

Corporal punishment still common in schools: rights group

By Abby Sewell
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BEIRUT: In spite of attempts in recent years to curb the practice of corporal punishment in Lebanese schools, violent punishment of children remains common, a newly released report by Human Rights Watch has found.

The issue cuts across both private and public schools and affects Lebanese children as well as Syrian refugees attending Lebanese schools, according to the report.

Researchers interviewed 51 children who said they “had been beaten, verbally abused, or humiliated by staff,” as well as parents, teachers, school staff and administrators, NGO workers and officials with the Education Ministry and other public bodies.

In one case cited in the report, a 10-year-old Lebanese boy attending a private school had his nose broken by a teacher. In another, a teacher hit a 9-year-old boy with a book, breaking his two front teeth. A boy undergoing leukemia treatment was allegedly called a “donkey” and had his hair pulled by both a teacher and the director of a public school.

“Children interviewed in this report described how teachers whipped them on the hands, feet and faces with implements including an electrical cable, a rubber hose and a thick wooden stick; hit them on the back of the neck and head or slapped them in the face; pulled their hair and ears; slammed their heads into the school desk; and shoved them into the walls of classrooms or corridors,” the report said.

The Education Ministry has taken steps to prohibit corporal punishment, the researchers noted. But they said that enforcement needed to be increased along with training teachers and staff on nonviolent discipline methods.

Education Minister Akram Chehayeb could not be reached for comment Monday. A ministry official responsible for child protection, reached by telephone, said she had not yet seen the report and needed time to read it before commenting.

HRW researcher Bill Van Esveld said the aim of the report was to “support the ministry’s positive steps to end violent discipline in schools and to make those steps more effective.”

The Education Ministry has officially prohibited corporal punishment in public schools since 1974 and in 2011 issued a circular banning the practice in both private and public schools, the report noted.

A countrywide survey conducted by Saint Joseph University that year found that 76 percent of 1,177



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schoolchildren interviewed said they had been subjected to physical violence by teachers or administrators in schools.

In 2015, the ministry set up a hotline for complaints about the treatment of children in schools, and in 2018 issued a child protection policy once again prohibiting corporal punishment and increased the number of counselors in schools.

Ministry officials said the ministry had received 195 complaints regarding corporal punishment or violence by school staff since 2017, Van Esveld said, but it was unclear how many of those had resulted in teachers or staff being disciplined.

Until 2014, teachers were exempt from criminal prosecution for corporal punishment under Lebanese law. The exemption was removed after a video of a school director beating the feet of three

young boys with a stick for failing an exam went viral, drawing widespread outrage.

However, the criminal code still does not explicitly criminalize corporal punishment; the HRW report recommended that it should.

In spite of a large body of research showing that corporal punishment has negative psychological and behavioral effects, hitting children remains widely accepted in Lebanese society. In a recently released survey by World Vision Lebanon, 28 percent of parents surveyed reported using violent discipline on their children, although the research noted that the actual number was likely higher. Corporal punishment by parents remains legal.

The Lebanese school system has been under increased pressure in recent years, with the population of

students in public schools essentially doubling as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Although some of the cases outlined in the HRW report involved Lebanese children, the majority of the children interviewed were Syrian. Researchers noted that in some cases, Syrian parents were more reluctant to report abusive treatment of their children in schools because they lacked legal residency and were afraid of reprisals. Instead, in some cases, Syrian parents simply pulled their children out of school because of abusive treatment.

At a news conference accompanying the report’s release Monday, a woman who identified herself as a teacher in a school but declined to give her name or the name of the school disputed the characterization that the hitting of children was widespread. She said prohibition

on corporal punishment and even on verbal abuse was enforced. “If you so much as call a pupil a ‘donkey’ they will make an investigation, and you will get into something you can’t get out of,” she said. “If you want to give punishment, it has to be acceptable and it has to be purposeful.”

However, she acknowledged, “Of course, there are exceptional cases. The students drive the teachers crazy. They bring them to a place where the teacher might behave in a reflexive way.”

Van Esveld said that was the reason his organization was calling for more training. For most teachers, he said, “the heart is in the right place, but we think the teachers need to be given the tools to do the right thing, even in very difficult circumstances, and to be held accountable if they’re violating the rules.”