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## The Impact of Corporal Punishment for Timorese High School Graduates

Veronica Godinho Pereira  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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The Impact of Corporal Punishment for Timorese High School Graduates

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

Veronica Godinho Pereira  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Science in Education  
in Educational Studies, 2019

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University of Arkansas

The thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Brittany N. Hearne, Ph.D.  
Thesis Advisor

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Juan José Bustamante, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Jeffrey A. Gruenewald, Ph. D.  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

This research examines the impacts of corporal punishment for Timorese high school graduates. Physical punishment is a pervasive method of disciplining students and children used in Timor-Leste because it has been such a tradition (UNICEF 2017). Few researchers have attempted to analyze the negative impacts of corporal punishment and possible gender differences; there is no known research on the impacts of corporal punishment in Timor-Leste. This study uses an in-depth interview method, where data were collected from 26 Timorese high school graduates composed of both men and women from both private and public schools in Timor-Leste. The ages of the participants range from 19 to 33 years old. This study examines how the Timorese high school graduates describe the impacts of corporal punishment at school. The data reveal there are physical impacts--scars and continuous pain in parts of the body; emotional impacts--trauma and fear; academic impacts--avoiding certain subjects in higher education such as Math and Physics; and social impacts--where the Timorese high school graduates continue to use the physical discipline method on others, such as siblings or family units. The effects of corporal punishment were described similarly by both men and women in this study depending on their experiences. Therefore, it is important for education policy makers to consider making a strong rule against corporal punishment used at school to reduce negative impacts of physical violence as well as stopping the cycle of violence.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis especially to my parents (apa Anteiro and ama Teresinha) who trust me--as a woman from Timor-Leste--to freely fly higher, to travel across the world to pursue my higher education degree, to live in a place where myself and another friend are the first and only people from Timor-Leste in all of Arkansas. My parents did not get a chance to go to school, my father used to watch his childhood friends learn in class just through windows. To avoid the cycle, my parents value and fight for their children's education. Thus, I am proud to be the first and only person so far in my entire family to ever get a master's degree. This project is also dedicated to my siblings ETIVEIA (Evava, Bizaza, Zef, Minda, Tasya, and Levita) for their never-ending prayer, love, care, and support for me from the other side of the world and never letting me feel lonely in my world of academic journey. My parents and my siblings were always there for me; they got anxious and sleepless in Timor-Leste when I got anxious and sleepless here in the USA, and they sat there with me on a video phone call for my 3am nightmares.

I understand we all grew up with corporal punishment in our house. I understand the need for using corporal punishment as a discipline method. However, I also understand the feelings of frustration and anger towards each other when we used violence in our family. While writing this project, I know it was the time to step out from that comfort zone. I remember it was hard the first time our family had the conversation about not using corporal punishment in the house. But I am proud and confident now that our family started avoiding the use of physical punishment and hope to be an example for many others in Timor-Leste, whether it is in the family, school or society.

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## **Introduction**

Timor-Leste won its independence from Indonesia in 2002 after 24 years of Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) following centuries of colonization by Portugal (1500-1974) (Justino et al. 2014; Molnar 2009; UNESCO 2009). Timor-Leste remains a developing country. Thus, the education system continues to be developed with support from different international organizations, such as USAID, AUSAID, UNICEF and many other (Shah 2014; Rashid 2020). The country continues to work on the general enrollment rates at school. Despite these efforts, high school (grades 9 to 12) enrollment rates remain low. The statistical data from the Timor-Leste ministry of education (MOE) shows that high school enrollment in 2018 for 15-18-year-olds was 38.19% (MOE 2020; MOE 2015). Additionally, boys are less likely to be enrolled in schools and are more likely to drop out of school between grades 10 to 12 (Human Rights Council 2011).

In addition to low enrollment, students are often subjected to physical punishment at school. United Nations (2007) defined corporal punishment as “any physical punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (pg. 4). A report about violence against children in Timor-Leste showed that approximately 75% of boys and 67% of girls have experienced corporal or physical punishment such as being slapped, kicked, or pulled by their teachers (Camoës 2016; Suthanthiraraj 2017). Reasons for corporal punishment are often unclear, but Camoës (2016) states that according to Timorese students’ point of view, there are many factors contributing to a student receiving physical punishment, including disobeying school rules, misunderstanding lessons, not doing their homework, and revenge. Additionally, Blackman (2020) documents an occasion when students were physically punished for tardiness and not wearing a proper school uniform. Finley

(2015) states that this common use of corporal punishment at school may contribute to lower enrollment rates. As the ministry of education plans to implement and develop the education system and increase school enrollment throughout the nation, more research is needed to document the possible negative impacts of corporal punishment against Timorese students.

