

# Gender-based violence in primary schools: Malawi

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## Acknowledgements

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# INTRODUCTION

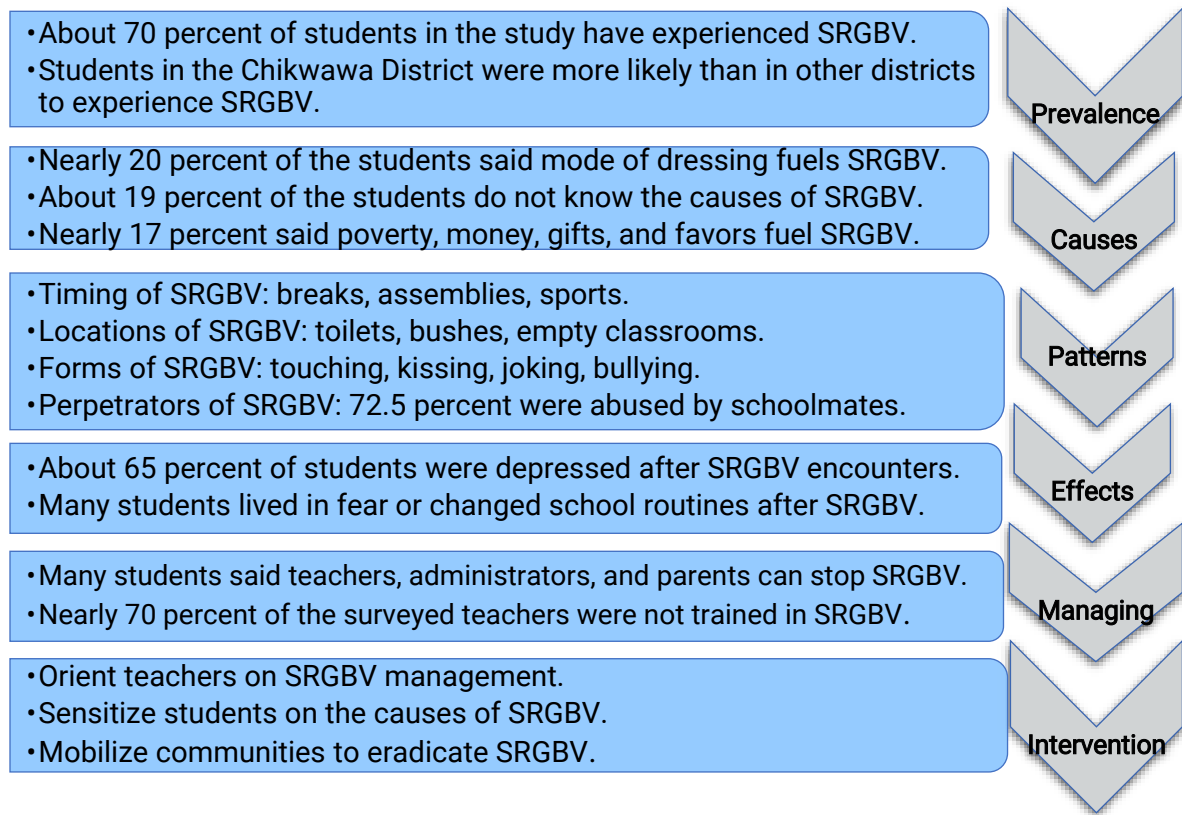
Gender-based violence (GBV) is the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights violation in the world (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottmoeller 2002). No longer only a general community issue, GBV has also infiltrated social places such as schools.

Despite numerous interventions to curb GBV in general, and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in particular, cases of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse are escalating in Malawi. This worrisome situation has unfortunately rendered futile the Malawi government's positive gender policy framework and past GBV interventions by local nongovernmental organizations.

Studies on SRGBV in Malawi report that cases of abuse and violence relate to the age and sex of victims. Violence and abuse mostly target the young and females (Bisika 2009; Burton 2005). In the Malawian education sector specifically, the research on sexual violence in primary schools has been inadequate. Thus, this study focused on primary education to ascertain the prevalence, patterns, and ways of dealing with SRGBV in Malawian primary schools. Could SRGBV affect students' school performance, their ability to focus, and their ability to learn?

