

Beyond awareness: Engaging communities in preventing violence against women and children

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Violence against women and children is deeply entrenched, and it erodes the safety and dignity of individuals, families and entire communities. In South Africa, the persistent shadow of systemic violence and segregation, coupled with wide economic disparities, continues to shape everyday life. These challenges, reinforced by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms interwoven with cultural and religious beliefs, create fertile ground for the perpetuation of violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC).¹

Historically, efforts to prevent VAC & VAW at community and societal levels have often taken the form of sporadic, recurring mass awareness campaigns led by government departments or civil society organisations through donor-funded projects.²⁻⁴ These include heightened media coverage and campaigns during the annual 16 Days of Activism (November 25 to December 10), the focus on women's rights during Women's Month in August, and the commemoration of International Women's Day on March 8. However, government has since rebranded the 16 Days of Activism as the "365 Days of No Violence" campaign to promote year-round awareness and action. Despite this rebranding, sustained campaigns running throughout the year remain limited, and evidence suggests that awareness-raising alone has little effect in reducing VAC and VAW. Instead, efforts to shift deep-seated community norms require engaging communities in norm and behavioural change.²⁻⁴

Community engagement adopts a more sustained and collaborative approach by creating spaces where community members, practitioners and researchers work together to jointly address issues that affect community well-being and drive changes in norms and behaviour. Communities include people who live in the same area or those who share the same characteristics, beliefs or experiences, and individuals are often members of more than one community.

Rather than imposing top-down solutions, and viewing communities as passive recipients of aid, collaborative approaches regard communities as valued partners who play an

active role in shaping interventions to prevent VAC and VAW.⁵

⁶ These approaches are then used to build sustained ownership and meaningful participation.^{6, 7} This paradigm shift entails meaningful community engagement and authentic participation that leverages local resources and prioritises the invaluable lived experiences and intimate knowledge of community members to inform interventions.⁷ It calls for external actors – including researchers, practitioners and policymakers – to work with communities in ways in which decision-making power is shared and community voices drive the process. Meaningful community engagement in preventing VAC and VAW is essential for promoting social connectedness, shared responsibility, and empowering members to challenge harmful social norms and support women survivors and vulnerable children. Furthermore, engaged communities have enhanced local capacity for collective action, enabling them to mobilise and advocate to hold legal and protection systems accountable for addressing the underlying drivers of violence and improving responses.⁸

This chapter outlines a range of approaches that practitioners, policymakers and researchers can draw on to meaningfully engage communities in preventing VAC and VAW. It considers: What specific approaches can practitioners, policymakers and researchers use to meaningfully and effectively engage diverse community actors in participatory, survivor- and child-centred prevention efforts? What illustrative examples exist from the South African context, and what are the current knowledge gaps regarding the benefits and impacts of these approaches?

How can communities engage with legislation and policy?

Efforts to prevent VAC and VAW at the community level require key actors, such as legislators, policymakers and the media to remain closely connected to grassroots realities. These actors play a crucial role in shaping legal, policy and public discourse and influencing social norms and behaviour at scale. However, their efforts will be most effective when they are informed by

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evidence – and are responsive to the lived experiences and inputs of communities on the ground.^{3, 4} Ensuring meaningful channels through which community members can engage with and influence these high-level decision-making processes helps strengthen the relevance and impact of prevention efforts. This two-way interaction supports the development of enabling frameworks, responsive policies and positive media narratives that authentically reflect the voices of those affected by VAC and VAW, thereby amplifying community-level initiatives and driving sustainable social change. Moreover, applying a gender and child-centric lens at all levels of this multi-layered engagement is essential. It guarantees that women's and children's perspectives and needs remain central in decision-

making processes, helping to redress power imbalances and ensure inclusive policies and programmes that empower women and children rather than marginalise them.

Engaging communities about legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act and Sexual Offences Act is essential to empower them with knowledge about their rights and the laws' implications. This is best achieved through accessible, culturally relevant programmes such as public education events and community dialogues that clarify legal concepts like protection orders and mandatory reporting, ensuring community members understand both the protections and potential risks, such as increased family tensions.⁹ Creating safe spaces for community members to discuss their experiences and concerns supports

Figure 8: Risk and protective factors for VAC and VAW at the community level



Source: Mathews S, Jamieson L, Lake L, Smith C. *Violence can be prevented*. [Poster]. Cape Town: Children's Institute. University of Cape Town. 2014.

