PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN EDUCATION SETTINGS

A White Paper by Sexual Violence Research Initiative and UN Girls' Education Initiative

UNGEI | UNITED NATIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE

SVRI sexual violence research initiative

This paper shines a light on sexual violence in education settings. It covers forced, non-consensual or exploitative sexual acts perpetrated in, around or related to an education setting. Sexual violence can be perpetrated by teachers, staff, students, parents, and others in the education setting and the target, victim or survivor can also be a person in any of these categories.

While sexual violence against children and young people is already a less-researched area of work, this focus on education settings is even less common. Yet, by all accounts, its prevalence is high and not being addressed fast enough. This paper presents available evidence including from global, regional, and national data sets, the persisting gaps in evidence and what has been found to work to prevent sexual violence in education settings. It aims to inform education, gender equality, child rights and gender-based violence (GBV) sectors.

Context

Childhood sexual violence is one of the most profound and pervasive human rights violations, stripping away the dignity, safety, and potential of countless lives. It demands our urgent and unwavering attention. Sexual violence against children is a grave violation of human rights and is one of the largest yet silent public health crises of our times (Alexander & Miller, 2022; UNICEF, 2020a; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). It occurs in countries all over the world, at all stages of economic growth. It is perpetrated against children from all backgrounds, diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, and of all ages (UNICEF, 2020b; WHO, 2016). Girls, children of diverse genders, children with disabilities, and those living in humanitarian or emergency contexts are at heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence in schools. In more than one third of countries, at least 5 per cent of young women have reported experiences of sexual violence in childhood.[1] Childhood sexual violence not only devastates the immediate wellbeing, physical and mental, of survivors but also creates deep, lasting connections to violence and trauma throughout the lifespan, perpetuating cycles of harm and further violence that can echo across generations.

Definitions

Sexual violence: sexual violence is defined as any sexual act directed at a person without their consent (World Health Organization, 2013).

Violence against Children (VAC): any deliberate, unwanted, and non-essential act, threatened or actual, against a child or against multiple children that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in death, injury, or other forms of physical and psychological suffering. (UNICEF, 2023)

Childhood Sexual Violence (CSV): Any deliberate, unwanted, and non-essential act of a sexual nature, either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering. (UNICEF, 2023)

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV): An act or threat of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools that is perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. (UNGEI) (Safe to Learn, 2023; UNESCO & UN Women, 2016; UNGEI, 2019) It includes different types of violence in an around schools, including sexual abuse and harassment, coercion and assault and rape, as well as other forms of violence where gender is a key driving factor, such as verbal abuse and bullying (UNESCO & UN Women, 2016)

Sextortion: Sextortion emphasizes the corruption aspect of sexual exploitation - the quid pro quo exchange between the perpetrator and the survivor (Wilton Park, 2023).

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1 https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/sexual-violence/#:~:text=In%20more%20than%20one%2Dthird,unsettling%20of%20children's%20rights%20violations

Sexual violence consists of a range of sexual acts including, but not limited to rape, intrafamilial abuse/incest, dating/intimate partner violence, commercial sexual exploitation, technology-facilitated sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and non-contact sexual abuse (Rimer, 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

For the purpose of this paper, we define an education setting as the physical or virtual environments where teaching and learning activities take place, including schools and higher education institutions.

Education settings are not immune from sexual violence. Global estimates show that 120 million (or one in 10) girls under the age of 20 have experienced forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts.[2] Global estimates for boys are currently not available.[3] However, an analysis of available data for 24 countries (primarily in high- and middle-income countries) showed that sexual violence in childhood ranged from 8% to 31% for girls and 3% to 17% for boys.[4] According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023, in the US 17% of high school girls faced sexual violence at school. This decreases to 6% for boys and rises to 20% for LGBTQI+ children. Data from 20 countries across four continents show that childhood sexual violence is a major issue, with lifetime prevalence rates ranging from 4.4% to 37.2% for girls and 1.1% to 21.2% for boys.[5] LGBTQI+ students, girls with disabilities and those from other marginalised and discriminated groups, such as religious minorities and indigenous communities are also more often affected by gender-based violence, including sexual violence.[6] During conflicts and humanitarian crises, gender-based violence risks against children are exacerbated, including sexual violence, increase in humanitarian settings, increasing the challenges already faced by affected communities linked to instability, fractured community safety networks, reduced access to resources and services, including school, and economic hardship.[7][8]

In some countries, adolescent girls and young women are coerced into transactional sex, in both humanitarian and development settings. When this is related to an education benefit like access to education or grades given to girls in exchange for sex, then that sex is exploitative and a human rights abuse and, in most countries, a crime by a government employee. Yet, it remains normalized. Girls around the world attest to having been forced to do the "sofa test" or "teste de sofa," to gain entry to a school or pass a class.[9] A 2022 study in rural Tanzania found that 26% of adolescent girls and young women participated in transactional sex, although it does not note what percent of them were related to accessing or being in an education setting.[10] A 2023 report supported by Girls First Finance Foundation conducted a survey of over 2,000 young women in sub-Saharan Africa, of which 70% of respondents reporting being sexually pressured at least once, and 42% experiencing occasional or frequent sexual pressure.[11]