Although corporal punishment is widely used in Timor-Leste schools, the impacts of physical punishment against students are unknown. In this study, I examine how Timor-Leste high school graduates describe their experiences enduring corporal punishment in school and whether this form of punishment continues to have implications after high school graduation. Additionally, I will analyze whether the consequences of school corporal punishment differ by gender. The completion of this study will potentially contribute to Timor-Leste education policy reform. Specifically, an examination of the consequences of school corporal punishment could inform policy against the use of corporal punishment in schools and ultimately help to further develop the education system in the country.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Socialization is useful for understanding the long-term consequences of corporal punishment for high school graduates. Socialization is “the lifelong process of social interaction through which individuals acquire a self-identity and the physical, mental, and social skills needed for survival in society” (Kendall 2020, pg. 67). People learn and are influenced by social norms through their daily social interactions. Receiving rewards for completing homework, being told to obey rules, and observing how others behave in public spaces are all examples of socialization that help a person function within schools or society-at-large. While the family is the main realm of socialization, school is another, playing a significant role in the development of students' social skills, academic skills, and friendships (Garcia and Serra 2019; Pellerin 2005).



Teachers help to shape values, behaviors, and norms through both academic and informal interaction (Brint et al. 2001).

Kendall (2020) says that “socialization enables a society to ‘reproduce’ itself by passing on its culture from one generation to the next” (pg. 68). When teachers use violence against students, those students may learn to become aggressive and to have less self-control. Teachers in Timor-Leste use corporal punishment because it has been a tradition (UNICEF 2017; Ba Futuru 2019). Arguably, because teachers use violence as a method of discipline against students, students learn that violence is acceptable social behavior; thus, the cycle of violence is perpetuated in society. This cycle could lead students to carry the same attitude about physical punishment methods later in life and think of corporal punishment as the only way for correcting misbehavior (Douglas 2006; Ba Futuru 2019).

The aim of this study is to provide insights about how graduates view corporal punishment in schools and perceive the impacts in their life and society. I expect to find that corporal punishment experienced in schools contributes to a broad cycle of violence.

### **Timor-Leste Context and School Policies**

In, Timor-Leste, located in Southeast Asia, physical or corporal punishment in schools is common (Ba Futuru 2019; Finley 2015; Suthanthiraraj 2019). Blackman (2020) states that it is common for Timor-Leste students to be punished with a stick for infractions such as not following rules or not listening to their teachers. Further, cultural issues influence schooling and school discipline practices in Timor-Leste. For example, the recent history of colonization has created an environment characterized by barriers to teaching and learning. Poor physical infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials and textbooks, a shortage of qualified teachers, and language barriers prevent many children from accessing schooling (Blackman 2020; Rashid

2020; Human Rights Council 2011; Saikia et al. 2011). Language barriers in particular pose problems in the classroom because given the colonial history of the country, multiple languages are spoken nationwide, and incongruities often occur between the languages spoken by the teacher and the students (Caffery et al. 2016; Boon and Kurvers 2015).

In 2011, the Timor-Leste ministry of education (MOE) created a strategic plan to reform the country's education system by 2030 (MOE 2011; Saikia et al. 2011). The plan identified several barriers to achieving improved educational outcomes including teacher absenteeism, low literacy rates, and outdated curriculum (MOE 2011). Furthermore, Timor-Leste's MOE adopted a framework curriculum in 2014 for primary school (grades 1-6). The curriculum holds teachers accountable for creating a safe school environment for students and emphasizes that teachers should create mutually agreed upon routines and rules together with students regarding consequences for breaking school or classroom rules (Lao Hamutuk 2018; MOE-TL 2014). It is also mentioned in the curriculum that a calm and respectful attitude is essential when handling students' behavioral problems by seeking to understand reasons behind misbehavior and it is important to involve students when solving behavioral issues. Additionally, the curriculum states that any violence (physical and emotional) against students or teachers is not tolerated. However, most high school handbooks in Timor-Leste – including public and private high schools in the capital (Dili) and municipalities – make no mention of corporal punishment against students nor consequences for teachers who employ corporal punishment against students.<sup>1</sup> Based on the handbooks, the most severe consequences for student misbehavior are suspension or an expulsion (i.e., transfer) from the school.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The list of schools referenced are provided in appendix C.

<sup>2</sup> The student handbooks were accessed by communicating with high school graduates from each school mentioned in Timor-Leste. Those handbooks are photographed by those graduate students since the information is not public and only accessible by students enrolled in the schools.