ongoing education and helps them navigate laws, advocate for themselves, respond to VAC and VAW, and support survivors. Continuous capacity-building initiatives further strengthen communities' ability to engage with legal systems effectively and promote informed responses to VAC and VAW. Ongoing dialogue between legislative, policy and media stakeholders and community members ensures accountability, while collaboration with local leaders, service providers and survivor advocates enhances this engagement by connecting communities to support services and referral systems.¹⁰

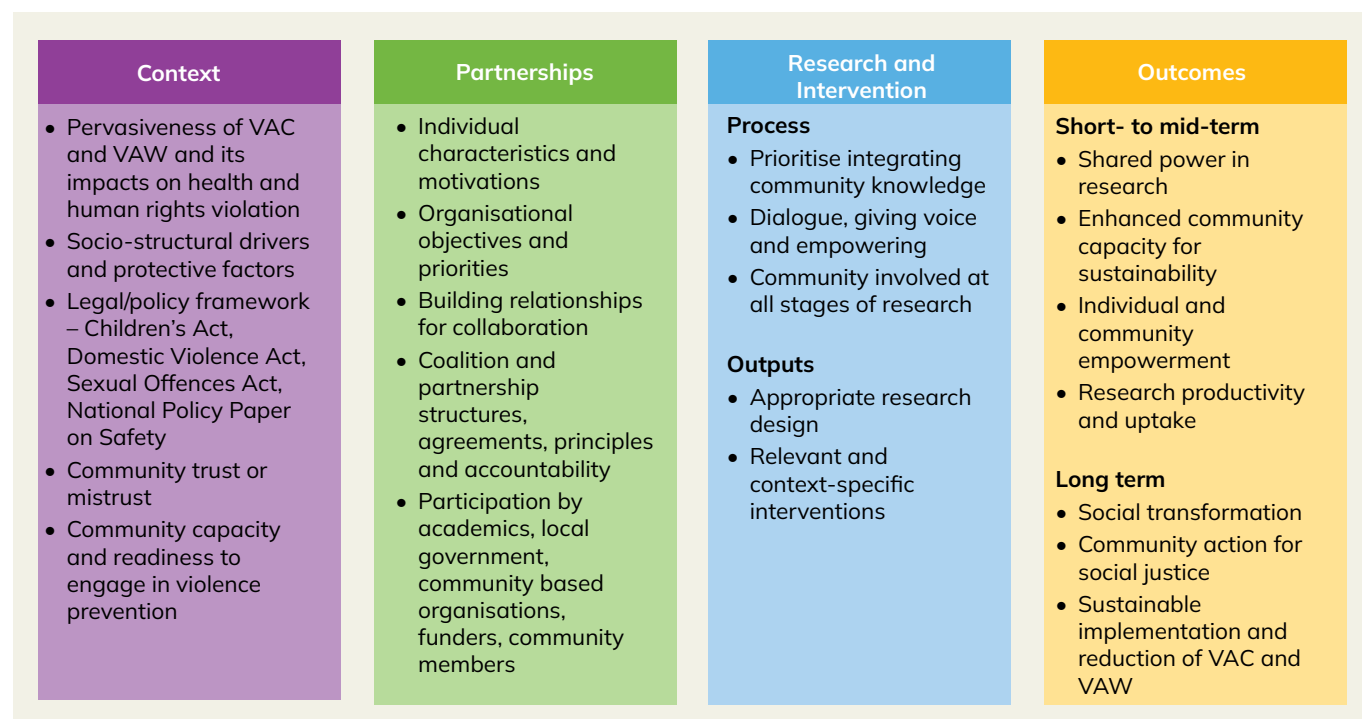
How can communities be engaged to identify community-level risks and protective factors?

Community-based participatory approaches (CBPA) can be used to help communities identify the specific risks, protective factors and social determinants of VAC and VAW in their context. These methods actively involve community members in identifying and analysing critical issues that drive violence – such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms and economic disparities. This should include participation in each stage of the public health approach – from defining the problem to prioritising changeable factors, developing interventions, evaluating outcomes, and monitoring impact. CBPA centres the lived experiences of community members, revealing not only risks such as poverty, unemployment, crime, substance abuse, weak sanctions against violence and low social cohesion

but also protective factors like strong social networks and community ties, high social cohesion with mutual trust and a shared sense of belonging, active community participation in addressing violence, access to quality education and economic empowerment opportunities, and coordinated community resources and services (see Figure 8).^{11, 12} In this way CBPA ensures that prevention efforts are grounded in the unique realities and strengths of each community rather than assuming uniform drivers across contexts.

