Addressing the intersections of violence against women and children: Schools as catalysts for change

Patrick Burton[i]

Violence against women and children is pervasive in South Africa, and the ramifications extend across generations. Understanding the intricate connections between these forms of violence and identifying effective intervention strategies is therefore crucial in fostering a safer and more equitable society and ensuring that the rights of both women and children are realised.

Violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) are not isolated phenomena but are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing.[1] While in the past VAC and VAW have been treated as two distinct phenomenon, there is increasing recognition of the intersections between them, and calls to adopt a more integrated approach to preventing and responding to the experiences of both women and children.[2, 3]

Violence against children in schools takes many different forms[4, 5] including physical violence (such as physical fights, assaults by peers or teachers and corporal punishment), psychological violence (such as verbal abuse, humiliation, threats or exclusion), sexual violence (including sexual harassment, dating violence, assault exploitation or grooming by teachers), and bullying (which may include both physical and psychological components). Violence or abuse also takes place online through technology-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse, cyberbullying, or online exclusion. Similarly, discrimination based on gender, sexual identity, race, class or ethnicity may manifest as physical, emotional or sexual violence. School-related gender-based violence has also emerged as an important and useful framing of violence against women and children within the school environment, and is linked to gender norms, gender identities and power imbalances that are usually rooted in traditional notions of male control and dominance over women's bodies and lives.

This chapter explores how violence against women and children intersect within the school environment, and how these experiences can shape adolescents' trajectories into adulthood. It provides an overview of what is known about the intersection of VAC and VAW within South African schools, and it concludes by outlining evidence-based strategies to prevent and respond to violence in schools, including examples of promising programmes and interventions from South Africa.

How violence in school shapes learners' futures

Exposure to violence, whether as a victim or a witness, has profound and lasting effects on individuals, shaping their attitudes, behaviours and future relationships.[6] Children who witness domestic violence, for instance, are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems, have difficulty forming healthy attachments, and are at a higher risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence in their own relationships later in life.[7-9] Similarly, children who witness or experience violence within the school environment are more at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in adulthood.

This intergenerational transmission of violence can be understood through a pathways to violence framework, which examines the various risk and protective factors that influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in, or being subjected to, violence.[8] For example, social and cultural norms that are accepting of violence in all forms, including gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and corporal punishment, can increase later risk of violence.[10] Structural factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, lack of access to education and opportunities, exposure to community violence, and weak social support systems can also increase the risk of violence perpetration and victimisation.[11, 12]

Schools are key sites where different forms of violence overlap and reinforce each other. Learners may be exposed to or experience bullying (including cyber-bullying), sexual violence, physical violence, hate, discrimination and harsh physical discipline including corporal punishment.

Experiences within schools, where children spend most of their waking hours, can shape children's perceptions of

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relationships, self-worth and social capital. They play a pivotal role in the lives of children, serving as both a place of learning and a microcosm of society.[13] Schools may reinforce the violence and abuse they experience in their homes or communities, or they can serve as interrupters of violence and spaces that feel safe for children.

What are the immediate and long-term impacts of school violence?

Exposure to violence in any environment at a young age increases the risk of later victimisation, as well as perpetration of violence and other antisocial behaviour. Schools, if considered holistically, are environments where children not only acquire scholastic knowledge, but also where they learn how to be, do and live together. Violence in schools impacts negatively on all these processes, creating instead, a place where children learn fear and distrust, where they develop distorted perceptions of identity, and self-worth, and where they acquire negative social capital if the threats to their safety are not effectively managed.

The intersection of VAC and VAW in schools is particularly critical because of its impact on gender norms. Female learners, who are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and gender-based violence both at home and in school, often internalise messages of gender roles and norms that promote subordination and diminished self-worth.[14] This internalisation can have long-term implications, including poorer academic performance, higher school dropout rates, and an increased risk of intimate partner violence (IPV), and VAW in particular, in adulthood.

Schools are often the place where adolescents start to explore their own sexuality, sexual identity and romantic relationships. As adolescents start to explore these aspects of their life, they simultaneously become more vulnerable to dating violence as well as violence and discrimination if their identities or relationships are perceived as not heteronormative.

