

# Human Rights Watch

## Children's Rights

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Corporal Punishment in Lebanons Schools

2019 Dadu Shin for Human Rights Watch

When 10-year-old Charbel saw his teacher hitting another student, he asked Why? Instead of answering, his teacher grabbed him by the nose and yanked upwards, twice. When Charbel returned home, his face covered in blood, his mother was shocked. No one from the school had called to let her know that a teacher had broken her child's nose, but other children's parents did. The next day, she and other parents confronted the director of his private school, demanding action. The school suspended the teacher for two weeks. Another student's mother said the teacher was notorious for violence against children. Charbel's mother has since transferred her son to another school and filed a criminal complaint against the teacher. There was nothing else I could do, she said. I don't want my child to be beaten.

Fadi was only 5 years old when he was diagnosed with leukemia. At his private school, the teachers understood that the illness and the medicine he had to take made it hard for him to focus, his mother said. That changed when Fadi's family moved and enrolled him in the public school in another town. His new teacher called him a donkey, hit him and pulled his hair, and regularly made him stand outside the school in the cold as punishment for what she deemed inadequate academic performance. Fadi's mother complained repeatedly, but the school director said that Fadi could not be given preferential treatment, refused to re-enroll him the next year, and said he should go to a place [an institution] for children with intellectual disabilities. Fadi said that the school director had also insulted him and pulled his hair. There was no one else for me to complain to, his mother said. They wrote an open letter to the Minister of Education, posted it on Facebook, and found a private school that offered scholarships, where Fadi enrolled. No one from the Education Ministry contacted her to ask about her son, she said.

Instead of helping him, the school staff berated Fadi, hurling verbal insults and physically abusing the young boy.

Corporal punishment is physical abuse intended to make children suffer pain, humiliation, and fear in the name of discipline. 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. One child's tooth was broken after a teacher hit him in the face with a stick. Another boy said a teacher beat him on the hand with an electric cable, causing a deep cut that was bleeding for two or three days. One boy suffered a broken nose. A teacher recalled that one student's fingernails popped off after another teacher hit his fingertips with a ruler.

Children are entitled to go to school without fear of violence and intimidation from the adults entrusted with educating them. Violence at school not only does physical and mental harm but also harms children's right to education. In cases documented in this report, children avoided or dropped out of school, or their parents pulled them out of school due to the pain, fear, humiliation, and risk of further harm from corporal punishment. Surveys show that corporal punishment is one of the leading factors behind school drop-outs in Lebanon.

While some teachers, as well as some parents, have claimed that corporal punishment is necessary to improve children's behavior and academic achievement, decades of pediatric, psychiatric and other medical and scientific studies have shown that deliberately inflicting pain and humiliation on a child in the name of discipline conveys the message that disagreements should be resolved through violence and causes harms that vastly outweigh the supposed benefits to children, including deteriorating peer relationships, difficulty with concentration, lowered school achievement, antisocial behavior, intense dislike of authority, somatic [physical or bodily] complaints, a tendency for school avoidance and school drop-out, and other evidence of negative high-risk adolescent behavior, according to the US Society for Adolescent Medicine.

Lebanon's Education Ministry has prohibited all forms of corporal punishment of students in public schools since 1974, and in 2001 issued a detailed circular, applicable to both public and private school staff, that bans corporal punishment as well as verbal abuse. Yet due to a lack of enforcement, surveys have found that widespread abuse persists. In 2011, a country-wide survey conducted by St. Joseph University, based in Beirut, found that 76 percent of 1,177 schoolchildren interviewed said they had been subjected to physical violence by teachers or administrators in schools, with the highest rates among younger, socially-vulnerable children in public schools. In some of the cases documented in this report, school directors responded to complaints of abuse not by disciplining the teachers responsible but by hitting the child again. One child recalled hiding under his desk from his teacher, who was beating him, and then being pulled out and beaten by the school director.

Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, enrollment in Lebanon's public schools has doubled, with roughly 210,000 Lebanese and 210,000 Syrian students in primary and secondary schools in 2018. (About 70 percent of Lebanese children attend private schools due to the perceived poor quality of public schools.) In 2014, the Ministry of Education's national education plan cited a UNICEF assessment of 27 public and private schools that found more than 70 percent of students had been subjected to violence by teachers and warned that teachers who were struggling to cope with vastly increased numbers of Syrian students were likely to resort to corporal punishment. In one case that Human Rights Watch documented in early 2018, violence and humiliating treatment by school staff against Syrian children was so serious that nearly all the Syrian refugees living in one village stopped sending their children to a public school for one week, until the school director came to the community and promised that teachers would stop beating children and would allow them to use the bathrooms. An education specialist described another public school that had closed its afternoon shift for Syrian students because parents stopped sending their children due to violence and humiliating treatment of children by school staff. Another education expert said the scope of the problem was so significant that Syrian parents faced a choice between protecting their child from violence and access to education.

Lebanese criminal law has lagged behind the Education Ministry's policy of prohibiting corporal punishment in schools. Until 2014, Lebanon's penal code explicitly exempted teachers from liability for inflicting culturally accepted levels of physical pain on children in the name of discipline. Parliament amended the law and removed the exemption a month after a video went viral of a teacher beating boys on the feet with a stick as they pleaded for him to stop. But multiple reports and Human Rights Watch's research indicate that the practice persists due to a lack of enforcement. In addition, the revised law still expressly permits parents to hit their children.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have called on Lebanon to ban all corporal punishment of children since 1998. After the 2014 amendments to the penal code, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Lebanon to make the prohibition of corporal punishment, however light, explicit in all settings, including public and private schools and in pre-primary and after-school education. Lebanon has not passed new legislation that explicitly criminalizes corporal punishment in schools.

In May 2018, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education launched a comprehensive child protection policy, after three years of development. The policy mandates school counsellors to identify and refer children who are victims of violence in the home, their community, or at school for appropriate follow-up. To implement the policy, the Education Ministry increased the number of senior counsellors from about 35 to 70 in the 2018-2019 school year; the counsellors provide trainings on tolerance, diversity, conflict resolution, and non-violent discipline to all staff and students at targeted schools. The policy explicitly prohibits all corporal punishment and should lead to improvements in responding to violence at school. Former Education Minister Marwan Hamadeh rightly said the policy was needed to remedy the impacts of violence in schools, including lower academic results and higher dropout rates.

The child protection policy represents a significant, positive step toward realizing children's rights to a safe school environment. However, it does not sufficiently address the key problem of impunity for school teachers, supervisors, directors, and support staff who harm children in the name of discipline.

The child protection policy distinguishes abuses such as sexual assault at school, which require immediate referral to external measures (i.e. the police), from those requiring internal disciplinary measures. Only internal measures, which are not specified in the policy, are to be taken against perpetrators of aggression or violence committed by members of the educational staff. An Education Ministry official told Human Rights Watch that the disciplinary measures could include reprimands, delayed promotions, and docking of pay, but that termination of employment would be reserved for perpetrators of sexual abuse rather than corporal punishment.

The Education Ministry established a hotline for complaints about violence in schools, and a mechanism for NGOs to refer cases of violence at schools to the ministry's headquarters in 2015. However, several civil society organizations said they resorted to complaining to public prosecutors after Education Ministry officials did not respond to referrals about violence in schools. In two cases documented for this report, parents filed complaints to police against school officials who allegedly beat students. The Justice Ministry said it did not record disaggregated data on cases of assault against children by school staff.

Another shortcoming undermining implementation, is that the child protection policy requires that all complaints of violence at school include the name of the child affected. While this information is only accessible to a small number of central and regional ministry staff and enjoins strict confidentiality, the policy's inability to deal with anonymous complaints fails to appreciate that children who have complained of violence or whose cases have been referred to the ministry for follow-up, have been subjected to reprisals and further violence by school staff, a problem consistently described by Lebanese and Syrian parents and documented by educators and NGO child protection specialists. Staff at two NGOs said they had stopped referring cases of violence in schools to the Education Ministry altogether because of a pattern of a lack of ministerial follow-up and further violence against the students by school staff. The reporting mechanism so far, its more harm than good, one said.

In funding proposals to international donors, the Education Ministry has requested further resources for child protection at schools, including to protect students from corporal punishment. The ministry should work with donors to compensate for any budgetary shortfalls, but should also improve outcomes by involving civil society in trainings, monitoring, reporting and follow-up. NGO staff noted that their colleagues had skills that public schools needed, such as child psychiatrists. In several cases, the ministry has allowed NGOs to provide teacher trainings on non-violent discipline and children's rights, and to place social workers, counsellors and other experts in public schools. But many NGOs complained of lack of transparency after they referred cases of violence in schools to the ministry for follow up. In some cases, NGO staff said, they only received acknowledgment of receipt of a referral from the ministry after months, along with a note that the case had been closed without any further explanation. Child protection referrals disappear in the system and are impossible to follow up, one NGO education expert said. Its a black box, said another.