It is important to recognise how community-based risk and protective factors are interconnected with the broader societal and structural drivers of VAC and VAW. Engaging communities directly using CBPA helps to provide a more nuanced understanding of how macro-level inequalities translate into localised risks and how community strengths can be leveraged to enable effective prevention. For instance, socioeconomic disparities (a structural driver) can manifest at the community level as concentrated poverty and unemployment (community risk factors), that weakens social cohesion and increases vulnerability to violence.^{12, 13} Similarly, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender inequality, which are structural drivers, can contribute to community risk factors such as the normalisation of violence and a culture of silence around abuse, while hindering the development of protective factors like women's empowerment and gender-equitable social networks.¹³

Figure 9: Key ingredients of community-based participatory research and collaboration to prevent VAC and VAW



Adapted from: Sánchez V, Sanchez-Youngman S, Dickson E, Burgess E, Haozous E, Trickett E, et al. CBPR Implementation Framework for Community-Academic Partnerships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 2021;67(3-4):284-96

How can community partnerships and collaborative initiatives help prevent VAC and VAW?

Community-based participatory approaches are also useful in establishing effective partnerships, coalitions and collaborative initiatives by prioritising equitable relationships and inclusive community structures (see Figure 9).⁵ These approaches require researchers to move beyond the traditional 'expert' mindset and embrace a role as co-learners, recognising the value of lived experiences and localised knowledge of community members alongside the expertise of researchers and practitioners.^{5,6} This ensures that collaborations are built on mutual respect and shared ownership from the outset. The collaborative approach ensures that initiatives are culturally relevant, context-specific, and more likely to be accepted, driven and sustained by the community.

Another key application of CBPAs is in the formation of community coalitions, which bring together diverse stakeholders under a structured partnership agreement. Coalitions enhance engagement through establishing clear terms of reference, determining and aligning shared goals, and supporting the co-development of interventions.^{14, 15} Moreover, embedding interventions within community structures and building local capacity through collaborative training programs and resource networks ensures that effective interventions and strategies are not reliant on external actors and can continue to be implemented and adapted over time.^{2, 16}

How can communities co-develop interventions to prevent VAC and VAW?

Communities can be engaged in identifying needs, designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions to ensure alignment with local contexts and priorities. The co-development process emphasizes dialogue, listening, reflection, and shared decision-making to reduce power imbalances and centre lived experiences. It builds trust and strengthens community cohesion by supporting collaboration within a safe and respectful environment (see Figure 10 on p. 90).¹⁷

Successful co-development requires a genuine commitment to equitable power-sharing, with experts relinquishing control to enable meaningful community participation. Researchers must address challenges such as communities' experiences with top-down approaches and local power imbalances. Co-development processes in VAC and VAW prevention should also align with feminist principles. This includes focusing on gender, challenging inequalities, embracing intersectionality, maintaining collaboration, doing no harm commitment and ensuring that researchers remain accountable to communities.¹⁸

Ethics committees and funders must be more flexible and supportive of participatory research methods that are iterative, time-consuming and resource intensive. Co-development requires longer project timelines and increased resources to enable relationship-building and adaptation.¹⁷

Participatory approaches and engagement strategies must be designed to meet the needs of the target group. For children, age-appropriate methods, safe spaces, confidentiality, and clear reporting and referral pathways are essential. Facilitators need training in these techniques and must address practical considerations like timing and transport. For adults, using local languages and literacy-appropriate materials is vital. Skilled facilitators with the ability to resolve conflict and build consensus can help ensure inclusive, respectful discussions. In gender-sensitive contexts, separate women's and men's groups create safe environments, especially in patriarchal communities where mixed groups risk reinforcing inequities. Across all groups, co-development should uphold values of non-violence, respect, trust, equity, active listening and collaboration to facilitate a creative, inclusive process.

How can communities challenge social norms?

Social norms are critical in perpetuating violence against women and children. In this context, social norms encompass the widely accepted beliefs and behaviours within a community that normalise or excuse violence. These norms often manifest as rigid gender roles, where men hold power and women are expected to be submissive, creating an environment where violence is seen as acceptable or even justifiable.¹⁹

For children, it can manifest in acceptance of corporal punishment as a form of discipline and the perception that children are passive recipients of adult decisions, lacking the agency to contribute to solutions for issues that affect them.²⁰ For women, this can mean accepting unequal treatment, limited access to resources, and an increased risk of experiencing various forms of violence.

Community-based participatory approaches can be used to actively involve community members in identifying, understanding, challenging and redefining harmful social norms that perpetuate VAC and VAW. Participatory methods can be used to facilitate the collaborative design or co-development of interventions that resonate with the community's cultural context. They are also useful to support community mobilisation and efforts to promote critical reflection and collective action. They can also be used to involve community members in monitoring and evaluating if prevention interventions have succeeded in shifting norms and behaviours.