Despite efforts to improve the education system in the country, recent reports have surfaced outlining instances of corporal punishment in schools. As an example of the use of corporal punishment in Timor-Leste, a video was posted on social media platforms in late 2019 that showed physical and sexual violence in a classroom. In the video, a teacher asked two girls to kiss each other in front of their peers in the classroom. The teacher had a large stick in his hand and hit the girls when they hesitated to kiss. He demanded they kiss each other on the mouth. He instructed them to be serious while simultaneously hitting and physically touching the girls, forcing them to kiss. The teacher also spoke to the girls in Tetum saying, “Hakarak moris ka mate,” which translates to “Do you want to live or die.”<sup>3</sup> This video demonstrates how violence is perpetuated in the classroom. While only one example, this serves as a powerful illustration of how corporal punishment is applied within schools.

### **Corporal Punishment at School**

A report authored by UNICEF officials (2017) states that approximately half of all school children worldwide ages 6 to 17 live in countries in which corporal punishment is not fully prohibited in schools. Teachers may use corporal punishment to discourage defiance, disobedience of authority, and violation of school rules (Kupchik 2010). In addition, teachers tend to use corporal punishment when students do not complete their homework assignments, do not bring their school textbooks and materials, or cause disruptions in the classroom (Kumar and Teklu 2018). There are documented cases of students in the Philippines, India, and Timor-Leste facing aggression and harsh discipline, such as being hit with object or hands, asked to kneel, or forced to swallow substances by their teachers when they misbehave (Banzon-Librojo et al. 2017; Nawani 2013; Blackman 2020; Ba Futuru 2019). Strict school discipline, similar to

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<sup>3</sup> This information can be found on a YouTube channel called "TV Channel" with the title: “Mestri Obriga Alunos Rei Malu.” The link to the video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49NruWKCwWM>.

physical punishment and suspension, is thought to improve students' academic outcomes and discourage conflict, but experts note multiple negative outcomes, including lower academic grades, as well as emotional and physical harm (Way 2011; Naz et al. 2011).

Corporal punishment can harm students physically (Gershoff and Font 2016), academically (Hussain and Muhammad 2017; Portela and Pells 2015; Naz et al. 2011), and emotionally (Portela and Pells 2015; Naz et al. 2011; Greydanus et al. 2003). Some common evidence of the physical consequences of corporal punishment includes bruises and physical pain (Gershoff and Font 2016; Gershoff 2010). There are also reports of localized swelling, cuts, dislocation of teeth, and unconsciousness (Kumar and Teklu 2018). As a result of physical pain from corporal punishment, some students may find it difficult to use body parts to complete their schoolwork—such as not being able to use an arm or hand to write (Gershoff and Font 2016).

Corporal punishment has negative consequences for student academic achievement (Hussain and Muhammad 2017; Naz et al. 2011; Greydanus et al. 2003). Students' fear and frustrations about corporal punishment could lead to negative impacts on students' performance and attendance (Portela and Pells 2015; Naz et al. 2011; Greydanus et al. 2003). Hussain and Muhamad (2017), in their study on the social impact of corporal punishment for Pakistani high school students, found that corporal punishment could provoke students to leave school before classes end, reduce students' learning capabilities due to fear, and lead to a general lack of interest in learning. SeungHee (2017) states that some students who receive corporal punishment at school are less likely to value learning and more likely to consider discontinuing their higher education (see also Rafique and Ahmed 2019).

Additionally, harsh discipline has negative effects on students' emotional wellbeing (Chen and Wei 2011). Research shows that there is an association between physical punishment

(including school corporal punishment) and depression and low self-esteem (Greydanus et al. 2003; Naz et al. 2011). Students who experienced corporal punishment have been shown to develop feelings of sadness, worthlessness, depression, suicidal thoughts, difficulties sleeping, and poor concentration; they also often disclose feeling humiliated, ashamed, and hatred for their teachers and school (Kumar and Teklu 2018; Greydanus et al. 2003). Furthermore, the impact of corporal punishment could provoke students to develop antisocial behavior, in which children hit one another, lie, and engage in aggressive behavior, making it harder for students to cope with adversity (Gershoff 2010; Zhu et al. 2019).

### **Unequal Applications of Corporal Punishment**

Corporal punishment is known to be applied unequally across social categories (Irwin 2020; SeungHee 2017; Skiba et al. 2002). Sociologists have examined whether school discipline is fairly applied across genders (Dune and Leah 2005; Welch and Payne 2010). Prior research finds that boys are more likely than girls to be punished for misbehavior (Rafique and Ahmed 2019; Kumar and Teklu 2018). Boys also receive harsher punishments (Kumar and Teklu 2018). Reasons offered for the gender disparities in inflicting corporal punishment are rooted in ideas about inherent differences between boys and girls. For example, school officials may argue that the greater punishment for boys is because boys are brave, boys are not afraid of other forms of punishment, or physical abuse is a rite of passage to manhood (Humphreys 2008). In general, gender inequality and the reinforcement of gender norms, such as men should be tough and women should be submissive, are reasons for the unequal application of corporal punishment by gender (Dunne and Leach 2005; Leach, Dunne, and Salvo 2003 cited in Parkes and Heslop 2013).