The Education Ministry insists that it must maintain the confidentiality of children whose cases are reported, but the current lack of action and transparency undermines the protection of children from violence, undercuts the ministry's own child protection policy, and hinders civil society groups that try to enroll children in public schools from identifying and supporting children who subsequently drop out of school due to violence. The ministry should work with civil society to design a grievance reporting mechanism that allows children to report any abuses confidentially and safely without fear of reprisals. The mechanism should also enable NGOs to help families follow-up on complaints of violence in schools.

International donors have given hundreds of millions of euros to support education in Lebanon, including assisting the development of the child protection policy. They should press for accountability for violence in schools, support revisions to make the child protection policy more effective in this regard, and support the provision of teacher-training in positive discipline.

#### **To the Lebanese Parliament:**

#### **To the Ministry of Justice:**

In order to ensure school directors, teachers, children and families are aware that violence in school is unlawful and may be criminally prosecuted:

#### **To the Ministry of Education and Higher Education:**

In order to achieve the goal of ending corporal punishment, and to empower students, parents, and civil society to uphold children's rights:

#### **To international donors to education in Lebanon:**

Human Rights Watch interviewed 51 children who said they had been beaten, verbally

abused, or humiliated by staff at public or private schools in 2018 and 2019, in seven of Lebanon's eight governorates. In almost all cases children described a combination of verbal abuse and physical assault. The children interviewed for this report were identified primarily with the help of staff at Lebanese and international non-governmental organizations that provide counselling, non-formal education, or child-protection services; in all cases, these organizations obtained the consent of children and their parents to share their contact information with Human Rights Watch. During some of the interviews with parents and children, they also identified other children who had been assaulted or abused at school, whom researchers then followed up with. All of the children interviewed for this report were attending primary schools. The majority of children who were interviewed attended public schools, while 8 attended private schools; none of the children interviewed attended institutions supported by the Ministry of Social Affairs or schools for Palestinian children operated by UNRWA. Of the cases of corporal punishment at school Human Rights Watch documented through these interviews, 9 children had Lebanese nationality, and 42 were Syrian refugees.

The report is also based on interviews with three Lebanese public-school teachers, two private school teachers, and three Syrian teachers working as volunteers in Lebanese public schools as education community liaisons. In addition, Human Rights Watch interviewed eleven education and child protection staff at seven non-governmental organizations and two international humanitarian agencies, two Lebanese academic researchers, two Lebanese pediatric psychiatrists, and four officers with donor country agencies or international financial institutions providing funding to education in Lebanon. We also interviewed or corresponded with officials at the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice.

Where possible, interviews were conducted separately with children, and with one or both of their parents. In settings where private individual interviews were not possible, parents and children were interviewed together. Thirty-two of the interviews were conducted in February and May 2018; sixteen were conducted in October and November 2018, after the Education Ministry had established a comprehensive child protection policy in May 2018, and three were conducted in February 2019. All interviews with children were conducted in Arabic with many of the interviews translated into English by an interpreter.

Human Rights Watch provided an explanation of informed consent to ensure that interviewees understood the nature and purpose of the interview and could choose whether to speak with researchers. In each case, researchers explained how the information would be used and published and sought the interviewees permission to include their experiences and recommendations in this report. Human Rights Watch informed children and their parents that they could stop or pause the interview at any time and could decline to answer questions or discuss particular topics. Human Rights Watch did not provide any financial or other incentives to consent to interviews.

In almost all cases, parents requested that Human Rights Watch withhold identifying details and not use their real names or the names of the school staff involved, because of concerns that their children could face reprisals from school staff, or in the case of Syrian refugee families, because they feared or had experienced threats from school officials to report them to the police for lacking legal residency in Lebanon. For this reason, Human Rights Watch did not provide details about individual cases to the Ministry of Education. All names of parents and children used in this report are pseudonyms.

Globally, pediatric, psychiatric and other professional medical associations have called for an end to the use of corporal punishment because of the short- and long-term harms it causes children.

In 2018, the responses of 153 Lebanese pediatricians to a questionnaire showed that 40 percent were not aware of the psychological impact of corporal punishment on children, and 50 percent were not aware of the physical harms caused.<sup>[6]</sup> To the extent that the harmful impact of corporal punishment has been documented in Lebanon, non-governmental organizations and the Lebanese government have identified corporal punishment and other forms of violence in schools as a cause of students dropping out of school and ending their formal education. The reports do not always distinguish whether the cause of drop-outs was violence by school staff, or bullying, harassment, and assault by other students, but they do indicate that violence by school staff is common:

Among children who do not drop out of school, the World Bank also found a strong correlation between the frequency of abuse in Lebanese schools, and declining scores in math tests<sup>[10]</sup> Studies in the US have similarly found that students at schools where corporal punishment is frequently used perform worse academically than children in schools where it is prohibited. <sup>[11]</sup>

Among countries in the Middle East and North Africa, only Tunisia's penal code clearly prohibits all corporal punishment of children in the home, school, and all other settings. Laws, regulations, or policies reportedly prohibit corporal punishment in schools in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, but with varying degrees of enforcement.<sup>[12]</sup>

Around 210,000 Lebanese children, 210,000 Syrian refugee children, and 6,000 Iraqi refugee children enrolled in Lebanon's public schools in the 2018-2019 school year.<sup>[13]</sup> About 700,000 Lebanese primary and secondary school students, as well as around 65,000 Syrian children, attended private schools in 2018-2019. The majority of private schools have a religious affiliation mostly Shia or Sunni Muslim, and about 20 percent are Catholic.<sup>[14]</sup> Of all the children in Lebanon, including those not yet of school age, almost 1.4 million children were living below the poverty line in November 2018.<sup>[15]</sup>

There is a history of violence by primary and secondary school staff against students in Lebanon.<sup>[16]</sup> In 1998, the Higher Council for Children in Lebanon formed in 1994 as a framework for NGOs and international organizations to formulate policy on children's issues that would implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the Minister of Social Affairs as president<sup>[17]</sup> -- found that 40 percent of Lebanese schoolchildren suffer from acts of physical violence on the part of their teachers, despite ministerial decrees prohibiting the practice since 1974.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 2011, St. Joseph University in Beirut conducted a country-wide survey of 1,177 schoolchildren ages 10-18 in private and public schools, selected proportionately to the overall population in each of the country's governorates. It found that 76 percent of the children interviewed had been subjected to physical violence by teachers or administrators in schools, with the highest rates among younger, socially-vulnerable children in public schools.<sup>[19]</sup> Punishments reported by children included being slapped in the face or head, having their ears twisted, pulled by the hair, hit with a ruler, kicked, forced to kneel in a painful position, or tied up with a rope or belt.

Also in 2011, some 94 Lebanese, Iraqi refugee and Palestinian refugee children who participated in focus group discussions with Save the Children in seven different areas in Lebanon --

whether in private or public schools, or in schools run by the UNs agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) said they had seen corporal punishment or humiliating treatment by teachers and administrators at school, which were major factors in low enrollment and high dropout rates.[\[20\]](#)

A survey by UNICEF and Save the Children of 22 public and 5 private schools during the 2012-2013 school year found that corporal punishment is widespread:

Lebanons Education Ministry cited these disturbing findings in the education plan it adopted in response to the influx of refugee students fleeing from the conflict in Syria, which began in 2011. The three-year-plan, Reaching All Children with Education, or RACE, warned that existing corporal punishment practices are likely to make violence an increasing resort for teachers who are struggling to cope, while Syrian children already report suffering from verbal and physical abuse from teachers and students.[\[22\]](#) In the 2012-2013 school year, when the UNICEF / Save the Children study was conducted, some 29,000 school-age Syrian children who had fled to Lebanon were enrolled in public schools, alongside 198,000 Lebanese children.[\[23\]](#) By the 2017-2018 school year, children fleeing to Lebanon from the conflict in Syria had doubled the number of children in the public school system, from 196,000 in 2011-2012 to more than 400,000.[\[24\]](#) According to a UNICEF humanitarian update from October 2018, one in every four people in Lebanon was a Syrian refugee, and half of the estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees were children.[\[25\]](#) (Lebanese authorities stopped allowing UNHCR to register new refugees in 2015; as of February 2019, the number of officially-registered refugees was around 950,000.[\[26\]](#))

Recent surveys have consistently identified a significant prevalence of violence in schools:

Research for this report focused on corporal punishment of students by school staff, but bullying by other students has also led Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian children to skip school or even drop out.[\[32\]](#) Syrian children face additional risks at and on the way to school. In order to accommodate Syrian refugee students, the Education Ministry opened afternoon shift classes at more than 300 public schools since the 2016-2017 school year.[\[33\]](#) Syrian children face verbal or physical abuse on the way to school, and have reported that fights outside school premises were common, particularly during the change between first-shift classes with a large majority of Lebanese students, and Syrian-only, second-shift classes.[\[34\]](#)

This chapter presents information about abuses in schools selected from interviews Human Rights Watch conducted with teachers, NGO education and child protection workers, and with Lebanese and Syrian families whose children suffered from violence by teachers, supervisors, school directors, and bus drivers. The interviewees described serious abuses at both public and private schools across Lebanon, including cases from the South, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, North, and Akkar governorates.