Box 8: The role of culture and masculinities in violence against women and children

Teresa Abelⁱ and Malose Langaⁱⁱ

South African society often portrays men as the perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV). While this view reflects the lived experiences of most victims and survivors of GBV, it is also important to consider how many boys grow up as silent witnesses to domestic violence, internalising harmful gender norms and trauma that then shape their future relationships and sense of identity.

Creating safe spaces for dialogue

A different narrative is emerging through Breaking the Cycle: Empowerment Initiatives to Disrupt Gender Based Violence – a project implemented by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) in select GBV hotspots in Gauteng and the Western Cape – including Tembisa, Moroka, Diepsloot, Delft and Mitchells Plain. As part of this process, the CSVR and Department of Social Development hosted a series of men-only dialogues which provided a safe space for men to reflect, share experiences and examine the pressure exerted on men by traditional masculinity.

Conversations centred on gender norms, perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood, and how toxic masculinities shape the role of men in GBV. The conversations also explored how to shift the mindsets of the participants and the communities at large, from perceiving men as perpetrators of violence to seeing men as peacemakers. This approach provided the men with a platform to speak freely without fear or judgement. And it aligns with global evidence that meaningful male engagement must be trauma-informed, context-specific and grounded in an understanding of power and identity.^{42, 43}

From defensiveness to critical reflection

For many participants, the first breakthrough is simply being heard. As one of the men puts it in an interview, “When it comes to GBV, men feel like they are no longer involved, or they are no longer important in the community where they are treated like monsters. The only thing is that they are seen as perpetrators more than anything. There is also a trauma in men that goes with that.”

This deep sense of exclusion undermines men’s confidence to engage in community conversations and initiatives addressing GBV. For some men, this was the

first time they had spoken publicly about GBV, not just as something they witnessed or perpetrated, but as something they survived.

In some communities, GBV is largely seen as a women’s issue or a concern for the government to handle, but this perception has shifted significantly among men who participated in the study. A participant reflected, “Now men know their part, they are part of the community, and they have the right to voice things out, and to express their emotions openly”.

Culture and masculinity in transition

The men-only dialogues offered a safe space that helped men confront how patriarchal norms, socio-economic challenges and emotional repression are shaping their view of masculinity. The conversations explored the traditional ideas of men as strong, stoic and self-reliant and how this discourages male victims of violence from seeking help.

One of the most compelling discussions revolved around the concept of positive fatherhood. Some of the men admitted that being a father is a big part of their identity, and considered non-violent discipline, open communication and mindful behaviour as key to positive parenting and families’ well-being.

Fathers expressed a strong desire to pass on healthier versions of masculinity to their sons. Harmful gender norms are often internalised during adolescence, so engaging adolescent boys is another powerful tool for breaking the cycle of violence across generations as was shown in Langa’s book *Becoming Men*⁴⁴ where adolescent boys started to embrace positive masculinities that promote fairness and equity.

Research shows that men continue to link their masculine identity to the dominant provider role. These expectations have deep psychological consequences, especially when social or economic conditions make them unattainable and often manifest as emotional distress, strained relationships and resistance to shifting gender roles.^{45, 46}

The men-only dialogues have reframed what is acceptable, respected and aspirational within male social circles. One man who participated in the dialogues noted, “We are talking about men championing men. We do

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not need to be apologetic when people say that men are perpetrators. We are here to rebuild and restore.”

Conclusion

Participants emphasised that men need opportunities to explore their identities without being cast by society as inherently violent or emotionally defective. Young boys and men also benefit from being introduced to alternative masculinities that are grounded in care, vulnerability and respect.

Excluding boys and men in GBV conversations breeds silence, defensiveness and resistance, but strategic inclusion paves the way for accountability, healing and solidarity. For these shifts to be sustained, they must be embedded in community structures and linked to economic empowerment and mental health support. Building alliances with faith leaders, educators and traditional structures can help embed these new masculinities into everyday social life and ensure community ownership of the change process.