Sexual violence against girls in schools can also result in pregnancy, further increasing the likelihood that girl learners will drop out of school, exacerbating other vulnerabilities and lifelong impact of violence. School-related gender-based violence (GBV) and teen pregnancy are closely linked through a series of mutually reinforcing risk pathways. These pathways are bidirectional: teen pregnancy can increase the risk of GBV, while GBV can increase the risk of teen pregnancy.[15-17] Teen pregnancy often results from sexual coercion in and around schools by peers, teachers and other adults within the school environment.[15] Structural factors such as poverty, inequality and economic vulnerability may also push adolescents into transactional sex with older men, including teachers, in exchange for uniforms, clothes or food. This victimisation all occurs within a broader environment of gender norms which reinforce male dominance, and limit girls' agency.

Teen pregnancies, like all forms of violence children experience, often result in children dropping out of the formal education system. Studies have shown that children who drop out of school are less likely to attain the level of education that can serve as a protective factor against VAW. In contrast, schools that promote gender-equitable norms can help challenge these harmful patterns. For example, school-based interventions that model and promote gender equity can mitigate the risk factors associated with both VAW and VAC.[18, 19]

School safety is therefore a fundamental precondition for learning. Schools are both a key location where children who have been abused may be identified and where long-term harm resulting from abuse within the home or school itself may be identified and addressed.[20] Interventions that target shared risk factors such as harmful gender norms and economic stress can effectively address both VAW and VAC simultaneously.[21] Schools can create a safe and supportive environment for children and young people by addressing the structural drivers of violence, and by equipping children with the tools to establish healthier relationships and positive social norms.

What do we know about violence against children in schools in South Africa?

Prevalence data on violence against children within the schools in South Africa is limited but illustrates similar trends. In the 2016 UBS Optimus Foundation Study, one in three children reported experiencing physical violence from peers at school, with similar rates for bullying and verbal abuse.[22] This data is broadly consistent with the two national school violence studies (NSVS) conducted in 2008 and 2012 by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

Data from the Optimus Foundation study also highlighted the impact of sexual violence, with both boys and girls reporting nearly five times as much substance misuse, nearly four times as much high-risk sexual behaviour, and around three times as many mental health problems, if they also reported sexual abuse.[20] This data highlights how many of South Africa's children are exposed to multiple risk factors across different settings, that then increase their risk for further violence and poly-victimisation.

A lesser explored form of violence in schools is that perpetrated against educators. While the NSVS provided limited data on violence perpetrated by learners against teachers, some evidence did emerge of verbal, sexual and physical abuse – in particular perpetrated by male learners

Box 7: Technology-facilitated violence against women and children

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Digital technologies have expanded the ways in which women and children are exposed to violence, intensifying existing harms and increasing their reach and impact. Technology-facilitated violence (TFV) often mirrors the violence that women and children experience in real life, and it includes exposure to harmful online content, sexual exploitation and abuse,[ii] cyberbullying and harassment, hate speech, doxing[iii] and privacy violations.

Digital technology is evolving at an exponential pace, often exposing children to new forms of risk before adults are aware of them, or aware of how to mitigate them.[51] This demands a more systemic approach to managing risks and preventing harms, with a focus on the institutional drivers of violence, within both the physical or digital environment. This includes the schools where children spend a significant part of their waking hours.

TFV against women and children share common drivers,[52] and are often grounded within a culture of coercion, control and manipulation and influenced by patriarchal norms and values.[53] For example, men may use smart-home devices to control and abuse their intimate partners and children living in the same household.[54, 55] Digital technologies can also increase the points of contact for other forms of interpersonal violence through – facetiming, video-calling, sexting or distributing or demanding sexual images or videos, often with concurrent threats should the victim fail to comply – including threats to disseminate content to the child's school, family or wider community. Teachers (and in particular female teachers) may also be subject to TFV perpetrated by learners or other teachers.

TFV against children can have a negative impact on short and long-term health, often resulting in poor mental and physical health outcomes, and a negative impact on school performance, and increased risk of suicide and self-harm.[56-58] In addition, children often fail seek help for technology-facilitated abuse due to feelings of shame or embarrassment or fear of being blamed, which further compounds the trauma.

Such behaviours impact directly on children and young people's experiences at school, yet schools also have the potential to play a critical role in creating a safe environment, and in identifying and supporting children who have been exposed to TFV.