Four children described assaults by teachers, school supervisors, and school bus drivers that resulted in injuries including a broken nose, broken teeth, swollen and bleeding hands, and lost fingernails. In two cases, children with medical conditions were singled out for punishment even though particularly vulnerable to pain and suffering because of their illnesses.

At three schools, violence by school staff against Syrian refugee students was so common that it caused mass drop-outs when parents stopped sending their children to school. Syrian children described especially humiliating treatment, including verbal abuse and denial of access to bathroom facilities that forced some to soil themselves in the classroom. Staff at some schools appeared to regularly beat students with impunity, based on interviews with numerous parents and children over the course of several months. Some students and parents who did complain faced reprisals, particularly Syrian families whom teachers or principals threatened to report to the police due to a lack of legal residency.

One morning in early February 2019, a third-grade teacher at a public school in the Mount Lebanon governorate responded to requests from Nur, 9, to go to the bathroom by beating him on the head with a textbook, breaking his two front teeth, his mother Manal said.[\[35\]](#) She only learned about the incident when Nur returned from school. She said Nur told her, I asked the English miss [teacher] to go to the toilet [twice], and the second time she hit me with a book and broke my teeth. I started crying and she said, Sorry I didnt mean to. Nur had fallen and chipped his two front teeth during the summer vacation, and a dentist gave him fillings, which broke along with pieces of his teeth when he was hit theyre now broken even more, Manal said. She called the principal, who promised to find out what happened, but then called her back saying that Nur fell during recess. Manal, a nurse, said:

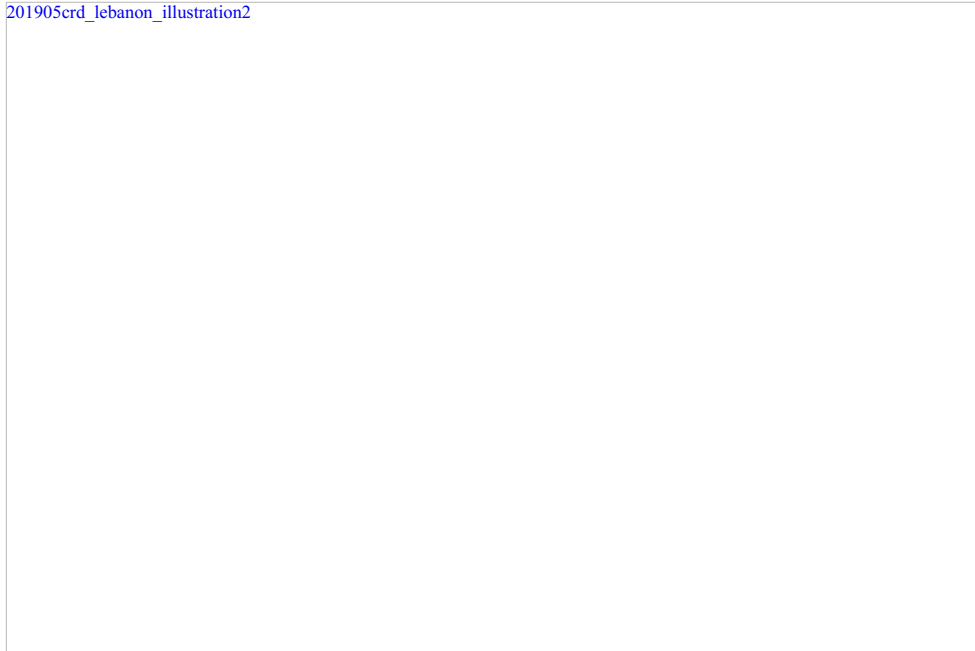
A dentist gave Nur new fillings, but said it was not clear if his nerves were damaged or if his pain would subside, Manal said. When Nur returned to school the next day, the teacher told him, I didnt hit you. I waved the book and you bent your head down, Manal said. [Nur] also told me she told the classroom that everything that happens in class stays in class, they cant tell anyone whats happening.

After the incident, Manal asked Nur about the teacher and learned that she was verbally abusive and that he saw her hit other children with a ruler.

Manal said she had not contacted the Education Ministry or the police for fear that the teacher could be fired and lose her livelihood, but was concerned about the prevalence of corporal punishment in schools: in Lebanon its becoming normal. Her youngest son, who attends the same school, also regarded his first-grade teacher with fear, she said. Hes always scared. He keeps saying these words: Miss will hit us.

In an incident during the 2017-2018 school year, a teacher at a private school in the Mount Lebanon governorate broke the nose of a boy Charbel, age 10 after he told her to stop hitting another student.[\[36\]](#) According to the boys mother, Rana,

[201905crd\\_lebanon\\_illustration2](#)



[Click to expand Image](#)

Lebanons Education Ministry bans violent discipline at school, but it is not adequately enforced. In some children are suffering physical injuries. When a teacher broke Charbels nose, no one from the school called his family to let them know. 2019 Dadu Shin for Human Rights Watch

Rana changed her sons school because he started hating school and hating teachers. He thought all teachers were like her. It took him a month after starting at a new school to understand. And he asked me to send a gift to his old principala human rights book, so he will learn how to protect the rights of [my sons] friends.

In separate interviews, two other Lebanese parents whose children attend the same school said school administrators failed to discipline or remove a teacher who had repeatedly hit, shoved, screamed at and otherwise abused children, despite parents complaints.[\[38\]](#) The teacher shoved one girl so hard she fell to the floor, her mother said.[\[39\]](#) The girls mother said that on different occasions, while she was dropping off her daughter at the school in the morning, she also overheard the teacher shouting insults at another student, and banging loudly and in a frightening way on a students desk.

In November 2018, a teacher and a school director at a public school in the North Governorate beat a Lebanese girl whom the teacher accused of using a calculator to solve a math problem. The girls father, Ahmad, said she is talented at mathematics, and that her grades and school reports were all good with positive comments about her behavior.[\[40\]](#) However, when she solved an equation quickly the teacher accused her of cheating. Her classmates defended her and told the teacher its not true, but the teacher pinched her and pulled her hair, and reported her to the school director. Later the same morning, the director entered her class, asked Where is Noor?, and grabbed her and started hitting her face. When Noor came home two hours later, Ahmad said, her face was swollen and all red, like tomatoes. It wasnt just a slap. It was an intense beating. When I saw her face, I lost my mind. Ahmed went immediately to a nearby police station.

201905crd\_lebanon\_illustration4

[Click to expand Image](#)

In May 2018, the Education Ministry launched a policy for protecting children in school. Now the Education Ministry should prioritize enforcement. Noors teacher pulled her hair and the principal beat her in the face. Her father went to the police. 2019 Dadu Shin for Human Rights Watch

However, when Noor returned to school, the principal threatened to put her and her father and her mother in prison, Ahmad said. Noor came back home and told me. Ahmad then filed a complaint with the regional department of the Education Ministry. Within a few days, he said, inspectors from the ministry went to the school and interviewed students. However, three weeks after the beating, no action had been taken against either the teacher or the principal, and Ahmad transferred Noor to another public school. Since then, her attitude changed. Shes gotten better. Now shes studying well. Back then, she was afraid to go to school. Ahmad said he had previously transferred his son, Brahim, who is now 6, from the public school to a private school, after his kindergarten teacher kept yelling at him. I met with the principal, and she told me, thats what we have, take it or leave it, go to a private school.

Teachers at a public school in the Baalbek-Hermel governorate, regularly hit a 12-year-old boy and his 11-year-old sister, the children said.<sup>[41]</sup> The boy, Ghaith, identified a teacher who hit him on the back of the neck and back, and on the hands with a metal ruler and an electrical cable; on one occasion the electric cable cut open my hand and I was bleeding from it for a few days, he said. His sister, Rawan, said that on several occasions teachers at the school hit her, including her gym teacher, who slapped me on the face when I asked to go to the bathroom. The siblings are from a family of seven who fled to Lebanon from Syria, and attend the afternoon shift for Syrian students at the public school. They said that school staff prohibited Syrian students from using the bathrooms. Their mother said she complained twice to the school director, but hed just say, You Syrians get your education and healthcare for free and are ruining our country.