Social norm change interventions aim to shift these deeply ingrained beliefs and behaviours by challenging harmful norms and promoting more equitable and respectful relationships. These interventions move beyond individual-level approaches to address the broader social context in which violence occurs.^{8,21} Designing these interventions requires a deep understanding of the specific social norms driving violence within a community, using participatory approaches tailored to different groups. Implementation must address biases and power dynamics within the community and among external actors. It must also ensure participant safety and include ongoing monitoring of progress. A common social norm addressed by interventions is the belief that violence against women and children is a "private matter" to be resolved within the family. These interventions emphasise that VAC and VAW are societal issues requiring community-wide action that empowers members to intervene safely, support survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Successful community-level and social norm change interventions often depend on strong community ownership, involvement of local leaders and culturally relevant messaging. Challenges include resistance from those benefiting from existing power structures, limited resources, and weak sustained commitment. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from consultation to collaboration or community leadership as this helps to build trust, strengthen ownership, and engage key influencers early. Supporting communities to identify relevant solutions and leverage local assets can reduce resource constraints, while embedding interventions within community structures enhances sustainability. Lessons from effective programming emphasise long-term engagement, continuous monitoring and adapting to local contexts, highlighting the importance of CBPA principles in preventing VAC and VAW.²²

Examples of effective social norm change interventions that apply participatory methods in African contexts include the SASA! (Start Awareness Support Action) programme in Uganda which used a combination of community mobilisation,

training, and media to challenge gender inequality and promote respectful relationships.²³ The Indashyikirwa programme in Rwanda is another example of a national-level programme that combined community mobilisation, economic empowerment, and improved access to justice to address gender-based violence.²⁴ Like SASA!, Indashyikirwa emphasised community ownership and utilised culturally relevant strategies to promote gender equality and challenge harmful norms by working with couples. Other social norm change interventions, include community-based dialogues such as the One Man Can Programme implemented in South Africa that aimed to create safe spaces for men to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours related to gender and violence.²⁵

Most evidence-based social norm change interventions have focused primarily on addressing violence against women.²¹ Meaningfully engaging children in interventions to prevent violence is challenging as it is essential to weigh up the value of their lived experiences against the need to protect them from further harm. While some programmes, such as SASA!, aim to address both VAC and VAW within the same framework, VAC remains a secondary outcome, and children's voices and unique perspectives are still underrepresented in intervention design and evaluation.^{21, 24}

Social norm change interventions have largely focused on women and girls as victims, with less attention to children's (including boys) distinct vulnerabilities. Ideally, interventions should integrate the perspectives and needs of both women and children, recognising that violence affects them differently. For example, interventions focused solely on preventing women's experiences of intimate partner violence often miss the direct impacts on children who witness or experience household violence.²¹ Likewise, initiatives promoting positive parenting of children can be strengthened by explicitly addressing gender norms and power dynamics within families, to ensure a more holistic response to VAC and VAW.²¹

Figure 10: Key principles and practices to guide the co-development of interventions to address VAC and VAW



Adapted from: Gibbs A, Mannell J, Ndungu J, Burgess R, & Washington L. *Implementing the co-development of interventions to address violence against women and girls: A short primer*. University of Exeter, South African Medical Research Council, Institute for Global Health, University College London, Project Empower & SVRI. 2023

How can children be effectively engaged in violence prevention?

To effectively involve children in research and social norm change interventions, CBPA's should prioritise building genuine partnerships that value children's knowledge and share power. Adults in violence prevention must recognise their biases and employ participatory, flexible processes that enable power sharing and that build children's agency and trust. Researchers and practitioners need to support children in developing their critical reflection and communication skills, enabling them to become collaborators in research and active stakeholders in service delivery planning and monitoring.²⁶ This involves encouraging children to contribute to policy development and shifting away from traditional, didactic approaches towards interactive dialogues and participatory methods that amplify children's voices on issues affecting them. Effective child engagement includes using age-appropriate and culturally sensitive approaches, utilising participatory tools such as

drawing, drama, storytelling, photovoice, digital storytelling and group dialogues to facilitate their expression within a psychologically safe environment.²⁶

How can communities mobilise to take local action?

Community mobilisation to prevent VAC and VAW involves key interconnected steps. It begins with providing accurate information and raising awareness about the risks, causes and consequences of VAC and VAW so that communities recognise violence against women and children as a local issue. Beyond awareness, critical consciousness then enables groups to question deeper social and structural drivers of violence such as unequal gender norms. Empowerment occurs when community members move from being passive recipients of information to active decision-makers, gaining confidence and capacity to develop and implement locally relevant solutions. These steps work together to drive meaningful social change.^{8, 22}

The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF) highlights the crucial role of local community and faith-based actors in preventing and responding to VAC and VAW.²⁷ The capacity for local action can be enhanced by gender transformative training and the empowerment of community champions – including people from faith-based organisations, traditional leaders and women's rights groups. Community champions can take action by organising community awareness-raising events, leading community dialogues, advocating for policy change, and managing local media campaigns. Such activities increase community activism, create genuine ownership, and ensure interventions align with local priorities. The aims of community mobilisation can include promoting collective reflection, challenging harmful social norms, and motivating communities to take consistent, direct action against VAC and VAW.^{8, 22}

How can faith leaders be engaged to prevent VAC and VAW?

