



## INFORMATION BRIEF

### Adult Perceptions of Violence Against Children in Northwest Syria: Research Summary

#### Introduction

Safe, inclusive learning environments are essential for children's education and wellbeing, with anxiety caused by violence undermining attendance, participation and academic outcomes. The Syria Education Programme II (SEP II), known locally as Manahel, puts protection and safeguarding at the centre of its approach to strengthening the formal education system with an emphasis on research and evidence-driven strategies and practices.

Manahel has supported more than 800,000 primary-age children since 2018 and strengthened safeguarding, teacher capacity, and school protection committees. Reported incidents of violence in programme supported schools fell by 88% between 2019 and 2022, yet challenges remain. Corporal punishment is widespread, peer violence particularly affects vulnerable learners and schools lack understanding or capacity to address issues.

To address such challenges effectively requires awareness of the perceptions of violence in schools. Manahel commissioned research to assess adults' understanding of violence – specifically amongst staff and parents/caregivers – as well as the causes, consequences, and existing mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence. This summary examines key findings from the study and recommendations for further action. A future study on child perceptions of violence is planned.

#### Summary of findings

The study found that adult perceptions of violence could be organised into five categories: physical violence (peer violence and corporal punishment); verbal and psychological violence; violence experienced by children with disabilities; neglect and emotional abuse; and sexual violence and harassment. It also noted that adult perceptions of violence vary by learner gender, school type and student vulnerability. For example, overall respondents said young girls were most vulnerable to violence but perceived boys as being at greater risk of peer physical violence and girls at greater risk of verbal and psychological abuse.

##### **Physical peer violence and corporal punishment:**

Most commonly reported as occurring between students, especially in boys-only and mixed-gender schools. Corporal punishment remained common in many schools, particularly in crowded classrooms and under-resourced schools, though respondents report it is becoming less frequent in Idlib and Western Aleppo.

**Verbal and psychological violence:** Perceived as widespread, particularly among girls, often targeting background, accent or social status. Informants believed that mixed-gender schools sometimes amplified gendered verbal aggression, and some indicated that it escalates as students get older due to social dynamics. In sampled Aleppo City schools, it was also reported that verbal violence by teachers is also common.

Up to **40%**

said peer verbal and psychological violence occurs in mixed-gender schools, vs up to 25% in boys-only and 20% in girls-only schools

**Children with disabilities:** Responses were inconsistent across schools, though overall children with disabilities were seen as vulnerable to bullying, verbal abuse and exclusion. It was reported as often manifesting as mocking, name-calling or marginalisation from peer activities. Children with speech or cognitive impairments were perceived to be especially vulnerable.

**Neglect and emotional abuse:** Perpetrated by both teachers and parents, neglect was highlighted as a significant contributor to violence. Neglect from teachers was said to manifest as children being dismissed due to their socioeconomic background or social status, while parental neglect is perceived to increase children's vulnerability to verbal and psychological violence in school. This was particularly reported in Aleppo City.



Libraries and classrooms were identified as being the safest spaces for girls; sports areas for boys; and Special Education Centres for children with disabilities. Toilets were consistently identified as unsafe for all groups.



**Sexual violence and harassment:** Did not emerge prominently and is less likely to be understood or reported.

The study also sought to understand perceptions of violence to and from school. Findings showed a belief that violence in this context was commonly physical, especially where supervision and protective measures were limited. Boys experienced more peer harassment and abuse, while girls more frequently face violence from adults, community members or non-students.

Key perceived causes of violence within schools were largely consistent across the sampled schools. These included children's experiences at home environments, social background and experiences – including those linked to poverty and displacement – and the proficiency or experience of teachers.

Consequences identified included absenteeism, dropout, psychosocial distress, reduced confidence and weakened academic performance. Gendered patterns were observed with boys believed to show increased aggression and girls perceived as reducing attendance.

Reporting mechanisms were identified consistently amongst respondents, though there was some variation in understanding of the process for reporting. While there was a strong desire to strengthen safeguarding and high confidence in existing systems, fear of retaliation, shame, and cultural taboos remained major barriers to reporting. Respondents in Aleppo City reported greater dissatisfaction and mistrust in reporting mechanisms.

## Recommendations

1. Strengthen collaboration and institutionalisation by establishing a shared definition of 'safe learning environments' amongst government, school, parents and learners. Key to this is supporting institutionalisation of safeguarding through training and technical assistance that develop policy and leadership in the Ministry of Education and Education Directorates. There is also need to build cross-sector links with the Ministry of Social Affairs and partners working on child protection.
2. Improve school infrastructure, prioritising the rehabilitation of toilets and safe spaces for girls and children with disabilities using universal design standards. Understand which locations learners consider safe and relocate complaint boxes to these discreet places.
3. Enhance capacity amongst schools, learners and communities. For example, providing structured safeguarding training to teachers and Protection Officers, strengthening governance structure (including School Community Committees), running community awareness campaigns on non-violent discipline and conflict-resolution, and expand peer-to-peer safeguarding approaches.
4. Adopt participatory methods that safely integrate children's perspectives into future research, institutionalising school and community safety mapping, and regularly monitoring unsafe spaces to support risk mitigation and awareness-raising.

Manahel, named from an Arabic word referring to fountains (of hope, knowledge and life), – is the northwest component of the UK aid-funded Syria Education Programme (SEP). Delivered by Chemonics UK, Manahel provides education to primary school-aged children and, since 2018, has benefitted over 800,000 children through school, home, and after-school education and by responding to children's psychosocial and protection needs.