The consequences of corporal punishment also differ by gender. The feeling of frustration as a result of physical punishment is a common reaction from girls (Liu 2018). Evans et al. (2012) state that the effects of corporal punishment on women likely manifest as displays of vulnerability, low self-esteem, and a hostile view toward their educators (see also Chen and Wei 2011). On the other hand, boys are more likely to show aggression and less self-control after receiving corporal punishment (Neaverson et al. 2019). Lastly, although boys and girls may experience anger because of receiving corporal punishment, anger tends to be higher in boys than girls and can lead them to engage in delinquent behaviors (Irwin 2020; Liu 2018; Evans et al. 2012).

### **Is Corporal Punishment Effective?**

Evidence shows that students tend to behave better and show more respect to their teachers when teachers do not use corporal punishment (Kaltenbach et al. 2018; Mason and Rosenbaum 2005). Durant and Janson (2005) argue that the absence of corporal punishment improves the relationship between teachers and students at school (see also Ba Futuru 2019; Kyegombe et al. 2017). Additionally, researchers claim that students feel safer when violence is absent in their school environment (Nyakito and Allida 2018; Devries et al. 2015). Lastly, Parkes and Heslop (2013) state that the prevention of corporal punishment at school correlates with increases in girls' enrollment and decreases in student dropouts in Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique (see also Gershoff 2017). Gershoff (2017) argues that a lack of policy and legality still allows corporal punishment to continue at schools.

While some countries have banned the use of corporal punishment at school, teachers continue to use corporal punishment because they believe it is an effective discipline method (Mweru 2010). For example, some teachers in Kenya claim that the cycle of using corporal

punishment starts with parents (Mweru 2010). These teachers argue that using corporal punishment helps students to obey their teachers, motivates students to work harder, and is more efficient than time outs or detention to address behavioral issues (Mweru 2010; Kaltentbach et al. 2018; Brown and Okeke 2012). Even though some teachers believe that corporal punishment is effective, there seems to be no empirical evidence to support this claim, creating an interesting dilemma between what teachers think works in the classroom and what research actually shows to be effective.

### **The Present Study**

In summary, previous research shows that corporal punishment is harmful to students (Hussain and Muhammad 2017; Gershoff and Font 2016; Greydanus et al. 2003). Prior studies from different parts of the world have documented various consequences of school corporal punishment for students (Gershoff and Font 2016; Kumar and Teklu 2018). However, the consequences of school corporal punishment are largely unknown in Timor-Leste. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Timorese high school graduates describe their experiences of corporal punishment at school and its impacts?
2. Do men and women describe the impacts of corporal punishment differently?

### **Data and Methods**

The aim of this research is to examine the impacts of corporal punishment for Timorese high school graduates. I also investigate whether interviewees describe the impacts of corporal punishment differently across gender. The research is completed using qualitative methods. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with Timorese high school graduates to understand the participants' beliefs about corporal punishment and to perform a qualitative analysis of the

impacts resulting from corporal punishment (Seidman 2012). In-depth interviews—as opposed to surveys or polls—are used in an effort to elicit rich details about the interviewees’ life experiences. Further, corporal punishment is a sensitive topic, and the in-depth interview method allows me to build rapport with the interviewees to learn about the impacts of receiving corporal punishment in school.

## **Participants**

Participants were selected using non-representative or purposive sampling techniques, including snowball sampling. I initiated the selection process by direct contact with individuals through social media, as well as through two gatekeepers of youth groups in Timor-Leste to help with building connection for the snowball sampling networks. Given that corporal punishment and its effects are a sensitive topic to discuss, recruiting participants was challenging. Therefore, using non-representative (or non-probability) and snowball sampling, as well as direct contact with potential participants and gatekeepers provided more opportunities to reach out to individuals willing to discuss this sensitive topic. Through snowball sampling, some respondents provided one or more referrals for me to contact to participate in this study. These referrals helped me to find willing participants who met the sample inclusion criteria. Sampling considerations include potential participants’ availability (in terms of time and internet connectivity), age (must be 18 and above), nativity (must be Timorese high school graduate), and English language skills. Although English was preferred, some participants explained their experiences in detail in Tetum (Timorese language). One disadvantage is that snowball sampling is often time-consuming and could lead to oversampling participants from a single person’s network, which could result in a biased sample (Browne 2005). My research exposed some of



these disadvantages with the snowball sampling techniques since one participant referred a large number of prospects to me.