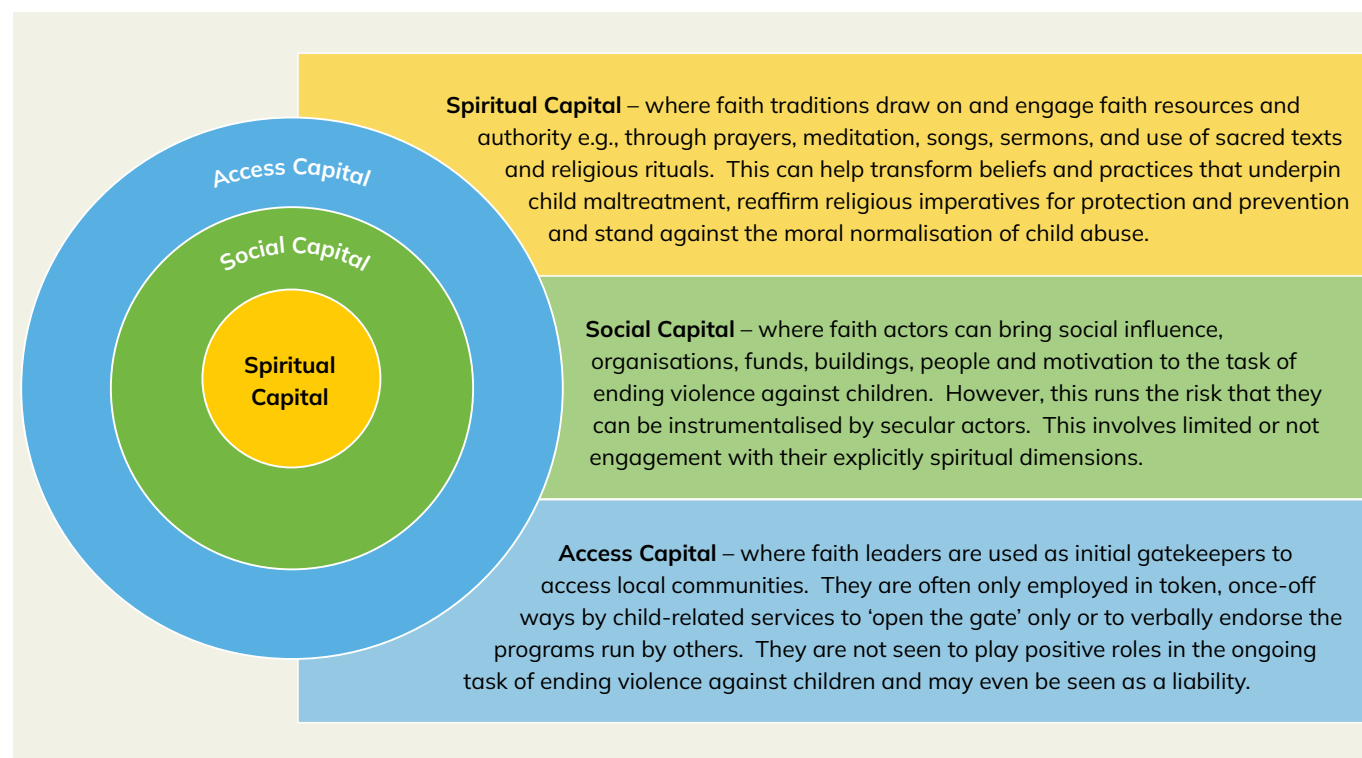
Faith leaders hold significant spiritual and moral authority, making their engagement vital in combating violence against women and children (see Figure 11).^{28, 29} Effective partnerships require researchers and practitioners to understand community structures, as well as spiritual values and beliefs about gender

roles, child discipline and violence. Involving faith leaders in intervention design ensures prevention messages align with faith and community contexts and can be integrated into worship and programmes for diverse groups, and messages are specifically tailored for women, men, youth and children. Co-developing strategies to celebrate women's leadership in worship and decision-making is also key to promoting gender equality. As educators and community advocates, faith leaders can prevent child abuse by integrating child-centred approaches grounded in justice, respect, and dignity.^{28, 29}

What is the role of traditional leaders?