The abuse, combined with poor-quality education, and the familys poverty had led Ghaith and his older sister Anan, 16, to drop out of school, they said. Anan was in her eighth year of school when the family fled Syria, but dropped out of school after coming to Lebanon to work in agriculture, she said. The English teacher just taught us the letters, and a few verbs, and spent the rest of his time on the phone, she said. Ghaith recalled, One teacher didnt teach anything at school but wrote his mobile number on the board and said to call him for private lessons. Their mother and father both have injuries and could not work. Instead of wasting my time not learning anything in school, Id prefer to help my family by earning an income, he said. Ghaith works as a cowherd from 8 or 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 or 5 p.m. daily.

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No scientific study has demonstrated a benefit from corporal punishment. Research shows instead that making children suffer fear and pain causes short-term and long-term harms, from school drop-outs to aggression and violence later in life. 2019 Dadu Shin for Human Rights Watch

A teacher at a school in the Mount Lebanon governorate twice witnessed serious violence by a bus driver against a Syrian boy in his third year of elementary school as he was waiting outside the school before going home during the 2017-2018 school year. In an email to Human Rights Watch, the teacher recalled,

When the teacher witnessed a second, serious physical attack by the bus driver, she intervened. I said, If the kids are bothering you, you can tell the school principal, but you have no right to hit any child! She reported the assault to the school principal, who said she would speak to the driver. The teacher did not know whether this happened, but assumed that there were other incidents of violence by other drivers that she did not directly witness. This happened twice in front of my eyes, but I am sure that it happened a lot with many other students, as another driver holds a cane all the time to threaten the kids.

Fadi, now 12 years old, was diagnosed with leukemia at age 5, when he was attending a private pre-school in the Baalbek-Hermel governorate. He continued for the start of his primary education at the private school, where the principal helped him, by moving his seat to the front of the class, his mother, Rasha, said.<sup>[43]</sup> At age 9, the boys family moved to a town in the Bekaa governorate, where he enrolled in a public school.

[Click to expand Image](#)

Parents in Lebanon who complained about violence in school said it did not help. Fadis mother said a teacher insulted and made him stand outside when the side-effects of his medication made it hard to study, but the school director defended the abuse. 2019 Dadu Shin for Human Rights Watch

Rasha said she complained to the school director four or five times, and also argued with the director as to whether Fadi would advance to the next grade, but without result. The director said, We cant treat him any better than the other students, and also pulled his hair at least twice.

Rasha said she eventually helped Fadi to write a public appeal to the minister of education on Facebook after the school director refused to enroll Fadi in the 2017-2018 school year, saying that he should go to a place [an institution] for children with intellectual disabilities.[44] The letter ended, we children have the right to love school, the right to learn. The minister discussed Fadis case on a television show, but did not require the school director to re-enroll him. No one from the ministry ever spoke with Fadi or called her, Rasha said. She had been unable to afford a private school in the area, but learned later that one school offered a scholarship, and was able to pull Fadi out of the public school and enroll him in the private school. Staff at the new school are providing accommodation for Fadi, and his attitude toward school has significantly improved, Rasha said. Now, they even carry his backpack for him.

Mohammad, 13, said a teacher at a public school in the Bekaa valley beat him on the hands with a ruler because I couldnt write well. His mother, Riham, explained that Mohammed has difficulty using his hands, which she believed was due to an undiagnosed congenital illness, and that his hands were susceptible to injury. They beat him on his hand and it got very bad swelling, until [school staff] saw [the swelling] and stopped, his mother said, but the beating galvanized her to pull her children out of the school. I couldnt imagine that my son might have been permanently harmed because of what they did to him there. Mohammad also recalled seeing other children being beaten, and one time the teacher slammed a girls head down on her desk, she was sitting right next to me.[45]

Mohammads sister Amna, 11, said her teachers, principal and other staff hit children for failing to bring notebooks to class, not memorizing assigned texts, or running in the playground.

The two siblings had enrolled in late October or early November 2017, but dropped out of school in February because of the violence, they and their mother said.[47] From the first week they started going to school they hated it, Riham said. They would come back crying. She complained to three different NGOs, which told her they had referred the complaints to the Education Ministry, but without any noticeable result, she said. I want them to have a formal, certified education, so I enrolled them in a public school, but if I had known this would happen I never would have tried.

In interviews with Human Rights Watch, Syrian refugee children and their parents described humiliating treatment and abuse by some teachers apparently at times motivated by the childs national origin. Rauf, 9, said that a teacher at the public school in Lebanons South governorate, where he is enrolled in second grade repeatedly beat him she hits me on the hands with a ruler. She hits someone every day.[48] He said the teacher mocked his dark skin color by call[ing] me dirty in front of other students, and did not intervene to protect him from older children in his class who stomp on my feet and hurt me. She also told him to leave class and sit in the hallway because his shirt was dirty.

Raufs sister, Abeer, 10, was in the same class, and said she protested when the teacher beat her brother, but the teacher said to mind my own business. The teacher prohibits children she doesnt like from being allowed to go to the bathroom, Abeer said.[49]

Staff at an NGO said they learned Rauf was being beaten regularly because a third sibling in the same class, Leila, 12, told them another one of their teachers was also regularly beating her.[50] Their mother, Ghada, said she had complained to the school about verbal and physical abuse of her children by teachers, but no one replied until she went to the school to speak to the director. The director was respectful [to me], but he told me my kids are always outside the classroom. The teacher told him [the director] that Rauf is dirty and smells bad and thats why she doesnt want him in the class.[51]

Ghada said that the abuse was harming her childrens education, and that quality of instruction was low: Abeer and Leila are repeating grades, because they dont teach them anything. She enrolled her children in non-formal classes with another NGO on weekends. She expressed anger and frustration that her children had no other formal education options but for a school where they felt humiliated by their teacher:

Staff at the NGO said they had notified the Ministry of Education, then followed up, but that as of April 2019 they had not received information that the ministry had taken any action. [52] The children were unable to transfer to a different school and were still enrolled in the same school in the 2018-2019 school year.

Education professionals described a number of schools where teachers and administrators hit and routinely verbally abused children without consequences, in some cases because of a reluctance to report the violence to the Education Ministry, or because of a lack of response by the ministry.

Some teachers enjoyed virtual impunity despite allegedly abusing students because of their connections with Lebanese political parties, a child protection officer at an international agency said, recalling a teacher who was fired for physical abuse but reassigned the following day because of party connections in early 2018.[53] In other cases, school administrators may prevent the reporting of incidents of violence perpetrated by teachers against students. According to a Syrian teacher volunteering as an education liaison with the refugee community at a public school in the Aarsal region of the Baalbek-Hermel governorate, the school director interfered with the system for reporting complaints. Normally complaints should go straight to UNICEF, but in this case they did not, because the director says he has to validate them first.[54]

Even in cases where complaints do reach the ministry, they are often not acted on. A child protection specialist at a Lebanese NGO said that during the 2017-2018 school year, we referred an entire public school in southern Beirut to the Education Ministry because we found that 11 children were being beaten, but the specialist said that no steps had been taken as of September 2018.[55]

A former teacher at an elementary public school in the North governorate, whose classes included both Lebanese and Syrian children, described impunity for routine, and sometimes severe, abuses.

The teacher informed the school-district body in the North governorate, with no result she was aware of. Not once did anyone from the school district visit, at least during the year I was there. They visit schools in cities every other month, but this was a school in a rural, remote area.

In the 2016-2017 school year, one NGO identified 15 children who were being hit by a public school teacher, but said the Education Ministry did not take any known action against the abuser.[57] Staff at another NGO told Human Rights Watch that dozens of Syrian children had dropped out of a public school in the North governorate during the 2017-2018 school year after a minibus driver beat some of them with his belt.[58] We had helped them enroll, and we wanted to intervene, but were unable to get the ministry to do anything to end the abuse or sanction the driver, an NGO staff member said. During that year, a child protection specialist with another NGO said that she had reported a case of bus drivers verbally and physically abusing children in the Baalbek-Hermel governorate, but did not know if there was any result, and that children had dropped out as a result of the abuses on the way to school.[59]



Yousef, 12, a fifth-grader, told Human Rights Watch that in early February 2019 he was assaulted by a teacher at his public elementary school in the North governorate.<sup>[60]</sup> Yousef told Human Rights Watch that a classmate had taken one of his shoes, to bother him, and when class was almost over, he told his teacher:

Yousefs father, Fouad, said that the beating happened at around 1 p.m., and that his wife immediately called him when Yousef arrived home at 2:15 p.m. She said, Come see your son, his teacher hit him and hes bloody. When I saw him, he was so afraid that at first he wouldnt tell me what happened. Furious, Fouad took Yousef to a nearby police station to complain, but they told me, Theres not a lot of harm, his face isnt swollen, theres nothing we can do. My sons face was all red, it was obvious he was beaten. Fouad took a photograph and posted the image, which shows a laceration in Yousefs front upper gums, on Facebook.<sup>[61]</sup> Yousefs mother eventually persuaded him to go back to the school with her, where she spoke with the administration. Theyre denying everything, Fouad said when he spoke to Human Rights Watch several days later. They didnt care, they dont care. Theyre not cooperating. Fouad said that he believes his Facebook post prompted a phone call he received from someone who said they were calling from the Ministry of Education; the caller did not identify himself, but from the phone number, Fouad saw that the call originated in Beirut. They asked about what happened, and that was it. They didnt say they will open an investigation or ask to interview [Yousef] or give any instructions on how to submit a complaint.<sup>[62]</sup>

Several Syrian refugee families who lacked legal status in Lebanon as more than 75 percent of Syrian refugees do, because of harsh residency requirements told Human Rights Watch that if they complained about school staff, the staff could inform other Lebanese authorities that the family lacked legal status, subjecting them to arrest, fines, and harassment.<sup>[63]</sup> NGO staff said that in general, Syrian refugees who lacked legal residency in Lebanon sought to avoid contact with Lebanese authorities.<sup>[64]</sup> In one case, NGO staff reported that a Syrian family had been forced to leave their informal tented settlement after complaining about violence by public school staff toward a child. The teacher was politically connected in the area, and the family was pressured to leave, a protection officer said about a case in the Bekaa valley from December 2017.<sup>[65]</sup>

Syrian parents and NGO staff had similar concerns. There needs to be reform so it is safe for families to report violence, an education expert in Lebanon said.<sup>[66]</sup> Staff at one NGO noted that before it referred cases of abuse at schools directly to the Education Ministry, it assessed whether our own staff who do the reporting could [face] retaliation, and whether our referrals will do more good than harm for the child, who could also face reprisals.<sup>[67]</sup>

It is likely that abuses are under-reported because of the fear of reprisals for reporting them. A report from November 2016 found that those Syrian parents and children who were aware of a complaints mechanism were afraid to report corporal punishment due to the potential of reprisals and the fear that children who complained would face more punishment shortly afterwards by the same teachers.<sup>[68]</sup>

Mousa, 8, fled with his family from Syria to Lebanons South governorate in 2013. He is enrolled in second grade, in the afternoon shift at a public school. One of his teachers repeatedly beat him. He hits me a lot, with a metal ruler. He hits me on the body. And once he pushed me so hard that I fell on my face and scratched my eye.<sup>[69]</sup> There are around 30 children in his class, Mousa said. The teacher beats all of us -- all of us. I hide my head when he is hitting me. I just try to hide away when Im being hit.

Mousas father, Samih, said he knew his son was being hit but was reluctant to complain because of his vulnerable status as a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, but when the teacher injured his sons eye in early 2018, he went to the school.<sup>[70]</sup> When I went to see the teacher who had hit Mousa, I found that the director of the school had also hit Othman [his older son] because he said he was acting like a devil. The director then told Samih to sign a paper stating that school staff had punished Othman due to the boys misbehavior.

The demand for Syrian medical certificates violates public school admission policies, which are set by the Ministry of Education, and which do not require Syrian documents as a condition for enrollment.

As the beatings continued, Samih said his sons began pretending that theyre sick at home to avoid going to school. I dont like going to school, Mousa acknowledged. The teacher says hes going to kick me out of the school and out of Lebanon.

Samih informed a Lebanese NGO that supports education for Syrian and vulnerable Lebanese children about the situation. The NGO notified the Ministry of Education, which sent personnel to visit the school. Staff at the NGO told Human Rights Watch that the complaint did not name Mousa, only the teacher, and confirmed Mousas account that there are a lot of children being beaten at the school.<sup>[71]</sup> Education Ministry personnel took the positive step of visiting the school to look into the complaint, but they went to Mousa and asked who had hit him, Samih said. He pointed at the teacher. Then they left, and the teacher said [Mousa] shouldnt have complained and hit him again. Samih and NGO staff said they could not confirm how the ministry staff had identified Mousa as the complainant. Samih said the ministry did not contact him at the time of the complaint, or since. No one has asked me anything.

After their complaints that the boys were suffering from violence at school, Samih said, the director told me that they had filed a case against me with the police and that they would be taking me back to Syria. Like most Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Mousas parents have been unable to maintain their residency paperwork. Lebanese authorities began to impose onerous residency requirements on Syrian refugees in 2015.<sup>[72]</sup>

The boys were able to enroll in a different school in the 2018-2019 school year and were not facing further abuse. However, no disciplinary actions were taken against the teacher at their former school, according to staff at the NGO.<sup>[73]</sup>

In some cases, significant numbers of parents have pulled their children out of public schools due to corporal punishment and other abuse. During the 2017-2018 school year, a public school in the Bekaa governorate and another public school in the North governorate were left with no Syrian students in their afternoon classes because all the families as a group stopped sending their children to the schools due to abuses by school staff, an education specialist working with a humanitarian NGO said.<sup>[74]</sup>

In the Akkar governorate, Human Rights Watch documented that a Syrian refugee community stopped sending their children to a public school for one week in March 2018, due to abuse by teachers, including beatings, insults, and the refusal of teachers to let students go to the bathroom, according to Hamed, whose children were abused at the school.<sup>[75]</sup>

Hameds daughter Rania, 9, said that her teacher beats me on my head and legs with a stick, and pushes my head down on the desk, hard, and beats me on my ears with the blackboard eraser.<sup>[76]</sup> Her sister Reham, 7, said, My teacher pulls me by the hair and calls me lazy. Hamed said his son, Salim, 11, was also being beaten and complained that one teacher called him a donkey. Hamed said that his brother pulled his son out of the same school in late 2017, after a teacher beat the boy on the hand, badly, so that he couldnt move his thumb for a week.

The parents boycott prompted the director of the school to come to the community, and he promised that hed stop the beatings and that the kids would be allowed to go to the bathroom, but he didnt keep his word, Hamed said.

Previously the children had been enrolled in a school run by an NGO, which was not accredited by the Lebanese Education Ministry, and were encouraged to enroll in public school so that their education would be officially certified, he said.

An NGO that followed Hameds childrens case sent two complaints in April and May 2018 to the education ministry, which resulted in the school director issuing a written warning to a teacher who children said had beaten them.<sup>[77]</sup>

An educator at a Lebanese NGO that provides non-formal education in the Bekaa valley said some parents had pulled their children out of one nearby public school due to fears of corporal punishment: We are always trying to tell them that formal education is best, but parents are afraid their kids will be beaten.<sup>[78]</sup> Another education expert at the same NGO, speaking to Human Rights Watch during the following school year, noted the same fear:

We work with parents who live right next to the public school, but they say, even if there were spaces available, we wouldnt send our children to be beaten there.<sup>[79]</sup>

Staff at two NGOs and parents of students identified another public elementary school in the Bekaa valley as an abusive environment and said that it led to the kids leaving the school. The school is always a problem, said an educator at an NGO located nearby. In an incident in early May 2018, a child had his tooth broken by a teacher [who hit him] with a stick, and in another case, a teacher pulled a girl by her ears.<sup>[80]</sup>

In December 2017, a teacher and an administrator hit an 8-year-old boy and expelled him from the same public school. The teacher would hit me on the back or on the hands with a rubber hose a type of hose commonly used to connect propane containers -- Mahmoud said.<sup>[81]</sup> The fifth or sixth time the teacher was about to beat him on the hands, this time with a stick, Mahmoud hid under his desk. The principal came into the class and slapped him, and then he was kicked out of school, because they said he was undisciplined and had been raised badly, his mother Heba recalled. Mahmoud had attended the school for two months, in the afternoon shift opened for Syrian refugee students (Lebanese children and some Syrian children attended the first, morning shift). The school administration didnt allow the Syrian children [in the afternoon shift] to go to the bathroom, so they regularly wound up soiling themselves, his mother, Heba, said.

Badr, 12, said he dropped out of the same public elementary school after his teacher repeatedly beat him on the back and on the palms with a stick, which he described as about half-a-meter long and square in shape, four centimeters on each side.<sup>[82]</sup> On one occasion, he was beaten for playing with his friends during a break between classes: When its raining and were all playing outside they hit us because were not supposed to, he said. His mother, Randa, said she pulled him out of school because of the violence. Now I just hang around, Badr said, since he had aged out of the NGO-run education program he used to attend before enrolling in public school.