2   UNICEF. (2014). Hidden in plain sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children. New York, NY: UNICEF.
3   Ibid.
4   Barth, J., Bermetz, L., Heim, E., Trelle, S., & Tonia, T. (2013). The current prevalence of child sexual abuse worldwide: A systematic review and meta-analysis. International Journal of Public Health, 58(3), 469-483
5   Successful child sexual violence prevention efforts start with data: how the Violence Against Children and Youth Survey helped curb the tide of child sexual violence in 20 countries | BMJ Paediatrics Open
6   Safe to Learn, "School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change - with youth and for youth" 2023.
7   Safe to Learn, "School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change - with youth and for youth" 2023.
8   UNESCO, UNICEF "Building Strong Foundations" 2024.
9   https://www.notibras.com/site/professores-acusados-de-teste-do-sofa-com-alunas/ "O Estado angolano é muito violento, comete atrocidades", entrevista a Sara Kambinga | BUALA
10   Ranganathan et al, Transactional sex among adolescent girls and young women enrolled in a cash plus intervention in rural Tanzania: a mixed-methods study, Journal of the International AIDS Society, 2022
11   Pizziconi, Connecting the Dots on the Pernicious Force Behind Gender Inclusion Advances: Sex for Education and Jobs, 2023

Sexual violence in and around education settings is considered a severe form of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and can be perpetrated by both teachers, school staff or learners. Multiple forms of sexual harassment and violence including unwanted sexual touching, coercion, rape including attempted rape, sexual comments, and jokes, sharing of sexualised images and text can and do happen at or on the way to and from school (UNESCO & UN Women, 2016; UNGEI, 2019).

In a 2020 survey across 10 countries, nearly 400,000 girls (ages 13-17) reported sexual abuse in school in the last 12 months.[12] According to a 2023 joint child protection and needs assessment in the Central African Republic, about 17% of the educational staff knew about an incident of violence experienced by a girl from their community in school or on the way to school in the last 6 months. Out of those, with physical assaults (63%) and sexual assaults by adults (20%) being commonly cited as incidents happening in school.[13] While recent trends demonstrate that sexual violence in schools is often perpetrated by peers, there is also existing evidence on sexual

violence by school staff. The Contexts of Violence in Adolescence Cohort study (CoVAC) in Uganda found that 1 in 20 (4.9%) schoolgirls surveyed reported that they had experienced sexual violence by their teachers (Parkes et al 2023). Among girls with disabilities, 16% had experienced sexual violence perpetrated by their teachers. Girls narrated to the researchers how they had resisted sexual advances, sometimes at the risk of further punishment or low grades.[14] The findings underline the importance of school systems to encourage reporting and to hold staff accountable.

Teachers can be found in the role of perpetrators, but also victims and witnesses of sexual violence. In a report conducted with more than 26,281 education staff from 11 territories, the proportion of education staff who have been the victim of violence at work in the last 12 months is varied but worrying in many countries: ranging from 40% in Canada, to 22% in Morocco, 23% in Cameroon, and falling to 4% in Japan. The proportion of staff who witness violence is around twice that of staff who are victims, except in Morocco, where it is 16%, and in Japan, where it is close to four times higher (17%).[15] Although this report is unclear on the rates of sexual violence specifically, the rates of violence experienced or witnessed in educational settings is alarming.

Sexual violence can lead to devastating physical and psychological consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, fear, low self-esteem, and depression, often resulting in early drop out from schooling.16[16] This also puts girls at greater risk of child marriage. An estimated 640 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood.[17] Secondary school attendance is particularly important in preventing child marriage, with girls 6 percentage points less likely to marry before 18 for every additional year they remain in secondary school.[18]

12   Crawfurd and Hares analysis of VACS Surveys / CDC Survey for US (2020).

13   Global Education Cluster, Joint Education and Child Protection Needs Assessment Central African Republic, 2023. https://educationcluster.app.box.com/s/8bfq121fdykkid115c26fsjbctii8rkw

14   Parkes, J., Bhatia, A., Datzberger, S., Nagawa, R., Naker, D., & Devries, K. (2023). Addressing silences in research on girls' experiences of teacher sexual violence: insights from Uganda. Comparative Education, 59(2), 193-213.

15   Barometer I-BEST 2023 https://www.educationsolidarite.org/en/barometer-i-best-2023/#:~:text=The%20Education%20and%20Solidarity%20Network%20and%20the%20Foundation%20for%20Public

16   Bott, S. 2010. "Sexual Violence and Coercion: Implications for Sexual and Reproductive Health." In Social Determinants of Sexual and Reproductive Health: Informing Programmes and Future Research, edited by S Malarcher, 133–157. Geneva: WHO; Gelaye, B., D. Arnold, M. A. Williams, M. Goshu, and Y Berhane. 2009. "Depressive Symptoms among Female College Students Experiencing Gender-Based Violence in Awassa." Ethiopia. Journal of Interpersonal Violence 24 (3): 464–481. doi:10.1177/0886260508317173; Gossaye, Y., N. Deyessa, Y. Berhane, M. Ellsberg, M. Emmelin, M. Ashenafi, and A. Alem. 2003. "Butajira Rural Health Program: Women's Health and Life Events Study in Rural Ethiopia." Ethiopian Journal of Health Development 17 (2): 1–51.

17   The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024

18   Wodon, Q., et al., 2018a, Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls, Washington DC: World Bank.

Structural and power inequalities between women and men, girls, and boys along with harmful notions of masculinity and patriarchy, including gender norms, drive sexual violence. Resistance and reluctance to talk about gender, violence, and sex in education settings create a void in which individuals trade inaccurate information with one another about relationships, sex, and violence, and continue to normalize violence and gender inequality for future generations. Sexual violence cannot end until we see it, acknowledge it, report it, and take action to end it, incorporating addressing root causes and drivers of violence.