Traditional leaders – whether holding government mandates, inheriting lineage or serving as cultural custodians – exert significant influence over customary laws and practices that shape roles and societal value of women and children. Their engagement is therefore crucial in addressing violence against women and children, including working with them to identify both the positive and negative impacts of traditional practices on violence and gender equality. Partnering with traditional leaders offers an opportunity to reshape or eliminate harmful cultural practices, thereby empowering women and children, encouraging their full involvement in family and community life, and protecting them from abuse.²⁸

Figure 11: Faith leaders have spiritual, social and access capital that can be leveraged for VAC and VAW prevention



Source: Palm S, Eyber C. Engaging the mechanisms of faith? How faith communities can contribute to ending violence against children. *The Thinker*. 2024, 98(1):37-48

Case 13: The role of faith communities in ending violence against women and children

Selina Palmⁱ

Eighty-four percent of the world's population identify as people of faith across diverse religious traditions. For many, their faith provides an authoritative or influential guide for all aspects of their beliefs and behaviours, especially marriage, family life and ethics, shaping how children are raised, and with beliefs and values also passed on intergenerationally. However, research also shows that religion is a mixed blessing⁴⁷ in the task of ending violence against women and violence against children. It can underpin or help transform social norms that do harm. Emerging evidence suggests the need to intentionally engage with the diverse mechanisms of faith and their roles in helping all children thrive without violence.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰

SVRI is the largest global initiative focused on advancing research on violence against women and violence against children in low- and middle-income countries. Their Africa-centred Community of Practice on Faith and Gender-Based Violence⁵¹ started in late 2024 and already has over 700 members. This includes a working group dedicated to faith and ending violence against children. In 2025, the group co-designed and co-delivered a 12-week pilot course to 30 participants from diverse faith traditions and seventeen countries entitled Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence.⁵¹ Graduates, including many faith leaders, described the course as personally transformational:

"One of my most profound personal shifts (on this course) was re-understanding child discipline not as control, but as connection. I grew up in a context where "good parenting" was often measured by obedience and fear. This course helped me reflect on how deeply those ideas are internalized even by well-meaning people of faith and how we can interrupt that cycle with nurturing care, compassion, and sacred trust." (course graduate)

By intentionally centring the experiences of practitioners and survivors, the course helped to shift power dynamics and amplify marginalised voices, while the emphasis on creating a safe space for personal reflection and shared learning enabled participants to share their feelings and build connections across religious, professional and geographic divides:

"In most classrooms, the moment I say I'm a survivor the air changes. I see it and feel it. The discomfort, the doubt, the quiet dismissal. But here I spoke, and the room leaned in. No one cut me off with jargon. No one hid behind diplomacy. When I said, "this sounds noble, but harms children", they listened because survivor testimony isn't an add-on here. It's the heartbeat of the work." (survivor/course graduate)

i Sexual Violence Research Initiative

How can communities support survivors?

Communities and structures can be engaged to support survivors of VAC and VAW by leveraging and building local resources to establish safe, accessible support mechanisms – especially when formal services are limited.³⁰ Community-based initiatives such as "safe homes" provide vital protection, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. These safe homes, are exemplified by projects like the Green Door campaign, led by the Gauteng Department of Community Safety which involved residents, councillors, community policing forums, and other stakeholders collaborating with the police to protect the women and children in the community. This includes training local residents to offer initial assistance and linking them to security networks to prevent perpetrator access. This creates safe environments close to survivors' homes, complementing formal shelters and fostering community ownership of prevention and support efforts. Integrating psychosocial support through

trusted community organisations, establishing clear referral pathways, ensuring confidentiality, and implementing mandatory reporting protocols are also critical. Careful evaluation of safety and ethical considerations, including child safeguarding and informed consent in high-risk settings, is essential to ensure the safety and protection of both survivors and supporters.

How can local service providers prevent and respond to VAC and VAW?

The 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security³¹ has a strong focus on early intervention, victim support and criminal justice. Engaging all community stakeholders – including healthcare workers, teachers and police – is crucial in supporting these objectives and ensuring a comprehensive coordinated, empathetic response to survivors of VAC and VAW.^{10, 32} Frontline providers are often survivors' first contact, and their

response influences survivors' trust and willingness to seek help. Police interactions shape trust in justice, while teachers and healthcare workers can identify abuse early and facilitate referrals. Comprehensive training and ongoing orientation of these providers are essential to ensure sensitive, coordinated victim-centred responses that reduce stigma and bias. Without this engagement, negative attitudes and misunderstandings hinder effective violence prevention, leading to mistrust and poor survivor health and justice outcomes. Responsibility for delivering this training often falls on NGOs, and funding constraints frequently result in piecemeal or inconsistent implementation.