- **Prevention strategies** include addressing harmful gender norms and practices, including structural and cultural norms that condone or promote gender inequality,[iv] wider violence prevention education programmes (delivered through and outside schools)[59] and whole-school prevention programmes.[60, 61] Media and digital literacy programmes are also essential in helping children identify and manage risks they encounter online.[62, v] Schools can also pay an important role in helping parents develop skills so that they can help their children to be safe online.
- **Early detection and intervention** have been shown to disrupt cycles of harm and be effective in minimising trauma. Here, schools have a critical role to play in identifying signs of trauma and abuse and intervening to provide and refer for support and interventions.[vi] This includes knowing how to respond when learners or staff are being harassed, bullied or experiencing other forms of technology-facilitated violence, including how to limit to the degree possible further distribution of digital material and how to intervene with learners perpetrating abuse and violence.
- Schools should **support victims and hold perpetrators to account**. This can be done through ensuring that children and all victims have access to trauma-informed interventions that can improve recovery outcomes and reduce their risk of re-victimisation. These need to be age-appropriate and tailored to meet children's developmental

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ii There have been many different terms used to describe violence and abuse that children experience online. The recent shift away from terms such as online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) to technology-facilitated CSEA better represents the ways in which CSEA often moves from the digital to the physical environment and vice-versa.

iii Doxing is the act of publicly revealing the personally identifiable information of an individual without their consent online or through a digital platform, including information such as their name, address, school, telephone number or other private data. This is usually done with the intent to intimidate or harm the individual.

iv These can extend to structural barriers to girls or women accessing digital technology itself, and related to this, inequalities in technical digital and media literacy, which increase risks for women and girls, while also creating further structural barriers to help-seeking and accessing services.

v Digital literacy refers to the skills required to successfully and safely navigate the digital environment (eg knowing how to block accounts or unwanted messaging, set safety and privacy settings and so on). Media literacy refers to the ability to critically understand and engage with media effectively and responsibly. This encompasses skills necessary for active participation in a media-saturated society.

vi Tools such as safety-by-design and privacy-by-design are critical to this, but are offered by platform, apps and service providers. Schools can ensure that whatever software or technology they introduce have been developed on the basis of safety and privacy-by-design principles.

needs. It is also essential that teachers, service providers and school management take the experiences of children seriously and do not under-estimate the trauma and harm that can result from children's experiences online.

- These steps should all be **embedded into broader policy and regulations**. For example, where digital technology or Edtech is utilised by schools, national government should ensure that policies and procedures are developed to evaluate the safety of the technology and provide ongoing guidance to schools and educators on its use, as well as ensuring accountability mechanisms to manage its use within school.[63] All school safety policies, regulations and strategies should explicitly embed child online protection and technology-facilitated safety rather than approaching them as 'add-ons'.[vii]

As a final note, there has been increasing calls for the banning of cell phones altogether within schools. While this is seen as an effective option for keeping children safe from TFV in schools, there is little evidence to support this approach,[64] and substantial arguments that this approach can in fact undermine the development of the technical and digital skills that children require to both stay safe and build resilience.[65, 66] Children often depend on digital technology to access information on sexual and reproductive health, and to seek help when they encounter abuse or exploitation,[15] and this approach serves as a barrier to all of these important sources of information and supports, while also jeopardising the concurrent rights, such as their rights to education, health and as embodied in the CRC's General Comment 25, on Children's Rights in relation to the Digital Environment.[67]

vii This includes ensures the availability (and awareness of) reporting structures for learners and teachers, and associated response and feedback measures, and the recording and reporting of disaggregated incident data, as well as prevention measures.

against female teachers. Over half of the school principals interviewed in the survey had received reports of verbal abuse, while 12% received reports of physical abuse, and 3% reported sexual violence against teachers by learners.[23] More recent studies focusing on specific provinces provide greater detail: in a 2023 study in Limpopo province, teachers describe learner to teacher violence and harassment, including physical, verbal and sexual (including sexualised touching), which resulted in clear impacts on the quality of teaching and teachers well-being.[24] A 2024 study in Shoshanguve on violence perpetrated against early-career teachers revealed ongoing experiences of physical, verbal and sexual violence perpetrated by both school management and learners, the majority of which went unreported.[25] These experiences are all enabled by norms and values within the school environment that tolerate violence, and in particular sexual violence against women as well as girl learners.