This report presents findings from Malawi for a study that was also conducted in Kenya, Jamaica, and Nigeria. Figure 1 summarizes the key findings from the Malawian study.

**Figure 1. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in Malawian primary schools: Key findings**



Source: Author's compilation from field survey, 2020.

# Common study background and methodology

As noted earlier, this study is part of a larger cross-country study of SRGBV in primary schools that includes Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, and Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

## Objectives

The “common study” held three specific research objectives:

- Establish the prevalence of and possible factors leading to SRGBV
- Determine country response options to the challenges posed by SRGBV
- Identify possible interventions toward minimizing SRGBV.

The research applied a mixed methods design (Creswell 2013), including quantitative surveys, qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs), and a desk review targeting girls and boys of primary school age (10–13 years) as well as educators in selected primary-level institutions, including guidance counselors, head teachers, and teachers.

## Malawi-specific methodology

Although the other countries in the study focused on the age range of 10–13 years, the Malawian study had to extend it to students aged 17+ years. This was unavoidable because it is common to find learners around that general age in Malawian primary schools. This situation is driven by post-pregnancy admissions and repetitions, among other factors. It was important that this study include the broader age range to understand more fully the prevalence, causes, and experiences of SRGBV in primary schools. The study involved 600 students and 36 teachers at 16 primary schools, of whom 287 were boys (48 percent of the total sample) and 313 were girls (52 percent of the total sample).

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<sup>1</sup> A policy brief synthesizing the cross-country findings is forthcoming. The three country briefs are available here: <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/gender-based-violence-in-primary-schools/>.

The study covered all the three regions of Malawi. The Northern, Central, and Southern Regions were represented by Chitipa, Ntchisi, and Chikwawa and Thyolo Districts, respectively. For this report, findings are deduced from questionnaires administered to the 600 students. Where necessary, the questionnaire findings were corroborated by FGDs with the same students as well as by stories they told themselves. (Some of them were victims of SRGBV and had dropped out of school.) We further corroborated the student findings with responses from questionnaires administered to the 36 teachers. Descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of the numerical data, while thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the textual data.

## Key messages from the research findings

### **No. 1: Prevalence of SRGBV in Malawian primary schools is extremely high**

Malawi has an overall SRGBV prevalence of about 70 percent in primary schools, cutting across sex, age group, and region. And its prevalence in the primary schools has no boundaries—that is, it exists in all the research districts and primary schools. Student SRGBV experiences by region showed that more students in the Southern Region’s Chikwawa District (66.7 percent) than in the other districts have faced sexual violence and/or harassment.

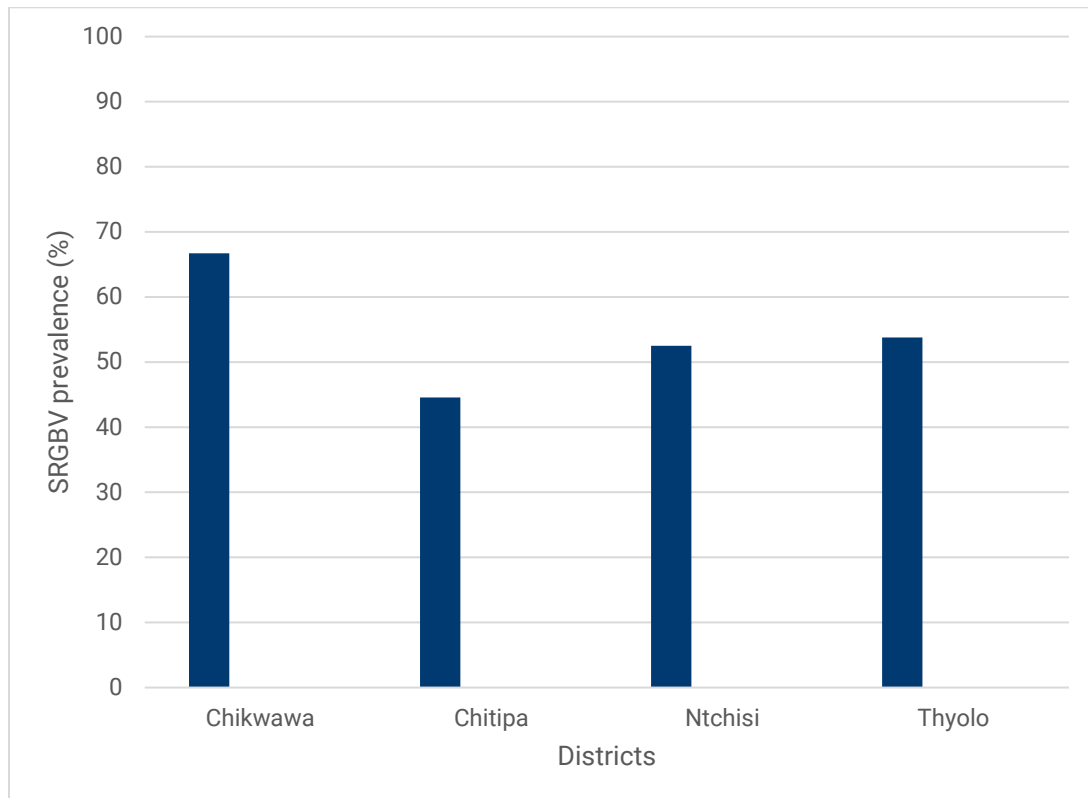
Bullying might be fueling SRGBV in Malawian primary schools. The Malawian study found that 413 out of the 600 students involved in the study were bullied in 2019, a prevalence of 69 percent. Although quite shocking, this prevalence is not surprising because important stakeholders tend to accept SRGBV in schools (Samati 2013).<sup>2</sup> Figure 2 shows the prevalence of SRGBV in Malawi, by region, averaged from reports of five forms of SRGBV: sexual, physical, verbal, psychological, and emotional abuse. Specifically, we zeroed in on SRGBV in order