The parents of Badr, said they also pulled his 9-year-old sister out of the same school because the principal refused to respond to complaints that she was verbally harassed by a group of boys who loitered in the courtyard after school. The girls father said he went to speak to the principal, and he said, If you dont like it you can take your daughter out of school. The *shebab* [the group of boys and male youths who had harassed the girl] wouldnt even let him walk through when he went to see the principal, Randa said of her husband.<sup>[83]</sup>

The majority of abuses that Human Rights Watch documented in interviews were the subject of complaints to NGOs, but NGO staff working in education or child protection said that most cases of routine abuse are not reported. A child protection officer at a Lebanese NGO said that in her experience, The worst thing is that hitting has become the norm. Its only when its really bad that the parents report it.<sup>[84]</sup>

Children also appeared to accept violence by teachers against students as normal. In a group discussion with four students two boys and two girls, ages 10 to 13 who attended four different public schools in Beirut during the 2017-2018 school year, three children said that teachers regularly hit them or their classmates, and that they had not complained to school staff or asked NGOs to refer their complaints. The beatings were punishment for various infractions, the children said.<sup>[85]</sup> If we go to school without wearing a uniform, or if we don't have our blue pants or coat, or if we get into a fight, they beat us with a stick all the teachers do, except for the Arabic and Science teachers, said an 11-year-old who attended one school. If we run during the break, there's a teacher who hits us and shouts and pulls our ears, a 13-year-old student at another school said. A 10-year-old boy who attended a third school said that one teacher meted out an especially severe punishment: They give us 30 hits with a stick, on the hands, the boy said.

Several NGO staff emphasized that the lack of reporting of abuse was the result of the lack of response by the Education Ministry to complaints. A child protection officer at a Lebanese NGO said that in 2017-2018 the NGO referred three cases of violence at public schools in the Bekaa valley to the Education Ministry, but we never heard back, beyond Thank you for your email.<sup>[86]</sup>

The cases included two children in one school who were beaten with a ruler, and a third child who dropped out of another school after a teacher hit and insulted him. In the third case other students imitated the teacher and also began to physically bully and insult the child.

Some teachers said they did not report violence because senior staff at their school approved of or personally used violence against students. A teacher at a public elementary school in the Mount Lebanon governorate said that during the 2017-2018 school year, she saw routine verbal and physical abuse against children by teachers, but had not made formal complaints because a supervisor as well as the school director also hit children.<sup>[87]</sup>

In a positive step, the Education Ministry, with UNICEF support, placed 400 Syrian refugees (many of whom were qualified teachers in Syria) as volunteer community education liaisons in public schools during the 2017-2018 school year. The volunteers helped Syrian students navigate the unfamiliar school system and acted as a point of contact for parents in the schools. NGOs supported the program by helping to find and work with volunteers from Syrian communities. The program helped develop much better relationships with parents, who knew more about what was happening to their kids at school, because they could talk comfortably to the volunteer, an IRC staff member said.<sup>[88]</sup> Three Syrian refugees, all former teachers who volunteered as education liaisons, told Human Rights Watch they believed their presence helped decrease violence. Complaints of violence by Lebanese teachers increased in some schools after the volunteers were introduced, indicating that the problem may have been previously underreported.<sup>[89]</sup>

However, the volunteers also indicated that principals could play an intimidating role in the reporting and referral system. Of course, there's violence by teachers, one said.<sup>[90]</sup> The kids leave the classrooms crying. But we try not to get involved directly. If the teacher hits the child we might bring it to the principal, but not beyond that. If the principal does nothing we might notify UNICEF. Another former teacher in Syria who volunteers as an education liaison for the Syrian refugee community at a public school remarked,

Different Lebanese government agencies are mandated to respond to abuses against children depending on the type or degree of harm and the location where the abuse occurred.<sup>[92]</sup> Sexual abuse or life-threatening abuse of a child may be reported to the police, who are obliged to send an officer or a social worker to investigate and to inform a juvenile court before taking further action.<sup>[93]</sup> Until 2014, article 186 of the Lebanese Penal Code of 1943 explicitly permitted the use of physical punishment by parents and teachers to discipline children in accordance with public custom.<sup>[94]</sup> The article was amended to remove this defense to the crime of assault for teachers in April 2014, after a video was widely disseminated on social media and television in March of a school director beating three boys with a stick on the soles of their feet for having failed an exam and stating, Every time you put your feet down, I will beat you more.<sup>[95]</sup> Article 186 no longer explicitly exempts teachers from criminal penalty for assaulting children, but as revised, the penal code does not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment in schools.<sup>[96]</sup> The law continues to permit parents to use physical discipline against their children.

The Ministry of Justice's online information portal does not disaggregate information as to the number of children abused at schools or by school staff. In total, the ministry reported, 462 initial investigations were opened at juvenile courts in 2017 into cases of assault or other abuse against children.<sup>[97]</sup> In response to written questions from Human Rights Watch, the Ministry of Justice stated that it did not collect disaggregated data on the number of cases of alleged violence against students that led to prosecution or conviction of school staff since the Lebanese penal code was amended to remove an exemption from liability for teachers who use corporal punishment, in 2014.<sup>[98]</sup>

When a child is subjected to violence at school, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) is responsible for ensuring the child is protected.<sup>[99]</sup> The ministry has prohibited corporal punishment since 1974 in public schools,<sup>[100]</sup> and has periodically issued circulars prohibiting verbal abuse and corporal punishment since a 2001 ministerial directive, applicable to public and private schools, which stipulates:

Private schools generally set their own policies, but must obtain annual licenses from the education ministry, and official examinations are mandated as a requirement for graduation.<sup>[102]</sup> The legal framework applicable to all educational facilities includes a June 15, 1959 decree that specifies sanctions to be taken in case of infringements by teaching staff, but does not mention corporal punishment.<sup>[103]</sup> The education minister has occasionally barred the employment of private school staff responsible for notorious incidents of corporal punishment.<sup>[104]</sup>

According to ministry officials, penalties for public school staff found to have used violence against students include warnings, delayed pay raises and promotions, pay reductions, suspensions, and firing.<sup>[105]</sup> Human Rights Watch has requested information from the ministry about the number of teachers who had been disciplined for violence against students or referred to judicial authorities.<sup>[106]</sup> According to a child protection officer at an NGO that monitors cases in Lebanon's North governorate, in 2018 the Education Ministry did not refer any cases of violence by teaching staff there for criminal investigation.<sup>[107]</sup>

The Education Ministry until recently had few staff who might preempt or redress abuses by teachers, according to an education specialist who is familiar with child protection.<sup>[108]</sup> The ministry has seen enrollment in public schools double since 2012 with the influx of Syrian refugee students and relies heavily on foreign donors for funding, primarily channeled through UNICEF, which said that funding shortfalls forced drastic cuts in NGO child protection programs in late 2017.<sup>[109]</sup> With roughly 420,000 students in public schools, the Education Ministry had only 30 trained child protection counsellors for first shift classes in 2017-2018.<sup>[110]</sup>

The Education Ministry has acknowledged the need for a clear, unified mechanism to address cases of violence at school or to clarify the responsibility of teachers and other Education Ministry staff to prevent and respond to violence.<sup>[111]</sup>

In August 2016, the Education Ministry published the RACE II education plan, which stated that the development of a child protection policy for the education sector [public and private] is underway that would include training for all teachers, education personnel, educators, and [] counsellors on national protocols for the identification and referral of any student impacted by violence.<sup>[112]</sup>

In May 2018, the Education Ministry and UNICEF launched the child protection policy with the goal of establishing a violence-free school environment based on equity and non-discrimination.<sup>[113]</sup> The policy defines maltreatment to include *all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, including beating or corporal punishment which causes corporal harm to the student, with the aim of imposing discipline, punishment or control.*<sup>[114]</sup> A child subjected to corporal punishment is defined as a student victim of school institutionalized violence.<sup>[115]</sup>

The policy seeks to preempt, promptly detect, and respond to a wide range of abuses, from violence in the home, to child labor, to degrading and insulting treatment and punishment by school staff.<sup>[116]</sup> The policy includes a table of warning signs of behavior that may indicate a student is being abused, and provides suggested activities for counselors to increase students awareness of and resilience to abuse.