What prevention initiatives exist in South Africa?

Schools are a powerful platform for intervention as the place where children spend most of their waking hours – and as such they have the potential to either entrench or disrupt the intergenerational cycle of violence.

Several measures and interventions have been implemented to try and address violence in South African schools. For example, at a national level the National School Safety Framework, Safety in Education Partnership Protocol between the Department of Basic Education and the South African Police Service, the Regulations for Safety Measures at Public Schools, the National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Alcohol and Drug Use among Learners in Schools, the National Drug Master Plan and the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy are all intended to create a school environment that is safe and free from violence. Importantly, the National School Safety Framework provides the basis for a whole-school approach (discussed later in this chapter), while many of the other initiatives aim to contribute to specific modalities that contribute to individual aspects that should be integrated within a whole-school approach. The National Department of Basic Education (DBE) has also initiated the *STOP, WALK, TALK* bullying prevention programme, and the Western Cape Department of Education has introduced a *Safer Schools* programme, and an after-school *Game-Changer* programme.

While many of the above strategies and initiatives have been in place for some years, the Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education is a new initiative designed to support educators in creating gender-inclusive learning environments for young children. Piloted by the DBE in KwaZulu-Natal, it provides teachers with practical tools and strategies to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equity in early childhood development.[26] This approach recognises the importance of starting early to promote gender equitable norms at a time when children's understanding of gender is first starting to take root. Early childhood caregiving environments, both at home and within the early years at school, influence lifelong risks of both victimisation and perpetration

of violence, with implications for both preventing violence against women and violence against children.[27] Initiatives such as the Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education should ideally be linked to concurrent interventions that promote non-violent forms of discipline in homes and early learning programmes to ensure a comprehensive foundation for learners.

Schools as an intervention point

Schools have a pivotal role to play in disrupting the cycle of intergenerational violence by providing safe environments, comprehensive education and targeted interventions. By addressing the root causes of violence and promoting healthy relationships, schools can empower students to break free from patterns of abuse and build a more positive future for themselves and their communities.

Schools' capacity to foster mental health and resilience in children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can be transformative.[20, 23] Schools also offer access to children and adolescents for significant durations during critical developmental stages and possess resources, infrastructure and values conducive to fostering positive health, mental well-being and resilience in young people. They can provide a safe and structured environment for learners who may be experiencing trauma or adversity outside of school.

One avenue for interrupting intergenerational violence lies in providing education on healthy relationships and conflict resolution. Curricula can be developed to teach students about consent, communication and respect, equipping them with the skills to navigate relationships in a healthy and non-violent manner. Furthermore, schools can implement conflict resolution programmes that teach students how to resolve disputes peacefully and constructively.

Moreover, schools can foster a culture of empathy and respect through social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes. SEL is the process of acquiring the skills to recognise and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships and handle challenging situations effectively. By teaching students how to understand and manage their emotions, build empathy and resolve conflicts peacefully, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that reduces the likelihood of violence.

These associations are strongly rooted in theories of the normalisation of violence and social and emotional learning. For example, teachers who have experienced or been exposed to violence themselves may come to view aggressive behaviour as an acceptable way to manage conflict and misbehaviour in the classroom as well as in their own homes.[28, 29] This normalisation can lead them to replicate similar behaviours when disciplining students. Similarly, and drawing on social learning theory, some studies suggest that individuals often adopt behaviours they have experienced or witnessed. Teachers who have been victims of interpersonal violence may lack exposure to or training in non-violent conflict resolution strategies, making them more prone to use corporal punishment within the school environment.

How can school-based strategies address the intersections of VAC and VAW?

A growing body of evidence on what works in preventing school violence, with particular import for addressing the intersection between violence against women and violence against children, has emerged over the past two decades. The strongest evidence appears to support a number of different components, that may be offered either as stand-alone components or as part of multi-modal approaches. These include modelling and promoting gender-equitable norms, social and emotional learning, teacher training, safe disclosure, providing support for pregnant learners and learner mothers, and addressing structural inequalities.