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<sup>2</sup> Discriminatory attitudes and practices against girls by teachers in the classroom and school Administrators and peers in the wider school environment were noted as deep and adverse.

to measure the following incidents: made unwelcomed sexual comments, showed sexy or sexual pictures, touched in unwelcome sexual ways, exposed body or showed naked pictures, forced to do something sexual, and bullying.

**Figure 2. Prevalence of SRGBV in Malawian primary schools, by region**



Source: Author's computation from field study, 2020.

Note: The sample included 600 primary school students, aged 10–17+ years, from 16 primary schools. Five forms of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) were measured: sexual, physical, verbal, psychological, and emotional abuse. The overall prevalence of SRGBV was averaged from responses regarding all five forms.

## **No. 2: Boys are most likely to encounter the more verbal forms of SRGBV, while girls are most likely to encounter the more detrimental physical forms of SRGBV**

On average, boys and girls in Malawian primary schools face SRGBV at roughly the same rate: 54.6 percent of girls and 55.3 percent of boys. Where significant gender differences emerge is in the forms of SRGBV experienced by boys compared with girls—the verbal forms for boys (20 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls encountered unwelcomed sexual comments) and the physical forms for girls (14 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys were touched in an unwelcome sexual way; and 12 percent of girls and 4 percent of boys were forced to do something sexual).

Students of all age groups are vulnerable to SRGBV, but the older ones (from 13 years) are more vulnerable. Students who are 17 years and older are the most likely (23 percent) to have had someone touch them in an unwelcome sexual way, followed by those aged 13–16 years (14 percent) and those aged 9–12 years (8 percent).

In addition, physical violence could not be separated from SRGBV. For example, most victims of SRGBV indicated during the FGDs that they had experienced forced touching, kissing, and hugging, usually involving physical force. Fights also were often cited during the FGDs. The fights usually led to SRGBV, especially when they were between students of the opposite sex. Physical violence was also observed by teachers, who indicated that they usually discipline students for fighting.