It also sets out a code of conduct for ministry staff that includes guidance on interviewing students and requires maintaining the confidentiality of information, as well as a professional commitment form to be signed by ministry staff and by their supervisors, stating in part:

UNICEF reported that the first step toward implementing the policy, in July 2018, involved child protection trainings in the North and Akkar governorates and the identification of five schools in the North governorate where NGOs had reported violence, for interventions.<sup>[118]</sup> The policy was being rolled out to 20 first-shift public schools where students are found to be at risk in the 2018-2019 school year, and the referral system will encompass 300 second-shift public schools.<sup>[119]</sup> The next planned step is to create an operational framework for the policy in the first quarter of 2019.<sup>[120]</sup>

The child protection policy has been accompanied by increases in staffing: in 2018-2019 the ministry hired an additional 25 child protection counsellors, nearly doubling the number of counsellors for first-shift classes.<sup>[121]</sup> and has placed two focal points teachers who have been trained in the child protection policy in 300 schools.<sup>[122]</sup> In addition, the second-shift curriculum for Syrian students will include a weekly, 45-minute lesson intended to prevent abuse by teaching self-awareness, social awareness and diversity, self-control, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making to students.<sup>[123]</sup>

Detailed implementing procedures to set out clear and precise roles and responsibilities for actors at each stage are still being developed.<sup>[124]</sup> Currently, the policy tasks school directors with implementation unless the director is implicated in abuses, in which case a vague provision applies: the stakeholders should ensure other means for a safe accomplishment of the monitoring process by persons who have the information (e.g. a hotline).<sup>[125]</sup>

The Education Ministry's 2018 child protection policy takes a step towards reflecting recommendations on ending violence in schools consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including by promoting codes of conduct that confront all forms of violence, classroom management and disciplinary measures that are not based on fear or force, and implementing programs that address the whole school environment such as promoting respect for all children without discrimination.<sup>[126]</sup> However, interviews with Lebanese and Syrian families as well as NGO and UN staff indicate at least four serious flaws with current reporting mechanisms that the Education Ministry will need to overcome for the child protection policy to function effectively.

An NGO education specialist described the 2018 child protection policy as a referral system for kids who've experienced violence to get PSS [psycho-social support] etcetera, but we already do this. What is needed is to hold teachers accountable for what they're doing.<sup>[127]</sup>

The Education Ministry has disciplined school staff, especially after violent incidents that were caught on video or reported by news media. In March 2014, then-education minister Elias Bou

Saab told reporters the ministry would take the harshest punishments against anyone beating a student, after video footage was widely circulated showing a director of a private school one of the network of schools operated by al-Makassed, a religious charity painfully hitting children on the feet with a stick.<sup>[128]</sup> On a television program in October 2016, which focused on the case of another boy whose family alleged that a beating by school staff had caused lacerations on his face, minister Bou Saab said that about 20 teachers had been fired for hitting students and several principals had paid the price for this issue, presumably in the period since he became education minister in 2014. He encouraged parents to call the ministry's hotline to report cases of abuse.<sup>[129]</sup> The following month, Bou Saab stated on television that a teacher would not be returning to teach students after news reports that the teacher had harmed children.<sup>[130]</sup>

However, despite a handful of widely-publicized cases in which teachers and other staff have been sanctioned for harming children, the overwhelming impression of parents, children, teachers, and local and international NGO staff interviewed for this report, is that there is a severe accountability gap within the Education Ministry for corporal punishment and other abuse by school staff against students.<sup>[131]</sup>

The 2018 child protection policy excludes corporal punishment and verbal abuse from the type of cases that require referral to external measures, leaving these issues to be dealt with only through internal measures.<sup>[132]</sup> Cases where children have been sexually assaulted at school are subject to immediate referral, which according to an Education Ministry official involves referral to the Ministry of Justice.<sup>[133]</sup> By contrast, only internal measures, specified as administrative sanctions, are to be taken against perpetrators of aggression or violence committed by members of the educational staff.<sup>[134]</sup>

Students who are victims of violence at school shall be referred to competent justice according to the laws and regulations in force, but Lebanese laws and regulations do not clearly require the involvement of law-enforcement authorities in cases of corporal punishment at school.<sup>[135]</sup>

According to ministry officials, penalties for public school staff found to have used violence against students include warnings, delayed pay raises and promotions, pay reductions, suspensions, and firing.<sup>[136]</sup>

However, the 2018 child protection policy does not clearly spell out the consequences of corporal punishment and verbal abuse in schools, including whether sanctions include firing teachers who beat children. An education expert working with Syrian and Lebanese children in the Bekaa valley noted that teachers and principals need explicit rules that are directly applicable to the extremely challenging classroom environments they work in:

The child protection policy does not permit anonymous complaints of violence at school, and requires referrals of cases of abuse by school staff to identify the child harmed, in addition to providing information about the alleged incident, the staff responsible, and the school.<sup>[138]</sup> The policy specifies that only a small number of central and regional ministry staff may have access to this information and sets out procedures to protect the confidentiality of the information.<sup>[139]</sup>

Steps to limit sharing of information about complainants are positive and necessary. An education specialist told Human Rights Watch that she was aware of cases where NGOs reported incidents of corporal punishment at schools through a standardized form to the Education Ministry, but then the child got kicked out of the school because of information [leaking]. The form was shared as-is, not anonymized. And the reporting mechanism so far, its more harm than good.<sup>[140]</sup>

The child protection policy's lack of an anonymous complaints procedure does not account for the fact that fear of reprisals has discouraged complaints, particularly among Syrian families. A 2014 research paper by the Center for Lebanese Studies found that parents who demanded accountability for violence against students by school staff could risk having their children blocked from access to education:

Some Syrian students preferred to drop out of Lebanese public schools than to endure abuse and violence, the report found. In one case, a principal to whom a student complained about corporal punishment claimed the abuse was necessary and threatened the student, leading a social worker involved in the case to express a sense of helplessness to help students and that these principals are untouchable.<sup>[142]</sup>

Beginning in 2015, the Education Ministry established a system by which NGOs could refer cases of violence in schools.<sup>[143]</sup> In separate interviews, staff at eight international and Lebanese humanitarian NGOs that work with Lebanese children and Syrian refugee children told Human Rights Watch that, in their experience with the referral system, the ministry did not share information about any follow-up measures it had taken. One education specialist described the development of the system:

In most cases she was involved in, the education specialist said, she was not aware of any change in teacher behavior after the complaints were submitted. Our beneficiaries a lot say they stopped going to school because of violence by teachers.<sup>[144]</sup>

The Education Ministry has not published information about the number of complaints received or resolved via the phone hotline. A ministry official said it would not release the information because of the risk that NGOs would misunderstand or misrepresent it, since some complaints were not genuine and others were not related to corporal punishment by school staff.<sup>[145]</sup> World Bank financing to the Education Ministry includes a component to strengthen the existing hotline to make it a more robust grievance redress system at MEHE, to be assessed at the end of the year by an examination of a random sample of anonymized hotline activity logs which demonstrate [a] secure, confidential and accessible system.<sup>[146]</sup> Human Rights Watch did not systematically ask parents and children about the hotline, but in three interviews, two parents and an NGO staff member said they had called a complaints hotline about a child's mistreatment at school but that no one answered their call.<sup>[147]</sup>

A child protection specialist at another NGO described the lack of transparency in the current system:

Education Ministry officials said that they are obliged to maintain the confidentiality of the children whose cases are referred.<sup>[149]</sup> However, NGO staff were not aware of any option for families to authorize them to follow up on complaints. We already know who we referred, and the family might come back to us to ask what is happening, and we can't help, an education specialist said.<sup>[150]</sup>

They will acknowledge receipt of the complaint but that's it. It's a black box, a staff member at another NGO said.<sup>[151]</sup> A child protection specialist at a third NGO said that after facilitating a complaint, we can't follow it up. MEHE is very defensive. Their efforts are not transparent. But we know that in some cases the violator and the victim are still in the same classroom after the complaint is filed.<sup>[152]</sup>

NGO staff said it could take three months to receive an acknowledgment from the ministry that a referral had been received; in one case, the acknowledgment stated that the case had already been closed, without further explanation.<sup>[153]</sup> The problem is that child protection referrals disappear in the system and are impossible to follow up, another NGO education expert said.<sup>[154]</sup>

NGO staff said the lack of information from the Education Ministry on its follow-up to cases of corporal punishment and verbal abuse hindered their efforts to protect children and ensure they have access to quality education. One NGO education specialist noted, for instance, that 20 percent of the 4,000 children who were enrolled in public schools and had benefited from the NGOs school-support programs dropped out of school during the 2017-2018 school year. I need to know why they dropped out, to see what needs to happen to get them back into school and if we can mobilize the resources, she said.<sup>[155]</sup> An education specialist at another NGO said, We have a legitimate interest to follow up cases where children drop out of school due to corporal punishment. But when I asked [the Education Ministry] for information about cases of kids who dropped out due to corporal punishment, they appeared not to know.<sup>[156]</sup>

The result of an opaque system that does not lead to results is that families will stop bothering to notify NGOs of violence in schools or pursue complaints with the Education Ministry, an NGO education specialist said.<sup>[157]</sup> An education expert at a large international NGO that provides child protection and non-formal education said the NGO had simply stopped reporting cases of violence at school to MEHE [the Education Ministry] because there is no follow up and some cases of reprisals.<sup>[158]</sup> The NGO did not have an alternative route for complaints.