Disrupting the intergenerational transmission of violence

One of the most compelling arguments for school-based interventions is their potential to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of violence. Research has consistently shown that early exposure to violence increases the risk of later victimisation and perpetration. Children who experience abuse are more likely to drop out of school, experience mental health issues, and eventually enter into abusive relationships as adults. This cycle is perpetuated when the same social and cultural norms that condone violence are passed from one generation to the next.

Interventions that include a gender transformative focus on early identification, SEL, and teacher training provide a means to break this cycle. By intervening at critical points – such as when children first exhibit signs of trauma or when teachers are in need of support – schools can alter the trajectories that lead from childhood exposure to adult victimisation. For instance, programmes that promote healthy relationship education and challenge traditional gender norms have been shown to reduce the risk of IPV and other forms of gender-based violence. A recent review shows that adolescents who participate in school-based relationship education programmes are more likely to recognise and resist abusive behaviours in both their peer groups and family settings.[30]

Modelling and promoting gender-equitable norms

Schools are pivotal in shaping attitudes toward gender roles and relationships. When violence against women is normalised both at home and in school, it reinforces the acceptance of abusive behaviours. Promoting gender-equitable norms from an early age is critical for preventing IPV and other forms of violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence.[19] School-based curricula that incorporate lessons on healthy relationships, gender equality and conflict resolution can help counteract harmful stereotypes and encourage more respectful interactions. For example, the PREPARE programme implemented by the South African Medical Research Council in South Africa, and the Connect With Respect (CWR) intervention in Tanzania, Zambia and Eswatini have yielded positive outcomes in the reduction of violence and associated behaviours by promoting gender-equitable norms and improving learners' knowledge and skills.[31] It is also crucial to include teachers in these programmes to ensure that changes in behaviours and attitudes among learners are reinforced by the same messaging and behaviour among teachers.

Social-emotional learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions have emerged as one of the most promising strategies for mitigating the long-term impacts of early exposure to violence within the home and schools. SEL programmes teach children skills such as emotional regulation, empathy and conflict resolution. There is strong evidence that SEL programmes reduce aggressive behaviour, improve social competencies and lead to better academic outcomes.[31, 32]

Case 7: The Right to Play Intervention, Pakistan

Right To Play has worked with children and young people in Pakistan to shift the social norms that perpetuate and condone violence against women and girls.[33] Through its schools-based Sport and Play programme, teachers are provided with curricula and trained to challenge the acceptability of violence against women and girls. The programme encourages boys and young men to adopt positive forms of masculinity and supports girls and women to develop their abilities to express themselves and act as leaders. A study evaluating Right To Play's intervention in Pakistan found that this structured play-based life-skills intervention helped reduce school-based peer violence and depression among school children.[34]

Case 8: Skhokho Supporting Success, South Africa

In South Africa, the Skhokho intervention is a comprehensive gender-transformative intervention aimed at reducing sexual violence. It includes a focus on promoting gender equity and reducing violence through, among others, a combination of SEL initiatives and teacher training. Importantly, it also premised on the importance of integrating school and family support and alignment and includes a discrete parenting component. Early evaluations indicate that Skhokho has led to measurable reductions in physical aggression and gender-based violence in school settings as well as in the family. Importantly, the intervention addresses the role of teacher well-being in perpetuating violence, training educators in non-violent disciplinary practices and trauma-informed care. This dual focus – on both students and staff – exemplifies how along with shifts within the home environment, schools can disrupt intergenerational patterns of violence by altering the environment in which children learn and socialise.

In environments where children have been exposed to violence, SEL can be transformative. By helping children develop healthier coping mechanisms and resilience, SEL programmes directly counter the normalisation of violence and the replication of violent norms, attitudes and behaviours into adulthood.[31] There are several examples of evidence-based programmes offered through and to schools that have achieved positive outcomes in reducing violence, such as the Right to Play intervention in Pakistan (see Case 7).

Teacher training and safe disclosure

Creating an environment where children feel and are safe to disclose violence is equally important. Like many victims of gender-based violence and violence against women, children often fear disclosing and reporting of violence, and in particular sexual violence, as they fear blame, retribution or not being taken seriously.[35, 36] Yet reporting and help-seeking is an important step in not only addressing the abuse itself, but also dealing with the trauma that results from the victimisation. When schools foster an atmosphere of trust and support, children are more likely to report abuse. Whole school approaches that focus on school climate consistently demonstrate increased students' confidence in reporting abuse while also facilitating timely community interventions.[37] Such proactive measures can limit the immediate harm and prevent long-term negative outcomes.

