more serious threat in the urban sites, with exceptional cases of boys being raped. In the rural site poverty was seen as a driver of early marriage as parents sought bride payments and girls hoped to find wealthier husbands. The cultures of polygynous marriages and widow inheritance compounded the problem. Especially in the urban sites, exposure to influences from satellite TV and other media was also said to be affecting youth behaviour, and perceived to be promoting violence.

While most forms of violence were considered wrong and unacceptable by officials, service providers, caregivers and children, opinions were divided with regard to corporal punishment (and some other forms of punishment) as a means of discipline in child upbringing. Many caregivers and some children believed that pinching as a form of discipline and in some cases mild beating by parents or teachers may be not just acceptable but beneficial – 'for the child's own good'. However, many participants suggested that excessive punishment could be very harmful, sometimes leading to children running away from home, or feeling suicidal.

## Differences by gender, age and categories of children

There were gender and age differences, with corporal punishment more common in middle childhood (above age 8), while older girls were at greater risk of sexual harassment, and older boys of exploitation at work. Certain vulnerable categories of children, notably migrants, domestic workers, and in some cases children living with relatives, in very poor households, or living on the streets were perceived to be more at risk of abuse, including overwork and denial of schooling. Girls involved in domestic work were at risk of rape by employers.

Regarding violence in schools, children often face corporal punishment for coming to school late, not having done homework, disturbing the classroom and not respecting rules. However, many participants suggested that corporal punishment in schools was declining, although girls face more bullying from boys, and there was also mention of cases of girls facing sexual advances from male teachers.

## Consequences of violence

Consequences of violence included health risks from overwork and child marriage, and unemployment and substance abuse leading to fighting, crime and even possibly suicide. Overworked children tended to come to school late and were punished or suspended, often leading to them leaving school altogether. Girls who were married early would not usually continue schooling, and victims of rape faced ostracism and a lack of confidence.

## Reporting violence

Most cases of violence were not reported and were dealt with through informal channels. In the home, children relied for emotional support on parents, siblings and other relatives who sought to resolve problems through discussions; neighbours would often also intervene to calm conflict between parents and teenagers. Children would turn to friends, especially if they were expelled from the house, and girls facing problems with boys would seek help from female peers. Local elders and religious leaders would often be called upon to resolve conflicts between spouses and sometimes between parents and children, and some children sought sanctuary in churches or

mosques that would also help orphans or migrant children. Likewise, iddir funeral associations assisted orphans, including helping them with costs associated with schooling.

Reporting violence to formal institutions was less common. At the community level, children could obtain support from the *kebele* Women and Children Affairs Bureau representative and the community police, for instance in cases of abuse from employers, and from health extension workers and social workers in the urban sites. In the school setting, headmasters and Parent Teachers Associations can play a role regarding violence by teachers, and school clubs are important in creating awareness through dramas. Student parliaments and student police in the urban sites can also address fights, and serious cases can be reported to the *woreda* Education and/or Justice Bureaus. The *woreda* Women and Children Affairs Bureaus also play a role in reuniting children who have been victims of trafficking or have been abducted.

## Examples of successful interventions

- In the rural site, a broker who withheld salaries from four migrant children was reported by one of the boys to the *kebele* social court and was forced to pay.
- In the urban site within the capital, a boy reported to the police that his father with whom he was not living had refused to pay his school fees and the father started paying.
- In the small town, eight cases of rape and early marriage were dealt with by the *woreda* Justice Bureau, in one case leading to a 25-year sentence for the rape of a 10-year-old girl.

However, in practice there are serious constraints on reporting violence to institutions in the formal system. This is especially so in cases of rape due to stigma and discrimination, family reputation, requirements by police and courts to produce witnesses, a lack of information on how, when and whom to report to, a lack of follow up when cases are reported, and even allegations of bribery within informal and formal institutions. Often cases are therefore not reported and are instead resolved through customary mechanisms that are dominated by patriarchal values, with limited concern for children's rights.

## Changes over time

Considering change over time, there is a clear sense that the worst forms of violence related to physical punishment have decreased. The practices of fuming children who have misbehaved with *berbere* (hot chilli) smoke in one urban site, and the burning of hands for stealing in the rural site, are now very uncommon and condemned. Moreover, corporal punishment in the home and in school is said to be much rarer, and girls are better able to resist imposed child or early marriages. These changes are attributed in part to greater awareness of children's rights and promotion of gender equality through schools, clubs, and mass media. Institutions that can protect children such as *woreda* Women and Children Affairs Bureaus and *kebele* representatives, social and *woreda* courts, community and *woreda* police, and schools and *woreda* Education Bureaus provide deterrents and address some cases, despite constraints on reporting and worries about the potential negative consequences of doing so.

Despite this (mostly) positive picture of change, bullying and harassment of girls by boys is said to have increased, in part as a result of greater interactions between teenagers and involvement in drinking, smoking cigarettes and drugs, chewing *chat*, and teenage sex with risks of pregnancy, compounded by limited employment opportunities for youth and a lack of adequate protection procedures and serious measures to deal with offences. Moreover, caregivers and service providers allude to new risks in child-rearing, with children and youth less willing to accept parental discipline as they are affected by foreign and global influences, notably through urbanisation, changes in communication technology including satellite TV and the internet. There was also evidence from all the sites, but mainly in the rural sites, that children are much more aware of their rights and some challenge parents and teachers in cases where they want to impose physical punishments. Caregivers and teachers also mentioned this but also felt that children were not behaving in a respectful way and fulfilling their responsibilities towards their families.

