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Bullying, Violence Common in Schools Worldwide

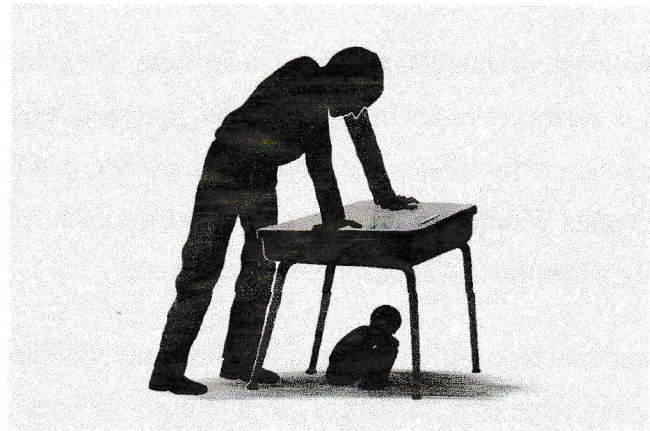
Governments Should Urgently Tackle Education-Related Abuses
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(London) – Governments around the world should urgently step up efforts to ensure students’ safety at school and in online spaces, Human Rights Watch said today on the first International Day against Violence and Bullying at School Including Cyberbullying. Many governments have not yet banned corporal punishment, and many lag behind on protecting students from school-related sexual violence, bullying, and online violence.

Students in most countries suffer violence, bullying, and discrimination. According to United Nations agencies, more than 246 million children suffer gender-based violence in or around schools every year, and one in three students experiences bullying and physical violence. Half of the world’s adolescents report violence from peers at school.

“It’s outrageous that students in many countries suffer terrible violence in school that can affect them for the rest of their lives,” said Elin Martinez, senior children’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Grave abuses like sexual and physical violence seriously affect students’ dignity, their bodily autonomy, and their ability to learn and to feel safe at school.”

Human Rights Watch research on barriers to education in over 15 countries found that children and young people experience many forms of school-related gender-based violence. Students often report corporal punishment, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, physical violence, and bullying. Teachers and school officials as well as other students are commonly responsible for these abuses.



Since Lebanon opened classes for Syrian refugee students, the number of children in public schools has more than doubled. But teachers need training in positive discipline. Syrian children said they were insulted and often banned from going to the bathroom at school.

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Girls, children with disabilities, refugee children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students frequently experience high levels of violence and bullying. Violence against these children often receives little attention because of prevailing discriminatory and harmful attitudes that perpetuate silence and impunity.

Despite important progress, corporal punishment in schools remains lawful in at least 67 countries, and many teachers still use corporal punishment to control classrooms and to exert their authority. In Lebanon, children are frequently beaten, slapped, and humiliated. In South Africa, some children with disabilities, particularly sensory and intellectual disabilities, and children with autism, are exposed to physical violence, verbal abuse, and neglect by teachers and assistants in mainstream and special schools.

Sexual violence in schools, which includes rape, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation, remains under-reported in many countries. In Senegal and Tanzania, teachers and school officials frequently sexually exploit girls in exchange for money for school fees, grades, and basic items like menstrual pads. Many girls told Human Rights Watch they did not report sexual violence because school officials do not believe them, especially when those responsible were teachers.

LGBT students face bullying, discrimination, and violence in many countries, but are often excluded from anti-bullying policies or measures taken to curb violence in schools. In Japan and Vietnam, a lack of teacher training and accountability means that teachers both allow and contribute to bullying of LGBT students.

Online gender-based violence linked to their school experience increasingly affects many children. It has increasingly become a concern as a result of the increase in time students spend online as a result of school closures tied to the Covid-19 pandemic. Cyberbullying also affects LGBT youth, with abuses moving from classrooms to online spaces. In the Philippines and the United States, LGBT students described anti-LGBT comments and slurs as well as rapidly spreading rumors facilitated by social media. This public exposure and ridicule has negative consequences for children's mental health and academic achievement, Human Rights Watch has found.

Countries that lack clear and binding policies for schools to address all forms of violence and bullying, including online, often perpetuate similar bad practices, Human Rights Watch said. Many schools lack policies to safeguard children as well as targeted protection measures to ensure the safety of the most at-risk children.

In many countries, children do not receive age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. This essential subject provides an entry point for children and teachers to discuss gender-based violence, enables teachers to approach sensitive or difficult conversations in non-stigmatizing ways, and empowers children to report abuses or harmful behaviors.

Schools also often lack counselors and teachers adequately trained in child protection. In the worst cases, school officials fail to protect children's privacy or to respect confidentiality, which exposes children to stigma, humiliation, and retaliation. Even when children report abuses, school officials do not always take the allegations seriously, initiate investigations, or refer cases to the appropriate authorities.

Governments should urgently adopt binding national policies that guarantee students protection in schools and online spaces. Those that already have policies in place should ensure that they include protections for children particularly likely to face abuse, including girls, LGBT students, and children with disabilities. Schools should have accessible, confidential reporting systems and counsellors, teachers, or school officials who act as child protection focal points and are available to provide immediate support for students who are threatened or have experienced abuse.

Schools should link up with local child protection and health centers to ensure that children who have experienced abuse are adequately heard, and referred to appropriate health and sexual and reproductive health services, including emergency contraception and abortion where needed. They should provide students with access to adequate psychosocial – mental health –services, including therapy. Governments should also ensure that schools provide compulsory, scientifically accurate, and age-appropriate sexuality education.

“Children have a right to learn in a safe physical or online environment and should be able to trust adults who have a legal and moral duty to protect them,” Martinez said. “This key principle should guide every government’s efforts to address and ultimately eradicate the scourge of violence and bullying in schools and online spaces.”

Region / Country

- Senegal
- South Africa
- Tanzania and Zanzibar
- Lebanon

Topic

- Children's Rights
- Education

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