Teachers and school counsellors are often in the best position to detect early warning signs of abuse. Signs such as sudden changes in academic performance, social withdrawal and emotional distress can be indicators of violence within the home, school or community. School staff, including teachers, who are able to identify these early signs significantly improve the referral and intervention process.[38] Training programmes that help teachers recognise early indicators of trauma can help prevent the escalation of violence.[39]

Moreover, teachers who receive training in trauma-informed practices are less likely to replicate the violent behaviours they may have witnessed or experienced. This shift not only benefits the learners but also contributes to a more positive, safe and supportive school environment. When teachers learn how to manage classroom conflicts without resorting to physical punishment, they set a critical example for children, reinforcing the idea that non-violence is both possible and preferable. Teacher training, when combined with shifting gender norms and values and SEL programming can be particularly effective in medium to longer term outcomes (see Case 8: the Skhokho intervention).

Modelling non-violence in the classroom, through the use of positive discipline, rather than corporal punishment, is also essential. Corporal punishment violates children's rights to dignity and protection from violence, undermines trust in teachers, and causes lasting physical, psychological and educational harm, including increased aggression, anxiety and school avoidance.[40, 41] It normalises violence as a problem-solving tool and is linked to poorer academic performance and damaged teacher–student relationships. Effective alternatives that foster a positive school climate include positive discipline, restorative practices, SEL programmes, and clear, consistent non-violent behaviour management, all of which maintain order while promoting respect, empathy and learner engagement.[42]

New sanctions for corporal punishment issued by the South African Council of Educators (see page 16) recognise the need for teacher training and rehabilitation with an emphasis on anger management and non-violent discipline. This is an important step forward in protecting individual learners and creating a safer, more supportive school environment.

Providing support for pregnant learners and learner mothers

Pregnant and mother adolescents are particularly vulnerable to experiencing bullying, social exclusion and stigma in school settings.[43, 44] In addition, they face heightened social and economic vulnerabilities which can increase their risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, both during pregnancy and motherhood.[45] These experiences can, in turn, negatively impact their education and health and well-being outcomes, including contributing to underperformance at school, potential school dropout and poor mental health.[44, 46] It is thus crucial in preventing and responding to VAC and VAW to include a specific focus on the needs of pregnant and mother adolescents in schools.

Case 9: Khanyisa Ngemfundo toolkit to help teachers support pregnant learners and learner mothers

Jane Kelly[i]

Teachers are well-positioned to create a supportive environment and respond to the support needs of pregnant and mother adolescents but may feel ill-equipped to do so. In recognition of this, the Khanyisa Ngemfundo research team, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education, created an evidence-informed training toolkit and accompanying videos for teachers.[47] Drawing on research data from educators, school governing board members, civil society organisations, adolescent mothers and their peers, the toolkit aims to:

- help teachers understand the unique challenges pregnant and mother adolescents face in and outside school, including risk of social exclusion and violence;
- empower teachers with interpersonal skills to improve their engagements with these adolescents, such as active listening and providing non-judgmental support; and
- support them to develop solutions and procedures that are appropriate to their own context.

Recognising that teachers cannot provide support alone, the toolkit includes suggested activities for how schools can partner with health and social services, such as mapping available services in their community.

The toolkit is intended as a practical resource to strengthen the capacity of teachers and school communities to better support pregnant and mother adolescents. By fostering empathy, improving communication, and encouraging collaboration with other sectors, it aims to contribute to more inclusive and responsive school environments.

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Case 10: Violence Prevention for Peaceful and Inclusive Communities – Early prevention for long-term impact

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Intervening early in the life course can reduce children's exposure to violence and neglect, while fostering protective factors like secure attachments and positive parenting. The Violence Prevention for Peaceful and Inclusive Communities (VPPIC) programme therefore aims to support the development of early violence prevention programmes to break the intergenerational cycle of violence and build more resilient individuals and communities.

The VPPIC programme aims to create a positive caregiving environment for children from birth to 12 years old – by equipping their caregivers, educators and community workers with knowledge and skills, and by creating safe supportive environments in early childhood development centres, schools and extracurricular programmes. The programme tackles violence against children and violence against women simultaneously allowing for more effective prevention by targeting shared root causes, including power imbalances and harmful gender norms. This integrated approach contributes to safer, healthier families and communities.