In addition to wider links with poverty and persistent structural factors, respondents felt that there was an upsurge of new risks, especially of sexual harassment. Unemployment, sometimes leading to addiction and involvement in crime as well as exposure to violence in films and through the

internet were perceived as posing threats to child upbringing and socialisation. This in turn was said to lead to increasing intergenerational tensions and was presumed to exacerbate violence.

## Policy implications

The research presents the following seven suggestions for consideration in policy and practice.

### ***The importance of context and regional differences in shaping understandings of violence***

There is a need for greater understanding of how violence is defined locally, and how definitions differ between regions and environments (urban and rural). Starting with local definitions of violence would enhance the effectiveness of policies and programming, and would bridge the gap with national and international definitions. Holding regional dialogues on how violence affecting children is understood and how children are disciplined would enable a better understanding of how national policies are translated into practice, and enhance the possibilities of engaging with communities for change.

### ***Building a multi-sectoral and multi-level approach***

Strengthening inter-sectoral coordination on violence affecting children, following on from the work of the inter-ministerial Committee on Violence affecting Women and Children, and the National Coordinating Committee on Children's Rights is essential to create awareness and implement existing national policies, and plans, and enable greater collaboration between government, UN and international and national NGOs, alliances and networks and research institutions (FMoJ and UNICEF 2012). It will be important to revise and strengthen the implementation of the National Action Plan on violence affecting women and children.

Initiatives to prevent and address violence affecting children must reach down from the federal level to the regions, *woredas* and especially the *kebele* and community levels where the violence occurs. At the *kebele* level, health extension workers and increasingly social workers under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as school clubs, students' parliaments and community care coalitions, can play key roles in preventing and addressing violence.



### ***Adopting a whole-school, comprehensive approach to violence prevention***

Schools need to be supportive, inclusive and safe spaces where children can learn and flourish. Preventing school violence requires addressing the structures, norms and practices within schools that promote violent behaviour, whether between peers or between students and teachers, and reinforce exclusion. Improving understanding among teachers about the relationship between poverty and violence and promoting awareness of how these factors may influence children's ability to attend and engage with schooling is critical, especially in relation to children's roles and responsibilities and sense of duty towards caregivers.

Improving school governance is central, using guidelines and action plans to eliminate violence in schools, including corporal punishment. Measures include employment policies (e.g. use of corporal punishment constituting misconduct and liable to disciplinary action) and teacher training, with appropriate budgetary support, in order to provide the knowledge, human and financial resources necessary to enforce legislation and increase accountability. The proper implementation of the Ministry of Education's 2014 Code of Conduct on Prevention of School-Related Gender-Based Violence in Schools can go a long way in addressing gender-based violence. Confidential reporting systems, with appropriate follow-up support, for children who witness or experience violence and expanding the child justice system are also important.

### ***Embedding an age- and gender-sensitive approach to violence prevention***

Children are more likely to experience different forms of violence, at different ages and on account of their gender. This should be acknowledged and included in the implementation of the National Children's Policy and the Ethiopian Youth Development and Change Strategy. The current focus on gender-based violence in relation to harmful traditional practices could be expanded to include violence affecting both girls and boys at home and at school. Understanding and addressing gender norms is critical. Developing an awareness of and challenging dominant forms of masculinity that encourage boys to harass girls will be important. Another area which needs attention is the ill-treatment of young people at work, developing protective measures to enhance respect for the dignity of young workers by creating guidelines about rights in the workplace.

### ***Building child-sensitive social protection***

Policies and programmes on violence prevention should be sensitive to poverty and structural factors that often underpin violence towards children. Greater attention needs to be given to protecting vulnerable and very poor households through better programmes to support families affected by economic shocks, for example by linking social protection to child protection, notably in the Productive Safety Net Programme using social and behavioural change strategies, and emphasising these issues in the implementation of the Social Protection Policy and Strategy and in the training and deployment of social workers.

### ***Comprehensive legislation linked to global and continental initiatives, and improving the national action plan to prevent violence against children***

National legislation should be made more comprehensive, linking to global initiatives, notably SDG 16.2 on 'preventing abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children', as well as regional continental initiatives such as those promoted by the African Union and the African Child Policy Forum through the African Partnership to End Violence against Children. Existing legislation and awareness could be strengthened, for example by creating a forum for sharing experiences, promoting greater inter-sectoral coordination, and setting common goals among policymakers, practitioners and researchers across the continent.

Innovative approaches to addressing social norms could be developed for Ethiopia by drawing on experiences from elsewhere. Societal attitudes and norms appear to be changing in some communities in relation to the use of harsh discipline in the home. Parents need to be encouraged to air their concerns about changing perceptions of risk, and efforts need to be made to support them in non-punitive ways, perhaps by working with community and religious leaders and local institutions to promote a more tolerant approach.

### ***Training for social workers and health extension workers***

To address the issues of violence adequately a greater number of social workers need to be recruited and deployed at a community level. Training could be extended to raise awareness of the need to be sensitive to local definitions of

violence, the importance of accessible services for children, and focusing on working with children and families who are affected, ensuring that children are listened to and parents are supported.

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## About this brief

This brief, produced in partnership with UNICEF Ethiopia and Oak Foundation, is based on a sub-study on violence affecting children and youth carried out by Young Lives Ethiopia. The full report by Nardos Chuta, Virginia Morrow, Alula Pankhurst and Kिर्रily Pells entitled *Understanding Violence Affecting Children in Ethiopia: a Qualitative Study* is available on [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk). The research that this paper is based on was possible thanks to the support of Oak Foundation.

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