What we know and do not know about sexual violence in education settings

The global prevalence of sexual violence in education settings has been difficult to capture because of the sensitivity of the topic, inconsistencies in the definition of sexual violence and potential risks associated with disclosure (UNESCO & UNGEI, 2023). Also negatively affecting evidence generation is that most surveys do not differentiate between types of sexual violence, for example between sexual harassment and rape (Hares, S. & Smarrelli, G., 2023). Furthermore, new, and different forms of sexual violence in education settings must also be considered, measured, and addressed including growing online violence.

Sexual violence in schools often gets categorized and named as something else such as 'bullying,' It frequently remains unreported to school officials or law enforcement. Such categorization also obscures the violent and illegal nature of these incidents, deflecting liability and responsibility from the school.[19] Longitudinal research investigating bullying also makes an important contribution to knowledge about perpetration of SRGBV, having identified a predictive pathway from bullying perpetration in primary schools to subsequent perpetration of sexual violence in secondary schools. The study, across 3 years with 10–15-year-old Americans, found intentional exposure to violent pornography over time predicted an almost 6-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour, whereas exposure to non-violent sexually explicit material did not show

this result (Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2011). Engaging in homophobic name-calling also increased the odds of perpetrating sexual violence in high school (Espelage, Basile, Leemis, Hipp, & Davis, 2018; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018).

Online pornography has become widely accessible to young people who have connectivity. Many pornography sites offer free access to some of their materials. In response, concerns have emerged that engagement with online pornography may operate as a driver for the objectification and sexualisation of women and girls, and lead to increases in forms of sexual violence within young people's relationships. Studies confirm that violence is commonly present in online pornography. A study conducted in 2017-2018 analysed the video titles found on the landing pages of three popular mainstream pornography websites (Vera-Gray, McGlynn, Kureshi, & Butterby, 2021). It found that one in every eight titles shown to first-time users describe sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence. Studies have shown an association between intentional consumption of pornography and earlier engagement in sexual activity and greater likelihood of sexual violence perpetration. A study of American Grade 10 students who had been dating in the last year showed that boys exposed to violent pornography were 2-3 times more likely to report perpetration of sexual violence in their dating relationships than their non-exposed counterparts (Rostad et al., 2019).

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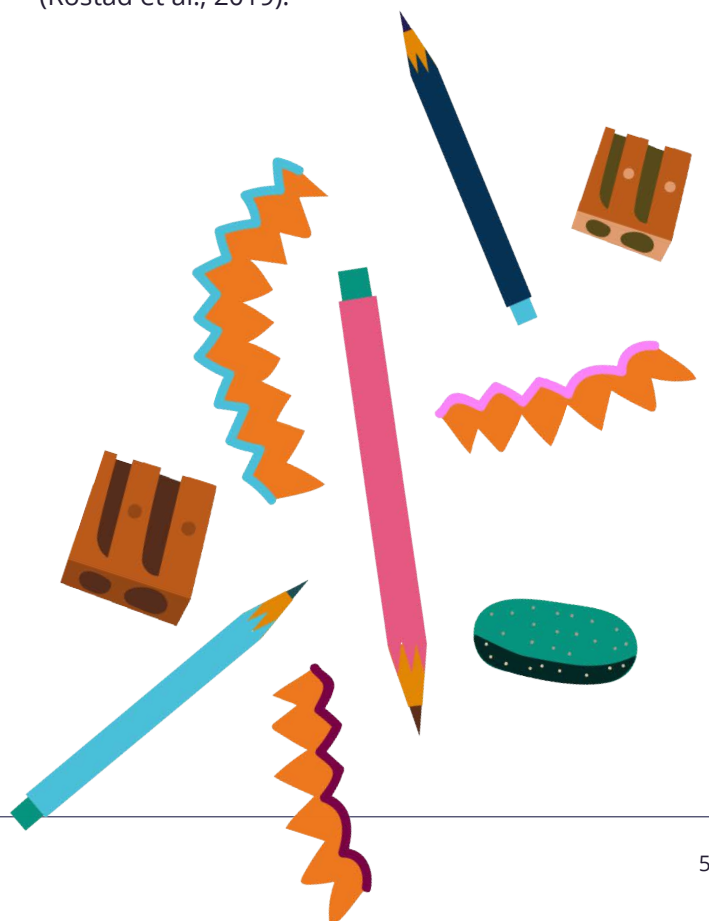
19 Nan Stein, A Rising Pandemic of Sexual Violence in Elementary and Secondary Schools: Locating a Secret Problem,' Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy 33-52 (Spring 2005) available at: https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djglp/vol12/iss1/2

Studies, research, and particularly longitudinal studies, gather important data to understand the impact of sexual violence in education settings, yet the data is incomplete as under-reporting or lack of reporting diminish the understanding of the breadth of the violence. Many factors contribute to no or under-reporting include an environment of impunity, fear of retaliation and stigma and the normalization, in specific contexts and environments, of sexual violence including unwanted touching and sexualized comments, sextortion and coercive and transactional sex. Other reasons that survivors do not disclose or report sexual abuse are that the sexual assailants tend to be part of the victim's culture or community, and there is fear that she will be blamed for being even a close friend, colleague, or schoolmate of the sexual assailant. Many women remain silent for their entire lives to protect their self-dignity and that of their family. Coupled with impunity, fear of retaliation and stigma, not receiving appropriate support, or being blamed all lead to no disclosure or under-reporting of incidents. Research shows between 30% and 80% of victims do not disclose experiences of childhood sexual abuse until adulthood, while others may remain silent for their entire lives.[20]

We know that the data is imperfect. Globally, or even regionally, comparable data is not available while country data is dispersed or hidden. Much of our understanding of this issue is cited in high income countries – more research is needed in low- and middle-income countries. Data gaps and shortcomings are linked to insufficient funding, poor coordination, limited technical expertise, and the constraints of traditional data collection methods. But grassroots organisations, youth, teachers, teachers' unions, and survivors are telling us that these issues are rife and require greater attention. It is important to listen to their experience. Not having enough evidence on sexual violence cannot be an excuse for not acting upon it.