Several education-policy analysts have argued that because Lebanon's public education sector lacks capacity and resources, strong partnerships between [the Education Ministry] and civil society are essential to expanding services including alternative learning programs, curricular support, and teacher training.<sup>[159]</sup>

The Education Ministry has collaborated with NGOs in its RACE and RACE II plans, works extensively with UNICEF, and has occasionally permitted NGOs access to teachers and classrooms to study issues like bullying and harassment.<sup>[160]</sup> Senior ministry staff have repeatedly met with Human Rights Watch. Currently, the ministry is negotiating an agreement with an NGO to conduct a study about corporal punishment in Lebanese first-shift public schools.<sup>[161]</sup>

Nonetheless, some Education Ministry officials have expressed views that NGOs are not trustworthy and compete with the ministry for donor funding. One official told Human Rights Watch that NGOs, in order to boost their funding from donors, had submitted false complaints of violence against children in public schools.<sup>[162]</sup> The ministry has developed a protocol whereby NGOs responsible for five false complaints will receive a letter from the education minister calling on them to improve their data collection and verification processes.<sup>[163]</sup> Another Education Ministry official said that foreign government donors preferred to give funding to humanitarian NGOs headquartered in their home country, rather than to Lebanese ministries, indicating a concern that if the ministry granted a greater role to NGOs, it would find itself starved of the funding and capacity required to fulfill its responsibilities.<sup>[164]</sup>

Staff at Lebanese and international civil society organizations and NGOs complained that the Education Ministry's reluctance to work with NGOs generally had reduced children's access to needed services and argued that effective coordination could help compensate for the ministry's lack of resources and capacity. One child psychologist said: There are very few psychologists in the public schools. They only have guidance counsellors. NGOs have the resources to help psychologists and social workers. In this way we can prevent the abuse.<sup>[165]</sup>

Studies indicate that teacher training in classroom management and positive discipline is an important component of programs that successfully reduce corporal punishment in schools.<sup>[166]</sup> In a funding proposal to improve education in Lebanon, the World Bank reported in September 2016 that effective non-violent classroom management has also been associated with increased teacher self-efficacy and increased student learning.<sup>[167]</sup>

In August 2016, Lebanon pledged to design both a child protection policy (discussed above) and a new curriculum with teacher-training modules on classroom management and positive discipline, as well as a National Teacher Assessment Framework to check teachers' competency in these and other areas.<sup>[168]</sup>

However, there is no legal or policy requirement in Lebanon for public or private school teachers to complete teacher-training courses before being hired, or for regular in-service trainings; the



required qualification is a university degree.<sup>[169]</sup> In interviews with Lebanese academic researchers in 2014, teachers at Lebanese private religious and secular schools in 2014 said they had no training and were unprepared to meet the needs of the Syrian refugee children entering classrooms in increasing numbers.<sup>[170]</sup>

The Education Ministry has made some positive gestures toward more teacher training. The ministry's 2018 child protection policy plans to include trainings by senior counsellors for all members of school staff as well as students.<sup>[171]</sup> As of December 2018, the Education Ministry had trained 600 staff from 300 public schools, in addition to 55 staff at the ministry's Department of Pedagogy, on the Policy for the Protection of Students in the School Environment.<sup>[172]</sup> UNICEF reported that in 2018 it had supported training sessions for more than 10,000 teachers on principles including child protection.<sup>[173]</sup>

The ministry has also permitted NGOs to conduct trainings for Lebanese public and private school teachers and administrators that include sessions on children's rights and corporal punishment. In March 2018 the Education Ministry permitted a Lebanese NGO, Himaya, that focuses on child protection, to work with children and train staff in public schools, for two months.<sup>[174]</sup> Himaya has also worked with private schools and community-based organizations to create and implement comprehensive child protection programs, which international school associations highlight as an important criterion for accrediting schools.<sup>[175]</sup> Ana Aqra, an NGO established in the 1990s to improve literacy rates and reduce drop-outs, provides trainings on children's rights, trauma awareness, and a safe learning environment to between 700 and 1000 teachers annually at 260 public schools.<sup>[176]</sup>

A positive example of teacher training in Lebanon is the six-week intensive training course provided by Teach for Lebanon, an NGO that places university graduates about 40 to 50 teachers at any given time in under-served public or semi-private schools, for two-year periods. A former teacher with Teach for Lebanon, who later ran a project monitoring staff at 53 schools, described the importance of trainings for the programs' 23- to 29-year-old inductees, and the contrast with other teachers who are not given trainings:<sup>[177]</sup>

Lebanon has ratified key international conventions that guarantee children's rights to quality education free from violence.<sup>[179]</sup> The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges states to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse."<sup>[180]</sup> According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Children do not lose their human rights by virtue of passing through the school gates [...] the use of corporal punishment does not respect the inherent dignity of the child nor the strict limits on school discipline.<sup>[181]</sup>

The committee defines corporal or physical punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting children, with the hand or with an implement.<sup>[182]</sup> The committee concluded that corporal punishment is invariably degrading, as are other, non-physical forms of punishment that belittle, humiliate, denigrate, scapegoat, threaten, scare or ridicule the child. The Convention's prohibition of all forms of physical or mental violence does not leave room for any level of legalised violence against children. Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence and the State must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate them.<sup>[183]</sup>

The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has found that corporal punishment and possibly other aspects of school discipline such as public humiliation are inconsistent with the fundamental guiding principle of international human rights law: the dignity of the individual.<sup>[184]</sup> States parties are obliged to ensure that discipline inconsistent with the Covenant does not occur in any public or private educational institution within its jurisdiction.

Under the Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by consensus, all states agree to end all forms of violence against children (goal 16.2), and to measure the percentage of children who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month (Indicator 16.2.1).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Lebanon amend its criminal code to prohibit corporal punishment of children in 1996, 2002, and 2006.<sup>[185]</sup>

In June 2002, Lebanon adopted Law 422 for the Protection of Juvenile Delinquents and Endangered Juveniles, which obliges the judiciary to respond to any notification of child abuse. The law established six juvenile courts with specialized children's judges, but the judges are also tasked with multiple other functions and receive no mandatory specialized psychological training for dealing with child abuse, according to a report by a prominent Lebanese university medical school.<sup>[186]</sup> The law mandates the Union for the Protection of Juveniles in Lebanon (UPEL), a public agency with six offices across the country, to follow up child protection cases.<sup>[187]</sup>

However, despite being the primary law related to child protection in Lebanon, Law 422 explicitly permits corporal punishment consistent with the defense to the crime of assault against children in Penal Code article 186, before the article was partly revised to remove the defense for assaulting children in school settings.<sup>[188]</sup> Law 422, which applies in home as well as school settings, defines an endangered youth as a child subjected to physical violence, but only violence that exceeds the limits of what is culturally acceptable as non-harmful disciplinary beating.<sup>[189]</sup> The law does not create an obligation to report abuse, or specify a particular office to which to report cases of child abuse.<sup>[190]</sup> UNICEF has called for the law to be replaced with comprehensive child-protection legislation.<sup>[191]</sup>

After the third time that the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Lebanon amend its criminal code to prohibit corporal punishment of children, in 2006, a national task force was established, the Lebanese Intersectoral Board of Associations Network (LibanCAN), but this did not specifically address corporal punishment in schools.<sup>[192]</sup>

Following the 2015 UN Universal Periodic Review of its human rights record, Lebanon accepted Croatia's recommendation to harmonize its national legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including on corporal punishment, but only noted Estonia's direct recommendation to prohibit all corporal punishment of children.<sup>[193]</sup>

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in 2016, stated its concern at statistics showing that most children experience violent discipline at home and in school and called on Lebanon to encourage parents and teachers to abandon the practice and to revise the amended Penal Code to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings; similarly, the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2017 called on Lebanon to prohibit explicitly corporal punishment, however light, in all settings, including public and private schools and in pre-primary and after-school education.<sup>[194]</sup>

A recent UN-sponsored international conference argued that donor states should negotiate development aid supporting education and healthcare around the prohibition of corporal punishment, and systematic work towards its elimination, given the injustice of financially supporting school systems in which corporal punishment is still authorised.<sup>[195]</sup>

This report was written by Bill Van Esveld, senior researcher, and edited by Bede Sheppard, deputy director in the Children's Rights Division, with additional review by Elin Martinez, children's rights senior researcher. Nadine El Kobrouly, an intern with the Children's Rights Division, assisted with legal research. Charbel Salloum, research assistant in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) division, provided substantial research support. Aya Majzoub, a researcher in the MENA division, and Lama Fakih, the divisions acting director, edited the report. Clive Baldwin, Senior Legal Advisor, and Tom Porteous, deputy director in the Program office, reviewed the report. Production assistance was provided by Alex Firth, Associate in the Children's Rights Division, who also contributed desk research, and Fitzroy Hepkins, Administrative Manager.

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