Due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-depth interviews were completed using Zoom, a synchronous online platform offering free online conferencing and recording tools. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and guided by eight main interview questions, excluding demographic information and the opportunity to refer potential participants. The structure of the interviews encompassed two themes: the experience of enduring corporal punishment at school and how these experiences impact students during their study and after graduating from high school. Respondents were also offered a chance to share their perception on how gender played a role in how they were disciplined. During the last part of the interview, I gave each interviewee a chance to suggest improvement for school discipline in Timor-Leste. Audio and video were recorded during the Zoom session. All audio data are transcribed using otter.ai services and transcription files are uploaded into NVIVO for coding and analysis.

After receiving the interview transcriptions, I used selective coding as a research method to find patterns and themes that emerged from the textual data (i.e., interview transcript). Selective coding is a way of proactively categorizing themes (Ongena and Dijkstra 2006; Chametzky 2016). Based on theory and previous literature, I expected to see detailed data descriptions of the negative consequences of corporal punishment across four areas: physical, academic, emotional, and the reproduction of violence in the behaviors of the interviewees. Therefore, my focus was on coding themes that emerge from the following questions:

a) How do respondents describe their experiences with corporal punishment in school?

- b) What are the expressions or inferences respondents have about the impacts of corporal punishment?
- c) To what extent do men and women describe their experiences and the impacts of corporal punishment differently?
- d) Do participants describe any violent behaviors in their current lives?

## **Findings**

This research study offers unique insights into Timorese high school graduates' experiences with corporal punishment in school. A total of 26 participants, all Timorese high school graduates, were from both public (7 participants) and private (19 participants) schools in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, as well as municipalities. The in-depth interview sample consisted of 16 females and 10 males and age ranges from 19 to 33-years old. Interviews were scheduled for 25-35 minutes for each participant. Interviews were conducted between late May and early July 2021. At the time of interviewing, 21 participants were residing in Dili, Timor-Leste, and 5 participants were residing abroad in the USA, Brazil, and Indonesia.

In this study, I found that 24 out of 26 participants reported receiving corporal punishment by their teachers in various ways, such as being asked to kneel, being slapped, or kicked. Exceptionally, two graduates reported that they did not personally receive physical punishment in high school; however, they both experienced corporal punishment before high school, and reported witnessing the violent discipline of their peers during high school. Through the one-on-one virtual interviews, respondents described the effects of corporal punishment received while in high school. Some students continued to experience physical pain and scars on their bodies, emotional trauma, and a lasting impact on their academic journey. There was also

evidence that a cycle of violence continues through those who experienced corporal punishment at school.

### **Experiences Corporal Punishment and the Physical Impacts**

The data reveal that corporal punishment at school is a pervasive approach used in Timor-Leste high schools to enforce discipline and obedience. When asked about school rules, participants declared that school rules are either written in a booklet or passed orally to students. Notably, none of the formal school rules mention that corporal punishment was a possible consequence for misbehavior. Yet, physical punishment is used daily at schools; examples include asking a student to kneel under the sun, hitting with a stick or ruler, kicking or slapping. Manfer, a graduate from a private high school, described the use of physical punishment as follows:

They [teachers] usually hit us, using the black electrical wire that is used for electricity, the big one that is huge and heavy...; when it [the electrical wire] got on our feet or our body, we got scars, like bruises and all black... some of the teachers use brooms and some use different sticks like the rattan to hit us. But the rattan won't break, but our bodies got all bruised. And, another rattan is soft, but when it hits on our body it will get stuck on our body... However, those are not included kneeling, pinching our ears, slapping, etc.

Timorese high school graduates participating in my interviews reported that the physical punishment could be administered by teachers or even their classmates. For example, some teachers asked students who correctly solved class quizzes or homework to hit or slap their classmates who could not answer their teachers' questions in the classroom, did not complete their assignments, and when they completed assignments incorrectly. The respondents also reported that students would be physically punished if they did not complete chores such as cleaning their classrooms or school environment.

Most respondents who reported receiving corporal punishment at school thought corporal punishment was normal at school. Nini, who graduated from a private high school in 2011, shared:

It was just like, everyone sees it as normal, right? Nobody questions... They [teachers] didn't tell you from an orientation period that this [corporal punishment] will happen if you do not pass or do this or that.

One of the major aims of this study was to investigate the impacts of enduring corporal punishment at school. The data from this study show physical impacts in the short, medium, and long-term on Timorese high school graduates. There is a pattern reported by the participants that they felt pain in the moment they received corporal punishment. In addition, a few interviewees reported that they had bruises that remained for weeks as a consequence of receiving physical punishment from their teachers. Long-term consequences included scars. Aga showed me the part of her hand and head that are still scarred due to physical punishment she received from her teacher, and she stated:

...like my hands. Can you see? Part of my hands and my head are not very well. Because of the physical punishment and it made my fingers like twisted. Also, my teacher punched my friend, and slapped him...my friend was absent for five days. And when he came back his face was like black and red like bruises.