20   UNICEF "Hidden in Plain Sight," 2014.

One in four young women has experienced violence by an intimate partner (sexual or other) by the time they are 24 years old (WHO and UN Women, 2021), indicating the prevalence of gender-based or sexual violence among school-aged children. Perpetrators of intimate partner violence are almost always men and boys.

Approximately 60 million girls are sexually assaulted on their way to or at school every year.[21]

Around 300 million children have been affected by online child sexual exploitation and abuse over the past 12 months.[22]

Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACS) data for low- and middle-income countries show sexual violence is shockingly high for both girls and boys, with up to a quarter of girls experiencing sexual violence in the last 12 months. Of those who experienced sexual violence, up to 40% of boys and 20% of girls reported experiencing it at school.[23]

The What Works report (2019) identified the school as the location of the first incident of sexual violence experienced prior to age 18 for 31% of boys and 18% of girls in Uganda, and 17% of girls and 13% of boys in Cambodia.[24]

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) survey found that 11% of US high school students were forced by someone to do sexual things (including kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse) when they did not want to during the past year.[25]

In a survey conducted by Girls First Finance with girls and young women, 70% of respondents in sub-Saharan Africa reported experiencing sexual exploitation in education and work settings.[26]

A survey on teacher victimization among the 50 largest U.S. school districts found that for sexual harassment 12% of victimized teachers rated their experience severely distressing. 22% of victims felt unsafe in their schools after the incident, while 33% indicated that school administrators took no action.[27]

21 Global Women's Institute, GWU. 2012)
22 https://intothelight.childlight.org/executive-summary.html
23 Hares, S. & Smarrelli, G., "Violence in Schools: Prevalence, Impact, and Interventions," 2023, https://www.cgdev.org/publication/violence-schools-prevalence-impact-and-interventions
24 Together for Girls "What works to prevent sexual violence against children" p.11. 2019
25 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2024.
26 Wilton Park, 2023
27 Moon, B., McCluskey, J. & Saw, G. 2023

The limited evidence we have on sexual violence in education settings is chiefly confined to child sexual violence. We have little to no evidence on sexual violence perpetrated in and around schools towards and among teachers, non-teaching, and administrative staff.

We need more evidence on the prevalence or extent of sexual violence in education settings for any category of perpetrator or victim/ survivor, including local and country studies.

We do not know the extent to which it is reported or acted on or the rate of prosecution and punishment.

There is insufficient to no data about the prevalence of sexual violence in education settings in emergency contexts, in particular in conflict affected countries where education is under attack.

We do not know enough about how disabilities – and different types of it- exacerbate the likelihood of sexual violence in education settings.

Data is needed to better understand to what extent LGBTQI+ individuals, children with disabilities, indigenous populations, refugees, and other marginalized groups are impacted by sexual violence in education settings.

We do not know enough to what extent sexual violence in education settings leads to school dropouts, especially among girls. We do not know about the scale of sexual assault and abuse, including rape in education settings, a major factor impeding girls' education, among others.

Research has shown that perceptions and attitudes of male perpetrators of sexual violence are complex and to some extent, predictable across settings, which indicate the powerful influence of both structural and cultural factors in a patriarchal society.[28] However, research on the perceptions and attitudes of male perpetrators of sexual violence- including in education settings- remains limited and dated.[29]

28 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2024.

29 Josefina Jiménez Aceves and Laura Tarzia (2024), Understanding the Perspectives and Experiences of Male Perpetrators of Sexual Violence Against Women: A Scoping Review and Thematic Synthesis," Sage p.13.

Promising Results- Sexual violence prevention programmes delivered in education settings

Yet, there is reason to hope: repeat national surveys on childhood violence have found a significant decrease in childhood sexual violence in some countries.[30] [31] The good news is that education settings have gained recognition as effective sites for sexual violence prevention (Fantaye et al. 2022, Lu et al. 2023, Russel et al. 2020). While investment in addressing childhood sexual violence was limited in the past (UNICEF 2020a), increased awareness of its magnitude and consequences has spurred greater efforts to tackle it. Over the past two decades, emerging evidence has shown that prevention interventions can reduce sexual violence in education settings (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Ligiero et al., 2019). Given the evidence of the high prevalence of violence in online pornography, and the association between intentional use of pornography and increased perpetration of sexual harassment and sexual assault, utilizing age-appropriate education programmes have been seen as pivotal to teach young people how to stay safe online, and to critically challenge messages they may encounter within sexually explicit media.[32] Schools have been recognized as entry points for prevention through providing education, connections, and environments that lessen the impact of negative life events and promote health and well-being.[33]

Effectiveness of School-Based Programmes in Preventing Sexual Violence

Programmes may combine elements of several of these intervention types [below] so that they act to strengthen protective mechanisms, reduce risks to children, and enhance impact. (Çeçen-Eroğul & Hasırcı, 2013; Fraser, 2022; Walsh et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2016).