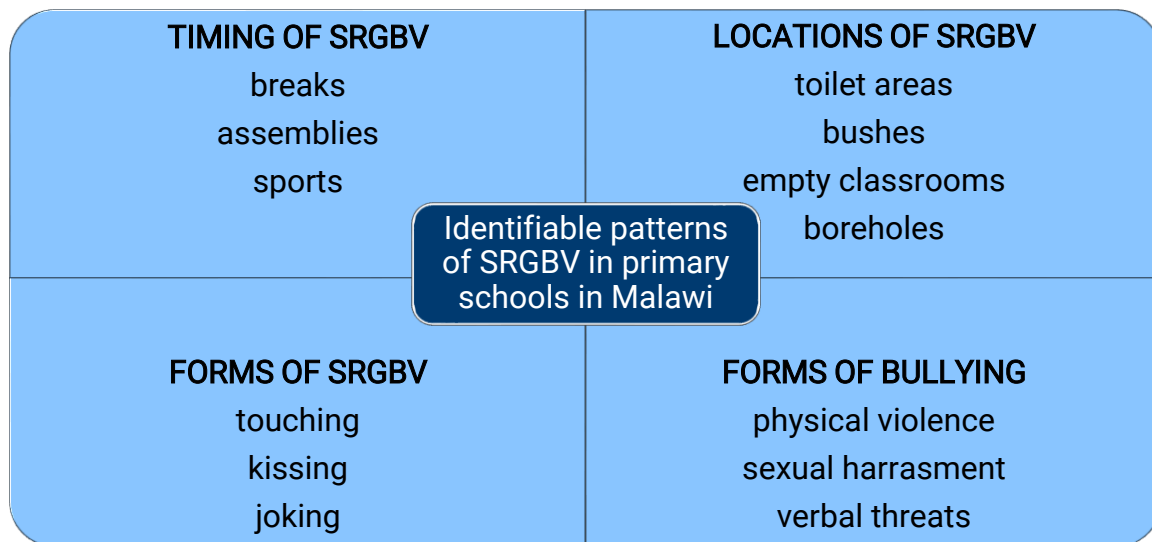
## **No. 3: Most perpetrators of SRGBV in primary schools in Malawi are the victims' schoolmates**

Of those students who reported having experienced SRGBV, 73 percent—across all age groups, genders, and regions—indicated the abuse had come from schoolmates. Other perpetrators specified by the students included a neighbour, a family member and a person of authority. The differences between the regions, age groups, and genders are narrow. This suggests that most of the SRGBV is orchestrated by schoolmates.



The mapping performed for the study shows that incidents of SRGBV commonly happen in toilet areas, bushes, empty classrooms, and boreholes. For example, at Nachiwe Primary School in Chitipa District, both girls and boys cited a school borehole as one common place where SRGBV occurs. Figure 3 summarizes these patterns.

**Figure 3. When, where, and how SRGBV occurs in Malawian primary schools**



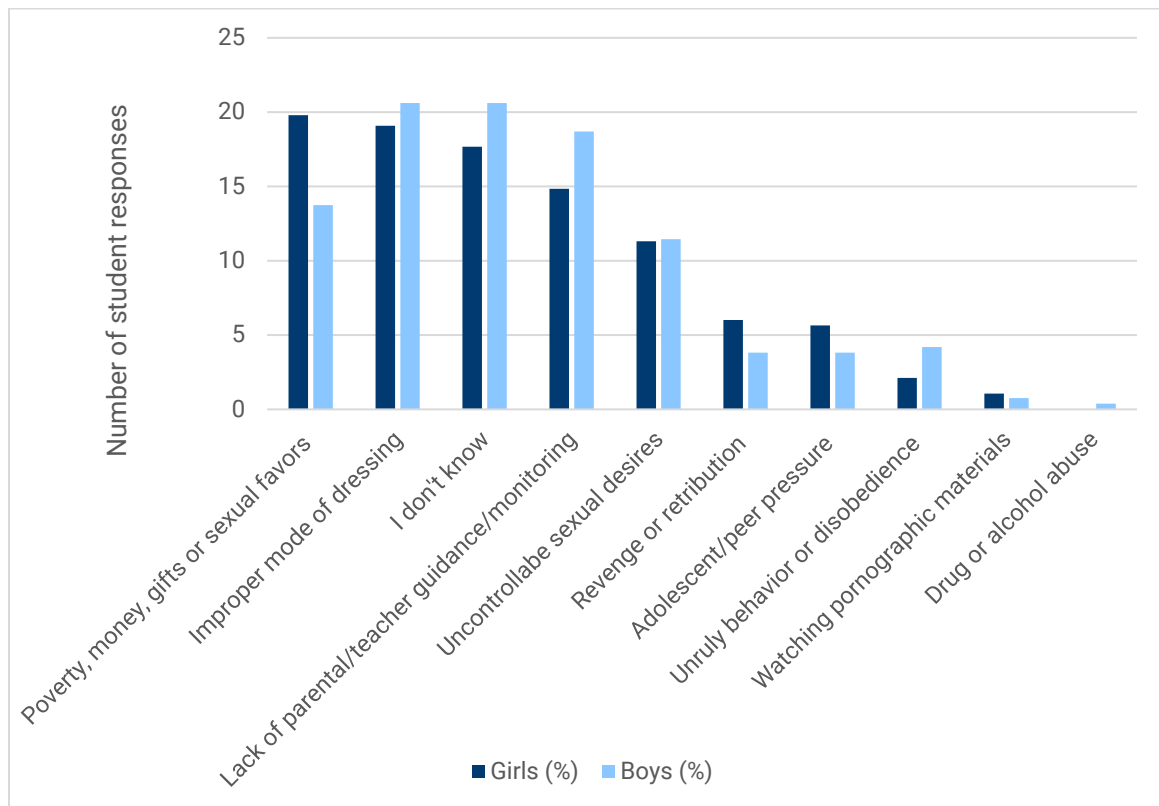
Source: Author's compilation from field study, 2020.