Manfer also reported that he has an ongoing hearing issue affected by the pinching on his ears he received at school. These are some examples of the effects of corporal punishment that participants described.

### **I Felt Sad, I was Mad; Emotional Responses towards Corporal Punishment**

Enduring corporal punishment is a traumatic experience. During the interviews, participants showed heightened emotions and frustrations while describing their experiences of receiving physical punishment at school. I also identified a pattern of negative emotional impacts among the sample, including descriptions of trauma and hatred.

Interviewees expressed that they felt sad, mad, scared, and angry when their teachers hit them at school. Alia stated, “I felt sad because I got beaten by my teachers. At that time, I also felt traumatized by the actions that my teacher did. Thus, when I went to class, I felt nervous, or not calm.” Moreover, Ade, a private high school graduate in Dili, described his emotions when receiving physical punishment in school: “I kind of felt sad, and also felt angry... angry towards my teachers and those people who make the rules.” Emotional turmoil continued even after graduation. Ila shared that:

I got corporal punishment from my teacher using his belt, it scares me. Like every time I see someone start fixing their belt, I’m like, oh my god, no, no. I get trauma... And also, I am stressed because why did I let a stranger do that to me. This is abusive, that we got from our teachers that psychologically affects us a lot.

Additionally, other respondents reported feeling shame, especially when remembering the event, or anxiousness when talking in front of people.

### **Academic Performances Due to Corporal Punishment**

Corporal punishment affected students academically both positively and negatively in their academic journey. The data show that Timorese high school graduates tended to accept corporal punishment as positive motivation to complete homework and to finish their high school journey. Although fear could be used as a motivator to complete schoolwork, it also can prevent students from asking questions when they need help or do not understand a topic. On the other hand, Albert, a male high school graduate who attended both private and public high schools in Timor-Leste, stated “I felt down or scared to ask questions because I was afraid of being punished if I make mistakes. In this case, it is hard for learning.” In addition, Atin shared that:

Corporal punishment affected me academically, because I was not really active in the class. Because I was too afraid, like I became passive in the class...many of us were

afraid to ask questions as often in class...even up until now, when I do a presentation, I freak out when I stand in front of people.

As a negative outcome, corporal punishment in high school has affected some participants' ability to engage with subjects in post-secondary schools. Illa and Aga both reported being severely punished by their math teachers and as a result, avoided math related classes in their higher education. Aga attended a technical high school and studied engineering. Due to her high school corporal punishment experiences, she decided to change majors in higher education, moving from a STEM major to social science humanities related field. Asiku reported a similar effect on his ability to study physics in high school as well as at university due to his experiences with his high school physics teacher. Asiku stated:

On my first day in high school, I met one of my physics teachers, she came with not effective discipline methods, which affected me with self-esteem and my relationship with classmates in her class. And with that I also have difficulty to make friends with those who are good at Math and Physics...I also tried to compare myself with others like, oh, I'm not good enough for this. I don't like to study the subject [physics] even now in the university.

### **The Continuation of the Cycle of Violence on Individuals**

Due to the nature of normalizing such behavior, UNICEF Timor-Leste (2017) reports that people view corporal punishment as a tradition. Data from this study show that participants who received corporal punishment at school tended to go on to use corporal punishment towards others. The normalization of corporal punishment at school may reinforce the use of corporal punishment for disciplining siblings at home, creating a cycle of physical violence for discipline. The idea of a cycle of physical violence for discipline is supported by the theory of socialization, where people reproduce the culture and behaviors they observe in others (Kendall 2020). Participants gave examples of this cycle of violence in the interviews. For example, Ade, a private high school graduate, described the use of corporal punishment as a part of the culture:

I feel like it is also part of the culture... because like, at home, you get physical punishment from your family, and then you go to school, experience the same

thing. So, growing up, you're starting to think and develop this thought in your mind that okay, maybe that's how it's supposed to be; the way you teach people to be a good student, or a good child is by using the physical punishment.

Additionally, the data show that there is a pattern in which Timorese high school graduates use corporal punishment against their siblings because they view corporal punishment as a method that is commonly used to discipline others, seeing their high school teachers use it.

Nonetheless, not all participants who experienced corporal punishment in school continue to use corporal punishment for discipline in their homes. A minority of Timorese high school graduates in this study reported that they tend to not use physical punishment for discipline. Some participants indicated they stopped using corporal punishment after they learned about the consequences of corporal punishment. Nini explained that she had used physical punishment against her brother, but after her study abroad experience where she learned about the negative effects of physical punishment, she tends to not use it anymore. During the interview, Ady wept deeply when reflecting on her use of corporal punishment against her younger sister:

I realized that my younger sister... now I'm crying because the corporal punishment affected my younger sister...she wanted my mom to go with her every day because her friend got beaten by a teacher in the classroom. So, it affected her a lot, so she didn't go to school for two weeks. So, at that time, it made me wanted to hit her because I was like why didn't you go to school?