Effective, when well-designed and implemented:

🎓 **Prevention modules embedded in school curricula, including sexual violence prevention,[31] comprehensive sexuality, healthy relationships,[32] dating violence prevention programmes,[33] programmes addressing prevention of school-related gender-based violence,[34] social emotional learning, health education and life skills**

📖 **Programme design, delivery and educator training for effective learning interventions**

⚡ **School-based self-defense programs (education and life skills)[35]**

Prevention programmes are most effective, especially when integrated into school curricula at all levels of the schooling system, and further supported through prevention activities implemented across all levels of the prevention ecosystem such as: parenting programmes, community-based interventions, policy and legislation and services (Letourneau et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2013).

Early education approaches e.g. Body safety training in pre-schools. Interventions with pre-school children are important as more than 20% of children are sexually abused before the age of eight (Snyder, 2000). The Body Safety Training (BST) Program, developed in the USA, is a 10-session programme that teaches children as young as 3 to recognise potentially abusive situations or potential abusers, refuse sexual requests and report

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30 Fantaye et al. 2022, Lu et al. 2023, Russel et al. 2020.
31 Successful child sexual violence prevention efforts start with data: how the Violence Against Children and Youth Survey helped curb the tide of child sexual violence in 20 countries | BMJ Paediatrics Open
32 Cahill, Helen "Desk review of research, tools and frameworks to inform policies addressing prevention of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)," UNICEF EAPRO 2024.
33 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2024.
34 Fryda & Hulme, 2015; Ligiero et al., 2019
35 Çeçen-Eroğul & Hasırcı, 2013; Walsh et al., 2018; Finkelhor, Asidigian, & DziubaLeatherman, 1995; Wolfe et al., 2009
36 De La Rue L, Polanin JR, Espelage DL, & D., 2014
37 Cahill, Dadvand, Suryani, & Farrelly, 2023; Cahill, Lusher, et al., 2023; Crooks, Jaffe, Dunlop, Kerry, & Exner-Cortens, 2019; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2023; Villardón-Gallego, García-Cid, Estévez, & García-Carrión, 2023
38 Safe Futures Hub. (2024). Building safe futures: Solutions to end childhood sexual violence. Evidence from low- and middle-income countries on childhood sexual violence prevention. Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Together for Girls, WeProtect Global Alliance. www.safefutureshub.org

(Wurtele, 2008). Research on BST and similar programmes have shown them as effective at teaching children body-safety rules and skills. Further, BST has been adapted and tested in settings beyond the USA, including among pre-schoolers in China (Zhang et al., 2021).

School-based sexuality education (which falls under the umbrella of foundational education for health and wellbeing) contributes to positive results in violence prevention, ranging from improved knowledge, attitudes and reporting of violence to actual decreases in victimization and perpetration (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021). Research from Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for example, shows that sex abuse prevention programmes for children as young as five years old yield a range of outcomes, such as improved self-protective skills, knowledge of 'safe touch', and self-esteem (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021; Brown, 2016).

Social-Emotional Learning Programmes have also been found to contribute to reduced rates of bullying, sexual harassment, and homophobic harassment, as well as bullying of students with disabilities (Cahill, Lusher, et al., 2023b; Espelage, Low, Van Ryzin, & Polanin, 2015; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015).

Embedding sexual violence prevention modules into school curriculum. Integrating sexual violence prevention programs into primary and secondary school curricula has shown promising results across multiple countries and intervention types (Fraser, 2022), even though curricula-only programs may be inadequate in preventing sexual violence (Taylor et al., 2013). Primary and secondary school interventions are often delivered as a series of sessions. They typically involve peer learning, role-play, modelling, film, critical reflection, and other interactive strategies, with an aim to increase knowledge of CSA and build self-protection skills among students (Walsh et al., 2018; Bright et al., 2022; Çeçen-Eroğul, & Hasırcı, 2013; Fryda & Hulme, 2015). Several programmes have been tested and found effective in multiple settings with varying age groups for example in Ecuador, China, Turkiye, South Africa, Indonesia, Kenya (Fraser, 2022). A systematic review of 23 school-based interventions conducted with adolescents to reduce dating and sexual violence found that at post-test participating students had better knowledge of GBV and were less tolerant of it; were less accepting of rape myths; and had an increased awareness of appropriate approaches to conflict resolution (De La Rue, Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2014).

Doll Program for CSA prevention in China: The Doll Programme - developed in China –consists of an e-education toolkit providing sexual education for lower primary school children and parents (Xu, Fu, & Yang, 2024). A rigorous evaluation of the Doll Programme showed that it effectively improves children's child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention knowledge (Xu et al., 2024). The impact of the programme was found to be even greater when parents also participated. In sum, the Doll program effectively improves children's CSA prevention knowledge, with added benefits from parental involvement (Xu et al., 2024).

Secondary Schools

Safe Schools for Teens in the Philippines: Eight modules on CSA disclosure, identification, and reporting were embedded in the Health and Values Education subjects of the school curriculum for grade 7 students in Manilla (Madrid et al., 2020). A cross-sectional study with 237 female and male teachers and 1,458 female and male from two public high schools was done in these schools over two years (Madrid et al., 2020). The programme involved training for all teachers on recognizing, recording, reporting, and referral of child abuse (the 4R's) (Madrid et al., 2020). The study found that, after the training, teachers' confidence in identifying CSA increased from 25% to 57%, whilst adolescents' self-reported knowledge on abuse, how to help friends as well as on adolescent's impulse control and emotional clarity improved (Madrid et al., 2020). Most importantly, there was a significant decline in self-reported experiences of dating violence which includes physical, sexual, and emotional violence (Madrid et al., 2020).