*Note:* The sample included 600 primary school students, aged 10–17+ years, from 16 primary schools. SRGBV = school-related gender-based violence.

#### **No. 4: Understanding of the causes of SRGBV reflects gender differences**

Primary school pupils in Malawi view improper dressing as fueling SRGBV. Both girls and boys mentioned mode of dressing as the major cause of SRGBV in their schools. However, the pupils' responses also suggest a potential normalization of SRGBV. The almost even spread of reporting about causes (figure 4) and the high incidence of "I don't know" responses (19 percent) suggest that students are normalizing messages about why violence is justifiable—such as because of poverty and sexual favors for money, uncontrollable sexual desires, lack of mentoring, and so on.

**Figure 4. Responses of Malawian primary students on the causes of SRGBV, by gender**



Source: Author's computation from field study, 2020.

Note: The sample included 600 primary school students, aged 10–17+ years, from 16 primary schools. SRGBV = school-related gender-based violence.

That “mode of dress” is the most-cited cause also reveals discrepancy and inconsistency with other findings, such as the high prevalence of SRGBV against both boys and girls. (Such a response clearly reflects a gendered understanding and normalization of violence—for example, assuming or associating that victims of SRGBV are girls rather than boys, and then “blaming” girls for the violence they have received because they are “asking for it” with provocative styles of dress.) Yet we see from the study findings that bullying is the most-cited type of SRGBV being reported—and this was higher among boys than girls.

In addition, the study found that sexual-related gender-based violence perpetrated against girls is less prevalent than against boys. Most boys faced unwelcome sexual comments, whereas many girls were more likely to be touched in unwelcome sexual ways. Given these findings, one would think that

students would be reporting *causes* of violence consistent with the *types* of violence they are reporting. That the study findings point to mode of dress as the primary cause suggests that participants tend to view the causes of SRGBV through a “blame the girls for their dress” lens. This reveals how children and youth are socialized to understand SRGBV as sexualized violence, primarily against girls.

### **No. 5: Most students take no action after incidents of SRGBV**

Among those students who took action, little or nothing was done to help them redress the harassment. The study found that 99.2 percent of the students involved in the study (both males and females) in all the four regions did not talk to a counselor or supervisor after incidents of SRGBV.

Male students preferred instead to report incidents to teachers, while female students opted to tell family about SRGBV experiences. The study found that 30 percent of male victims talked to teachers or fellow students about such experiences, while 48.6 percent of female victims talked to family or friends about it—most of them (94 percent) changed school routines e.g., skipped classes. Many older students (13-16-year olds) handled SRGBV situations by themselves, while younger students (9-12-year olds) reported the incidences to family.

The study also found that 97.7 percent of the male students and 94.8 percent of female students failed to report SRGBV because the harasser had more power and could harm them. This suggests that students must be encouraged to report SRGBV to redress and eliminate the abuse.

### **No. 6: Institutional resources, processes, and protocols are insufficient to manage SRGBV in Malawian primary schools**

Because most cases of SRGBV happen in school locations, perhaps teachers are the best placed figures to be referral authorities. This is what students said during the FGDs. As for whether teachers have handled SRGBV issues among students, 86.1 percent of the students reported yes and 13.9 percent reported no. This suggests that most teachers handle SRGBV issues.