While Ady's story is thought-provoking, she remains in the minority because conscious or not, the majority of high school graduates reproduce the cycle of violence at home by using corporal punishment to discipline family members.

### **Evaluating Interviewees' Responses about Corporal Punishment by Gender**

I did not find a pattern by gender in relation to responses about corporal punishment in Timor-Leste. When I asked the question "Does gender play a role in how you were disciplined?" A great pattern from the data reveal that the Timorese high school graduates participating in this research answered that corporal punishment is applied to everyone regardless of their gender.

They also argued that teachers punished those who broke the rules. While Ady and Ovid mentioned that sometimes males might get harsher punishment, but Ovid also claimed that “women can get harsher punishment as well.” Kika explained that:

I think that both men and women are the same to get sanctions...it is so balanced, it did not matter whether you are man or woman, big or small, everyone who made mistakes got the consequences.

Reported short-term effects and the long-term impacts of corporal punishment were similar between male and female participants. Both male and female participants reported physical bruising and pain at the time of receiving the physical punishment. Both felt uncomfortable asking questions in some classes when their teachers used corporal punishment. Both reported that corporal punishment was a short-term motivator to study harder or to do their homework. Also, both male and female participants agreed that corporal punishment affected their emotional wellbeing when used and both reported feelings of anger and fear when receiving corporal punishment.

Long-term impacts were most dependent on individuals’ perspectives and experiences rather than on gender differences. When examining the long-term impacts on physical, academic, and emotional wellbeing, both male and female Timorese high school graduates described similar long-term impacts. For example, both male and female participants described avoiding a particular academic subject in their higher education due to corporal punishment used by specific teachers in high school. Also, both male and female participants had lasting physical scarring or impacts from corporal punishment. In describing the long-term effects of corporal punishment, both male and female participants indicated they were traumatized by the corporal punishment and are currently still affected by the experiences. Both also reported using corporal punishment



within their families, continuing the cycle of physical discipline. Thus, the data show that the impacts of corporal punishment on male and female participants were similar.

## **Conclusion**

I examined the impacts of corporal punishment on Timorese high school graduates. Throughout the analysis, the data reveals that there are issues of corporal punishment in Timor-Leste high schools that the former students faced. Interviewees realized the impacts of this method of discipline on them during and even after their studies in high school. Unfortunately, corporal punishment seems to be a “normal” method that teachers would use at school to “control” behavior.

The interviewees also realized that physical punishment is not a good method for correcting behavior or to punish those who break school rules. Many described physical, academic, and emotional effects due to receiving corporal punishment. The impacts that Timorese high school graduates received continue to carry on after graduation, especially trauma, fear, disappointment, and hatred. While there were no obvious gender differences in the impact of corporal punishment, the experiences of corporal punishment in high schools seemed to have reinforced the cycle of violence for interviewees, especially at home against their siblings.

Previous literature found that corporal punishment is a harmful way to discipline students and brings negative consequences, such as pain, fear, hatred, and disconnection (Gershoff and Font 2016; Greydanus et al. 2003). In addition, the theory of socialization emphasizes that people mimic the way other people socialize or approach each other even if it is harmful such as using physical punishment (Kendall 2020). This research contributes to the existing literature on

corporal punishment at school and the effects on students. More specifically, I found physical, academic, emotional, and social impacts of corporal punishment used in Timor-Leste schools.

There are a few limitations that I faced while completing this research. First, the interviewees were substantially from private schools, which may not adequately represent the experience of students in public schools in Timor-Leste. Secondly, language was challenging during the interviews. The interview questions were in English, but many Timorese high school graduates were not sufficiently proficient in English, so I conducted some interviews in Tetum. Thus, I translated some interviewee responses to English. Lastly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to conduct the in-depth interviews online via Zoom. Consequently, there were a few issues regarding internet and differences between the USA and Timor-Leste time zones.

In the interviews, participants were asked for ways to improve the educational system including discipline used in Timor-Leste schools. The interviewees recommended stopping the use of corporal punishment at schools and suggested alternative methods of correcting misbehavior. Thus, future research should continue to investigate how students from Timor-Leste would describe their experiences when alternative discipline methods to corporal punishment are used in schools. Participants in this study recognized that it is hard for teachers in Timor-Leste to control their emotions at school, considering Timor-Leste is a relatively new nation and the current generation of teachers faced significant trauma growing up. Thus, future research should also focus on students' resilience—the ways students manage trauma—and emotional support for students and teachers.