Primary Schools

Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Psycho-Education Training Program in Turkiye: This program, designed for fourth-grade students, focuses on enhancing awareness about body safety and personal rights through a structured curriculum delivered over four consecutive days. Each one-hour session, with a ten-minute break, covers essential topics such as body ownership, good touch vs. bad touch, body safety rules, and how to seek help from trusted adults (Çeçen-Eroğul & Hasırcı, 2013). A rigorous evaluation revealed that the program significantly improved students' knowledge about preventing child sexual abuse, with the positive effects lasting for at least eight weeks (Çeçen-Eroğul & Hasırcı, 2013).

Secondary Schools

What Works in Schools Programme (USA) is an approach to school-based health implemented in American schools that has been shown to improve health behaviors and experiences, support mental health and reduce suicidality in schools. The core components of the program are:

- Improving health education,

- Connecting young people to the health services they need, and;

- Making school environments safer and more supportive.

The program is particularly effective in making sure teachers have the training they need to manage the mental and behavioral health issues of students in their classrooms, providing opportunities for positive youth development, including school and community service programs and mentoring, and ensuring that schools are safe for the most vulnerable youth through anti-harassment policies, providing safe spaces, inclusive clubs, and professional development for school staff. Participating schools saw decreases in sexual risk behaviors among students and decreases in students who use marijuana, who miss school because of safety concerns, and who experience forced sex. The programme was found to help to reverse negative trends and ensure that youth have the support they need to be healthy and thrive.[39]

A study conducted with Australian junior and middle secondary school students investigated the outcomes of participation in the **Resilience Rights and Respectful Relationships programme** (Cahill, Lusher, et al., 2023b). The intervention combined a focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) with a focus on prevention of GBV. It addressed seven key topics, each of which included three to five lessons. Topics 1-5 supported the development of social and relational skills, through lessons on Emotional Literacy, Personal Strengths, Positive Coping and Stress Management, Problem-solving, and Help-Seeking. Topics 6 and 7 addressed Gender Stereotypes and Positive Gender Relations, focusing on gender norms, respectful relationships, consent education and the prevention of GBV. The research found a decrease of students who said they sexually bullied other students (baseline 8.7%; endpoint 5.9%). The endpoint survey also showed that most students found the program useful, with girls and gender diverse students giving higher ratings to the gender and violence prevention components than boys, and boys giving higher ratings on usefulness of the focus on friendship skills than girls and gender diverse students.

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39   CDC "What Works Overview" 2023. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks/what-works-overview.htm

Primary and Secondary Schools

A SRGBV prevention education study of upper primary and lower secondary school classes, conducted with 9,090 students from 92 schools in three African countries (Tanzania, Zambia and Eswatini), investigated the outcomes of participation in the 'Connect with Respect' program (Cahill, Dadvand, Suryani, & Farrelly, 2023). The research found that the program achieved: reductions in unwanted sexual comments and sexual touch by peers; reduced participation in negative bystander behaviours such as laughing along; increase in positive bystander actions such as referring incidents to a teacher; increases in knowledge and intentions to seek help for those impacted by GBV. At the endpoint 91% of students recommended that all schools teach about the prevention of GBV.[40]

Examples of 'whole-school' programmes

Shifting Boundaries is a programme for students aged 12-13, aimed at preventing early dating violence. It focuses on legal consequences, gender roles, and healthy relationships, teaching students to set personal boundaries over six sessions. The programme includes a building-based intervention to identify and supervise "hot spots" for harassment. It also introduces "respecting boundaries agreements" and signage about sexual harassment. In a trial with over 2,500 students, schools received either both interventions, the classroom intervention, the building intervention, or none. Results showed that the combination of both interventions effectively reduced harassment and violence. The building intervention alone also reduced harassment and violence perpetration but not victimization. The classroom intervention alone was not effective (Taylor et al., 2013).

'End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV)' programme in Sierra Leone adopted UNGEI's 'whole-school approach' to prevent SRGBV including sexual violence, implemented in partnership with UNICEF Sierra Leone, Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission, and International Rescue Committee. Students (ages 12-18) learned about SRGBV through an age-appropriate life skills curriculum. Community GBV case management workers were supported, and all schools were jointly supervised by the Ministry. The programme helped establish school-level SRGBV reporting mechanisms and safe spaces. Results show direct impact on reducing SRGBV and in shifting students' attitudes and behaviours. The percentage of students who reported feeling unsafe at school reduced from 13% to 2% (almost the same for girls and boys). Students experiencing at least one form of SRGBV reduced from 99% (girls and boys) to 91% (87% girls and 94% boys). Sexual violence incidents reduced from 85% to 52%. 97% of students indicated they would feel comfortable reporting if someone hurt them at school, compared to 71% at the beginning of the project (almost the same for girls and boys). There was a 5-fold increase in positive gender attitudes towards adolescent girls, from 5% to 27%. The percentage of students who believed that a girl or woman should keep rape a secret reduced from 70% to 9%.

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40 Cahill, H., Dadvand, B., Suryani, A., & Farrelly, A. (2023). A student-centric evaluation of a program addressing prevention of gender-based violence in three African countries International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20, 1-19.