Nevertheless, when the teachers were asked whether they have had training on handling SRGBV, 30.6 percent said yes and 69.4 percent said no—indicating that most of the teachers, whom the students depend on, might not handle or manage SRGBV effectively. This means that many cases of SRGBV are referred to the teachers, but the teachers are seldom trained in SRGBV management.

## Recommendations

Malawi's high prevalence of SRGBV relative to Kenya, Jamaica, and Nigeria (see <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/gender-based-violence-in-primary-schools/>) indicates a degree of normalization of these offenses in Malawi; that SRGBV is hardly being addressed; and, to the extent that it *is* being addressed, the existing SRGBV interventions may be of less effect in Malawi than in the other three study countries.

This research reaffirms that the school environment plays a role in both reinforcing the gender stereotypes found in the wider society and in socializing students through the informal rules and norms it upholds. And that teachers are also gender actors who often show ignorance or ambivalence toward SRGBV (Samati 2013). The following recommendations emerge from the Malawian study findings.

### Students

- Orient students to be aware of their rights, duties, and responsibilities related to SRGBV.
- Sensitize students on what constitutes SRGBV and how to report incidents of SRGBV.
- Using established school protocols, guide and counsel students who have encountered cases of SRGBV.
- Include ways of addressing SRGBV issues in student activities.

- Use student-friendly services such as clubs, debates, and quizzes in schools to improve their knowledge and reporting of SRGBV.
- Help students to develop SRGBV survival mechanisms (for example, walking in groups).

## **Schools and teachers**

- Orient schools to have reporting structures for SRGBV.
- Train and mobilize teachers to manage SRGBV redress.
- Train head teachers on protocols to prevent and deal with SRGBV.
- Incorporate SRGBV into teacher professional development.
- Mandate that schools and teachers ensure that the locations students patronize are well secured.

## **Parents and communities**

- Sensitize parents on how to follow up on SRGBV.
- Mobilize communities to act against SRGBV.
- Guide parents and communities on how to refer students who experienced SRGBV.
- Include SRGBV awareness in community activities.
- Mobilize communities to set bylaws punishing GBV perpetrators at the community level.
- Empower parents and communities to ensure that school pathways are safe.

Overall, SRGBV has been normalized by students and teachers given its deep roots in people's values and practices. As a result, there is a need to develop and implement systematic, age- and gender-specific communications and

interventions for normative and behavioral change that sensitize, motivate, and empower students, teachers, parents, and community leaders to eliminate these abuses with a lasting impact.

## Conclusion

The Malawian study SRGBV in primary schools found that despite its high prevalence, most of the primary education stakeholders are unaware of its causes, effects, and ways of managing it in schools. The study also found that most of the key stakeholders in primary schools (particularly teachers) lack expertise on handling and dealing with cases of SRGBV. Furthermore, the current mechanisms and interventions to manage and curb SRGBV are ineffective. Without such interventions, as the study revealed, many incidents of SRGBV persist throughout unsafe areas of Malawian primary schools where many of the incidents occur.

Among other recommendations, there is a need to expand the advocacy on SRGBV to include boys since they are also victims. It had been widely believed that girls are more likely than boys to face sexual harassment or any form of SRGBV. However, new evidence from this research challenges this belief. It speaks to the need to design SRGBV interventions that are inclusive of both boys and girls and are also sensitive to age and culture.

This report also points to how a culture of SRGBV is proliferating violence to the point of negatively affecting both girls and boys (manifesting as depression, dropouts, and loss of concentration). This finding has grave implications for the country's ability to improve the quality of education and thus educational outcomes.

The recommendations from students and teachers indicate that close and productive relationships between teachers and students, and between parents and communities, could help all stakeholders to find amicable ways of resolving the GBV that erupts in schools but eventually extends to homes and communities. Thus, the issue of bullying and SRGBV calls for a systematic review of current ways of dealing with perpetrators—from no action or corporal punishments to counseling, parental involvement, and comprehensive

communication on social and behavioral change that also strengthens referral services. The importance of linking school-based GBV interventions with community action cannot be overemphasized.

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