The VPPIC has been working in partnership with Department of Basic Education and other stakeholders from civil society, local government and communities to develop early prevention programmes that are evidence-based and attuned to local needs.

It does so by building the capacity of local stakeholders so that they are better able to plan, implement and monitor early prevention services, and by facilitating collaboration across different sectors to strengthen synergies and coordination.

Lessons learned from the initial pilot in three hotspots for gender-based violence in Tembisa, KwaMashu and Rustenberg has helped build a strong foundation from which to guide local efforts to prevent violence and create safer and more inclusive communities.

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The DBE's Policy on Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools (2021) explicitly recognises the needs of pregnant and mother adolescents. It commits to (i) creating a supportive environment that enables them to continue and complete their education, and (ii) ensuring that schools provide a non-judgmental environment to support their physical and psychological health and dignity.[48] This is important because evidence shows that school retention and completion is protective for both adolescent mothers and their children.[49, 50]

Addressing structural inequalities

Structural factors such as poverty, discrimination and community violence play a significant role in perpetuating cycles of abuse. The pathways to violence framework acknowledge that these factors interact with individual experiences to create cumulative risk. As noted earlier in this chapter, schools are microcosms of the community and the social and physical environment in which they are located. Schools that operate in disadvantaged areas often face additional challenges, including overcrowding, limited resources and higher exposure to community violence. Policies and programmes that address these structural inequalities – through resource allocation, supportive policies, and community development initiatives – can create safer and more conducive learning environments.

Whole school approaches

While there is a growing body of evidence on the efficacy of the above strategies, there is both a degree of inter-connectedness between many of these approaches, and a multiplier effect which are often best embedded within a whole-school approach.

Intersecting all of the above strategies, and foundational to whole school approaches, is the critical opportunity that the school environment offers to identify children at risk, establish equitable, pro-social and healthy norms and values, and intervene and support children at an early age. Early identification of abuse and violence, and of children-at risk of violence or abuse, provides the opportunity to disrupt trajectories and pathways, preventing trauma and harm from escalating as well as interrupting root causes before they become entrenched. This requires a school climate that supports and enables early intervention, help-seeking and that is intolerant of violence and violent norms, and that can support trauma-informed intervention. This requires:

- school management that share a common vision and culture and that are equipped with the tools and competencies to create a wider school environment that reflects this culture
- psychosocial support services (including school-based counsellors and social workers) who share this common

Case 11: Good School Toolkit

The Good School Toolkit adopts a whole-school approach that aims to transform "the entire school eco-system by engaging various stakeholders, teaching learners how to deal with conflict in non-violent ways and how to intervene when they see violence, while also addressing the power imbalances between learners and between teachers and learners".[31]

The approach recognises that creating and maintaining a safe school in which children can thrive requires more than just physical safety. It also requires the commitment and support of all those who are part of the learning experience – including teachers, learners, school management, parents and the wider community. Furthermore, it requires a commitment to ensuring that children not only are safe, but feel safe, empowered and listened to. The Good Schools Toolkit provides the best example of a whole-school approach that focuses on creating a positive school climate for learners.

Figure 7: Entry points through which the Good School Toolkit influences the operational culture of schools

Source: Naker D. *Operational Culture at Schools: An overarching entry point for preventing violence against children at school. Background paper. In: Ending Violence in Childhood Global Report 2017. Know Violence in Childhood.* New Delhi, India. 2017.

vision and are appropriately equipped to support its realisation, and

- parents and caregivers who support and strive for these same outcomes and are equipped with parenting skills that are aligned with and seek to entrench the common values, norms and expectations.