While completing this study, I came to realize that Timor-Leste's educational system needs a policy strategy addressing corporal punishment at schools. The ministry of education in Timor-Leste had the strategic plan for quality education in Timor-Lester 2011-2030 (MOE-TL

2011). It is crucial for MOE-TL to dig more in the strategic plan towards reducing violence at school for students to freely explore in their learning without fear of being physically punished. Ultimately, if students and teachers have good relationships in their learning environment, students will be more comfortable to express their curiosity in learning and exploring.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

1. Demographic:
  - a. Age
  - b. Sex
  - c. Highest education
  - d. Marital status
  - e. Parent
2. Did you attend a public or private high school?
3. Do you have a positive or negative opinion about your high school? Why?
  - a. In general, did you have a good relationship with your teachers?
  - b. Were school rules made clear to you?
  - c. In class, did you feel comfortable speaking up if you had any questions?
4. Were you physically disciplined in school (e.g., hit with hand or object)?
  - a. If YES - How did it make you feel?
    - Do you think that those experiences continue to have an impact on you?
    - Do you think gender played a role in how you were disciplined?
  - b. If NOT - Have you witnessed CP used at school?
    - How did it make you feel to witness CP?
    - Do you think gender played a role in how the student was disciplined?
5. How do you currently feel about the discipline used by teachers in the high school you attended?

To those who experienced, or witness CP:

- a. Do you think CP had an impact on your (or the student's) academic successes during or after high school?
- b. Does CP continue to have a physical impact (pain) on you after high school?
- c. Do you think that the CP that you experienced continues to have a psychological impact (trauma, stress, shame, depression, low self-esteem, etc.) on you after high school?

6. Do you use physical discipline against other people? (At home, work, or socially)
  - a. If YES – what are your reasons for using physical discipline?
  - b. If NO – what are your reasons for not using CP?
7. How does it feel to talk about physical punishment experienced at school?
8. What would be your suggestion to strengthen and better the school discipline in Timor-Leste education system?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the school discipline used in high schools in Timor-Leste?
10. Is there anyone else who has graduated from a high school in Timor-Leste you'd suggest me to contact to participate in this study?

## **Appendix B**

### **Positionality**

Insider status is defined as a researcher who is native to the setting of the research study. A researcher's positionality as either an insider or outsider can bring strengths and weaknesses to the study. Therefore, it is critical to understand my status and how it influences access to the subjects during the research. In this study, I acknowledge my identity as a Timorese and someone who has experienced corporal punishment at school in Timor-Leste. I am aware of my position as an insider who is not only familiar with the education system and language of Timor-Leste but also empathetic with the interviewees. While I do have strong beliefs about the negative effects of corporal punishment, I can reserve judgment by setting aside my own opinion and experiences while conducting interviews, allowing participants to speak for themselves.

## Appendix C

### Timorese High School Student Handbooks

The student handbooks are used in many schools (especially high schools) in Timor-Leste to guide students through school rules, including students' rights and obligations, as well as sanctions for students if they break the agreed rules. I collected the booklets from 14 different high schools through communication with high school graduates. The handbooks are coming from both public and private schools as well as those schools located in Dili (the capital) and municipalities. The high schools are:

- a. Sagrado Coração de Jesus, Becora Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- b. 5 de Maio high school, Becora Dili (Public)
- c. Technique and Vocational School in Atabae, Bobonaro (Public)
- d. Sta. Madalena de Canosa, Has-laran, Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- e. Vocational School Crystal, Suai municipality (Public)
- f. Nosa Senhora de Fátima, Railaco, Ermera municipality (Private – Catholic School)
- g. Technic and Vocational Group of Technology and Industry, Dili (Public)
- h. Externato São José, Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- i. Colegio de Santo Inacio de Loiola, Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- j. Colegio Paulo VI, Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- k. Colegio São Francisco Asisi, Same municipality (Private – Catholic School)
- l. São Pedro, Dili (Private – Catholic School)
- m. Dom Basilio do Nascimento de Laclubar, Manatutu municipality (Private – Catholic School)

In these handbooks, I looked for information mentioned about the use of corporal punishment at school. I specifically looked at whether it is allowed to be used by teachers or what consequences teachers might face when they use physical discipline against students. Across the 14 handbooks, there is no mention that corporal punishment is allowed, and there is also no mention of consequences for teachers when they use physical punishment against students. By and large, the common severe punishment for students from those schools is suspension. Lastly, the 14 handbooks are available (in photographic file) upon request.

## Appendix D

### IRB Approval



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**To:** Veronica Godinho Pereira  
BELL 4188

**From:** Douglas J Adams, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review

**Date:** 03/17/2021

**Action:** **Exemption Granted**

**Action Date:** 03/17/2021

**Protocol #:** 2102312754

**Study Title:** The Long term Impact of Corporal Punishment for Timorese High School Graduates.

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

cc: Brittany Hearne, Investigator