H.E.A.R.T by Protsahan India Foundation, a "Whole-Child, Whole School Program"[41] Protsahan's HEART (Health, Education, Arts, Rights, Technology) approach is a pioneering arts-based psychosocial healing program aimed at addressing and preventing sexual violence in urban slums. By incorporating creative expression—such as art, music, and theatre—this programme not only provides a medium for children and adolescents to share their stories but also facilitates critical linkages with government schemes and entitlements for the most marginalized.

The H.E.A.R.T model is gender-transformative and trauma-informed, working cohesively to break the intergenerational cycles of childhood abuse, poverty, and gender inequity. Through the transformative power of the arts, it empowers participants to reclaim their narratives, fosters resilience, and encourages community engagement. Ultimately, this holistic approach serves as a powerful catalyst for social change, promoting healing and advocacy in a supportive environment.

Programmes are most effective when set in an enabling environment. Argentina has a set of national laws that promote the inclusion of gender and sexual violence in the curriculum: Comprehensive Sex Education Law (Law No. 26,150) and the Law on Educating for Equality. Prevention and eradication of gender-based violence (Law No. 27.234). Protocols for addressing gender-based violence in schools have also been promoted. These protocols organise institutional and collective ways of recognising, detecting, and monitoring situations of violence.

Preventing sexual violence in schools through gender transformative education

A gender-transformative approach in education means that all levels of education systems work to intentionally transform harmful stereotypes and practices by challenging power relations, gender norms, and the systemic roots of inequality and oppression (Plan International, Transform Education, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2021). Socio-ecological models [working across all levels] are recommended as the most appropriate model to inform approaches to wellbeing education, and whole of school approaches are one way to operationalised this in school settings (Wold & Mittelmark, 2018). A whole-school approach is a gender transformative approach, incorporating comprehensive childhood sexual violence prevention education and life skills programs systematically through school policies, as well as integrating school-based interventions within broader national strategies. This can contribute to national efforts to put a stop to childhood sexual violence and promote healthy, safe environments for all children. Adoption of a whole-school approach not only involves teachers and leadership, but communities and parents, to prevent and respond to SRGBV across levels. In this way, schools are safe spaces for all students, regardless of their gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation, or level of ability. Existing and proven tools, such as minimum standards (below), and guidelines for applying whole-school approaches can support successful uptake of whole school approaches and promotion of gender transformative education to prevent SRGBV and end sexual violence in and around schools.

41 https://protsahan.co.in/our-programs/heart-model/

Lessons Learned

Context and age-appropriate research-informed programme design and delivery, and teacher training and support have been identified as crucial components of effective programmes.

Programmes to prevent sexual violence in education settings have a greater likelihood of success depending on:

- Whether the programme model and content is linked to / informed by known risk and protective factors (Letourneau et al., 2017).

- The way in which intervention is delivered, through classrooms, in groups, same sex versus mix gender (Letourneau et al., 2017).

- Appropriate matching of age of children to course content and delivery mechanisms (Letourneau et al., 2017; Fraser, 2022), e.g. the programme must provide opportunity for repeated exposure to key concepts, interactive delivery mechanisms (Lu et al., 2023) and multiple sessions to offer the information (Letourneau et al., 2017).

- Availability of institutional support and funding/resources for the programme.

- Teacher and other staff's training, including providing them an accompanying manual (Fraser, 2022) and opportunities for practice, including disability-inclusive practices.

- Supervision and support for teachers, including training the trainer model (Lu et al., 2023).

- Design of the content. For example, evidence shows that the content of school-based programs determines success, and they can potentially prevent sexual violence perpetration among adolescents when they specifically focus on gender equality, sexual knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours rather than adopting a more general violence prevention approach (Letourneau et al., 2017).

- Effective programmes may work in one setting but not in another if investment and time is not given to thoughtful adaptation.

Adopting a whole-school approach to programming is necessary for impactful results across the whole education setting.

Sexual violence prevention programmes have been found to be most effective when integrated into school curricula and supported by broader prevention activities, across all levels, and integrating all stakeholders, which are connected to education settings. This includes parenting programs, community-based interventions, policy and legislation, and comprehensive services across the prevention ecosystem (Letourneau et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2013). The most successful violence prevention programs include a whole-school approach (Fraser, 2022; Ligiero et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2013[42]; UNICEF, 2020a). Research-informed education programmes that address the prevention of SRGBV can lead to:

- improved attitudes towards gender equality;

- improved recognition of the nature of GBV and its effects;

- improved knowledge and intention to act in response to GBV directed towards self or others;

- reduced rates of bullying and sexual violence;

- improved social capabilities and respectful regard for others;

- learning how to communicate about emotions;

- improved friendship and peer support skills; and

- strong endorsement by students who find them relevant and useful.[43]

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42 Students who participated in both classroom and whole-school interventions reported less sexual harassment and violence, both as victims and perpetrators. The building-based intervention alone also reduced harassment and violence perpetration, but not victimization. However, the classroom intervention by itself was not effective in reducing violence or harassment.

43 Cahill, Helen, "Desk review of research, tools and frameworks to inform policies addressing prevention of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)," UNICEF EAPRO 2024.