Whole-school approaches thus seek to address the entire eco-system of the school by engaging a wide range of stakeholders with a vested interest and mandate in creating safe, inclusive schools in which children can learn and thrive.[31] These approaches draw on a range of stakeholders – government, community, teachers, parents, children and school

Case 12: South African children and pornography

Marita Rademeyer[i]

South African children are accessing pornographic materials online at an unprecedented rate, with 53% of 9 – 17-year-olds having seen sexual images online.[68] Exposure is happening at very early ages with an estimated 10% of pornography users in the UK aged ten or younger.[69]

Exposure to sexual content online carries the potential for harm, though effects differ by age, developmental stage and context. For younger children (for example ages 8 – 11), initial exposure often leads to confusion, shock, fear or disgust; in a recent study from Ghana, children exposed to pornography reported feeling sad, confused and surprised.[70] Recent studies suggest that while pornography is not universally addictive, high frequency or problematic pornography use is associated with significant risks – especially for children and adolescents – including increased impulsiveness, poor decision-making and memory problems.[71]

A further concern, particularly in environments where open conversations about sex and sexuality is taboo, is that pornography may be children's primary source of sex education. A content analysis of pornographic videos found that 88% of scenes portrayed physical and/or sexual violence. Such content normalises violence especially during sex.

The harmful effects of pornography can be mitigated by sex education, providing opportunities for open age-appropriate conversations with children about what they encounter online, and by raising awareness among caregivers and teachers. Installing and maintaining appropriate software on electronic devices can mitigate risks for younger children, but has been shown to be less effective for older children, as they learn how to get around parental controls. Timely interventions can mitigate the adverse effects of early exposure.

Strategies for caregivers

1. Build a strong and healthy relationship with your child so he or she can tell you anything.
2. Have open and frequent conversations with your child about bodies, sex and sexuality.
3. if your child is young, secure your child's online environment through blocking, filtering and accountability software, but regularly check your child's browsing history and discuss. As your child enters adolescence, allow them more freedom and trust but ensure you remain available to discuss what they encounter online.
4. Spend time helping your child use the online environment safely.
5. Avoid scaring, threatening and warning. Fear-based approaches are not effective in preventing exposure.
6. Develop a family media plan that applies to everyone to balance screentime with family time, sport, exercise, homework and sleep.

Strategies for schools

1. Establish effective cyber and child protection policies.
2. Use firewalls and protective software on school devices to prevent unauthorised access to information, and test if children can get around them.
3. Learning about healthy sexual behaviours should be a continuous two-way conversation that starts in primary school.
4. Teach digital literacy. Help children learn what an 'online reputation' is and how to keep it positive. Help them take charge of the language, emojis and pictures they send, and what personal information they share online.
5. Work with parents to ensure that they understand the impact of online risks, including pornography, on their children and how to keep them safe.
6. Educators need to be trained to deal with their own discomfort and develop the skills to identify signs and indicators and to provide trauma informed responses when children have been exposed.

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administrative staff – to foster a school climate in which children feel safe and can learn and thrive. One of the best examples, with the strongest evidence, is the Good School Toolkit, designed and implemented by Raising Voices in Uganda. This integrates many of the components discussed above.

Conclusion: Schools as catalysts for change

In conclusion, the intersection between VAC and VAW in schools is symptomatic of the broader, intergenerational cycle of violence that is evident in South Africa (and many other societies). Viewing this violence within the broader context and pathways that children follow, from home to school and into the broader society, highlights how early exposure to abuse — whether at home or in school — sets children on trajectories that increase their vulnerability to both victimisation and perpetration later in life. Violence in schools not only disrupts the learning process but also shapes harmful perceptions of self, identity and social interaction, perpetuating cycles of violence and abuse that extend well into adulthood.

By adopting a comprehensive, integrated strategy that prioritises behaviour change through SEL and challenging inequitable gender norms, within the broader school environment that is supportive, enabling and peaceful, schools can effectively address the complex interplay between VAC and VAW. Through integrated strategies that include SEL, trauma-informed teacher training, early identification of abuse, and robust family and community support, schools can actively interrupt the pathways that lead to the normalisation and transmission of violence. By addressing both the immediate manifestations of violence and the broader structural and cultural factors that underlie it, school-based interventions can reduce the prevalence of VAC and VAW and promote healthier, more equitable relationships. There is a robust evidence base that comprehensive, integrated approaches are effective in reducing violence and supporting long-term behavioural change.

Ultimately, the role of schools extends beyond the teaching of academic curricula: it is here that children learn to navigate complex social dynamics, develop emotional resilience and build the foundations for future relationships. By harnessing this potential and implementing evidence-based, holistic strategies, schools can play a pivotal role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of violence, ensuring that children – and, by extension, women – grow up in safer, more supportive environments.

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