Figure: Whole-School Approach to Prevent School-Related Gender-Based Violence: Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework[44]

The following are recommended minimum standards (MS) for implementing a successful SRGBV prevention programme, including sexual violence, in school and education settings:

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1. School leadership and community engagement

MS 1: School principals, teachers, student councils and parents work together to develop a whole school approach to prevent and respond to SRGBV

MS 2: Local entities such as women's organizations, the police, the judiciary, and child welfare agencies partner with schools to prevent and respond to SRGBV

5. Reporting, monitoring and accountability

MS 1: Students have safe and confidential spaces to report experiences of SRGBV

MS 2: Reporting mechanisms are linked to support systems

MS 3: School protection or review organisations are in place to improve monitoring and accountability

2. Code of conduct

MS 1: Key definitions of the different forms of SRGBV are outlined in the code

MS 2: The code provides an unambiguous, zero- tolerance stance on SRGBV

MS 3: The code emphasizes conduct promoting a positive and safe school environment

6. Incident response

MS 1: Child-centered procedures are in place for responding to the different needs of girls and boys who experience SRGBV

MS 2: Establish referral links with local child protection systems

3. Teachers and educational staff support

MS 1: Teachers have the capacity to identify, respond to, and prevent SRGBV

MS 2: School structures promote women's leadership and support teachers who experience violence

MS 3: Teachers have the skills to use positive and gender-responsive teaching and learning methods

7. Safe and secure physical environments in and around schools

MS 1: Sanitary facilities are safe and secure

MS 2: Classroom architecture and design is gender-responsive

MS 3: Students move safely to and from school

4. Child rights, participation and gender equality

MS 1: Child rights approaches are integrated into curricula

MS 2: Student leadership is centralized and girls and boys equally represented

MS 3: Healthy peer relationships are promoted and student awareness and attitudes about gender norms and SRGBV improve

8. Parent engagement

MS 1: Parents are involved with school in keeping learners safe

MS 2: Parents use positive parenting and disciplinary techniques

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44   UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). (2019). A whole school approach to prevent school-related gender-based violence: Minimum standards and monitoring framework

We can build off of our known implementation barriers.

The relationship between quality of implementation and positive outcomes is well charted in meta-analyses of program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Studies show that some of the common factors leading to higher fidelity implementation include:

- adequate access to professional learning for facilitators;
- strong organisational capacity and support from leadership;
- contextual appropriateness or adaptability of the program; and
- contribution of local program champions.[45]

Implementation efforts addressing gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence can also be actively hampered by backlash and resistance expressed by community members, fellow staff, or students.[46] Consequently teachers and school leaders benefit from policy and in-house collegial support to deal with the political labour of teaching about troubling knowledge pertaining to the gendered nature of sexual violence (Dadvand & Cahill, 2020).[47]

Areas for Further Research

Although promising, evidence supporting the overall effectiveness of school-based programmes in reducing the prevalence of sexual violence, increasing disclosures, or alleviating related anxieties is limited (Njagi, 2024, citing Lynas & Hawkins, 2017; Russell et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2015, 2018). More research on all aspects of SRGBV is needed, the different forms, who are the victims, perpetrators – including all stakeholders involved in a school from staff to learners.

School-based self-protection interventions have been critiqued for placing a lot of responsibility on victims [and/or survivors] (Lynas and Hawkins 2017) and the effectiveness of victim-focused prevention programs remains unestablished (Letourneau et al., 2017). There is a growing call for more research focusing on perpetrator behaviour (Fraser 2022; Russel et al. 2020) and the creation of programmes that

target potential perpetrators including children and adolescents (Letourneau, 2017).

As highlighted in a report of the Special Representative to the Human Rights Council on the topic of protecting children online, there are serious concerns regarding forms of harm online, including exposure to violent and sexual content, among others. One significant driver of sexual violence, under-researched for its impacts on education settings, is early exposure to online pornography, and how mainstream pornography positions sexual violence as a normative sexual script.[48]Pornography websites depict practices meeting criminal standards of sexual violence, including rape, incest and so-called 'revenge porn,[49] with potentially grave implications on aggravating sexual violence in education settings.

Moreover, while there is increasing evidence on school-based sexual violence interventions, Fraser (2022) highlights geographic gaps with a bias towards high income countries. This is like other forms of sexual violence evidence which are often dominated by HICs (Gonzalez. Gevers & Dartnall 2022; Njagi, 2024, Veenema, Thorton & Corley, 2015). Further research is necessary to identify the essential components of effective school-based sexual violence interventions, determine how they can be tailored to various LMIC contexts, and explore sustainable scaling methods (Njagi, 2024 citing Broaddus-Shea et al., 2021; Devries et al., 2022; Ellsberg et al., 2015; Ligiero et al., 2019).

To conclude, there is enough evidence on the prevalence and devastating consequences of sexual violence in education settings to know that it must end. There is also enough promise in the initiatives that exist today to give us hope that we can prevent and respond to it. Both areas need much more investment, political attention and committed, sustained work – not as standalone but as critical elements of education, gender equality and child rights ambitions, plans and resources.

45   Durlak, J. A., & DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: a review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. Am J Community Psychol, 41(3-4), 327-350. doi:10.1007/s10464-008-9165-0

46   Flood, M., Dragiewicz, M., & Pease, B. (2021). Resistance and backlash to gender equality. The Australian journal of social issues, 52, 593-408. doi:10.1002/ajs4.137

47   Dadvand, B., & Cahill, H. (2020). Structures for Care and Silenced Topics: Accomplishing Gender-Based Violence Prevention Education in a Primary School. Pedagogy, Culture and Society. doi:10.1080/14681366.2020.1732449

48   Fiona Vera-Gray, Clare McGlynn, Ibad Kureshi and Kate Butterby (2021), Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography, p.1243

49   Ibid. p.1257

Acknowledgements

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