Sustainable impact requires government commitment to allocate dedicated resources and integrate training within formal service structures, ensuring that all frontline providers, across health, social, and justice sectors, receive standardised and ongoing capacity building. Sustained capacity-building across community stakeholders and service providers is

vital to transform attitudes, strengthen services, and reduce the incidence and impact of violence against women and children.^{10, 32}

How can communities improve safety?

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)³³ can help prevent violence against women and children by adapting the physical environment to minimise crime risks and enhance residents' sense of security (See Figure 12). This involves actively involving community members to identify local concerns, map harassment hotspots and collaboratively develop safety plans. These plans focus on improving infrastructure such as lighting, maintaining clear sightlines, controlling access, and securing public spaces to prevent them becoming targets for crime.^{33, 34}

Social CPTED complements these improvements in physical infrastructure by addressing the social dynamics within neighbourhoods. It focuses on building social cohesion, promoting community connectivity and strengthening

Case 14: VPUU's Emthonjeni Project – an integrated approach to addressing the intersection of violence against women and children

Phetang Mabebaⁱ

In the urban landscapes of South Africa's townships, violence is not a singular epidemic but a complex, interwoven web. Witnessing violence within the family and greater community is seen as 'normal', with little awareness that children are at risk. But children living in Monwabisi Park and other informal settlements are not just subject to physical violence. They are also exposed to the structural violence of apartheid spatial planning and cultural violence (social norms that condone the use of violence against women and children).

In these contexts, early childhood development (ECD) centres can serve as an important mechanism to protect children from harm and to nurture their optimal development, but many children in these communities don't attend early learning programmes (ELPs). The Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) therefore introduced the Emthonjeni project to engage communities in co-creating out-of-centre ELPs for young children living in informal settlements.

Emthonjeni are public spaces around communal water taps, which have been upgraded in collaboration with community members, parents and children to create safe, open-air classrooms for children who are not enrolled

in ECD centres. Each Emthonjeni serves as a dynamic, multifunctional space where people can gather – with clean water, trees, tables, seating and a safe place for young children to learn and play. These spaces help build social cohesion, improve safety, and serve as catalysts for an attractive and vibrant neighbourhood.

Facilitators are recruited from the community and equipped with the skills to promote play-based learnings using the Unlimited Child curriculum, educational toys and other learning materials. Each child's clinic card is checked regularly, and parents are encouraged to visit a clinic for vaccinations. Attendance is monitored to assist with impact evaluation, and safety is ensured by working together with parents, neighbourhood watch groups and community leadership. Facilitators also run regular parent workshops which help build relationships of trust and create a safe space in which women can reach for support.

The World Health Organization has identified investments in ECD as the most impactful and cost effective way to reduce poverty, ill-health and criminality by giving all children a fair start in life.⁵²⁻⁵⁴ In this way, VPUU's Emthonjeni Programme hopes to break the cycle of violence by connecting 80% of children in a community to an early learning programme.

ⁱ Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU)

Figure 12: Using environmental design to prevent crime and violence against women and children



Adapted from: Cozens P & Love T. (2015) A review and current status of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). *Journal of Planning Literature*, 30(4): 393-412.

collective efficacy, for example, by encouraging residents to support one another, confronting harmful behaviours and actively participating in crime prevention.^{33,34} Social CPTED can include neighbourhood watch programmes, safety awareness workshops, gender-based violence campaigns, community dialogues, conflict resolution training and youth empowerment initiatives. Building of partnerships between residents, local authorities and police, promoting community participation in crime prevention efforts, and ensuring that the police are responsive to community needs and concerns are also crucial components of community safety. Increased police visibility, particularly in hotspot areas, can help to deter violence against women and children and enhance feelings of safety.

Combining physical and social CPTED creates a holistic approach to community safety. Physical improvements provide the foundation for safer environments, while social strategies engage residents in sustaining safety through mutual support and collective action. South African examples like the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) programme and initiatives supported by the German development agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) demonstrate that integrating infrastructure upgrades with community dialogue and empowerment strengthens neighbourhood safety.^{34, 35} The VPUU focuses on upgrading infrastructure and public spaces in underserved communities to reduce crime and improve safety. This includes interventions like improved street lighting, the creation of safe pedestrian walkways, and the development of community parks and recreational facilities.³⁴ GIZ supports a range of community-based crime prevention initiatives, often working in partnership with local governments and community organisations to implement programmes tailored to specific local contexts.³⁵

Programmes should ideally take a holistic approach which includes trauma informed interventions, working closely with affected people to deliver tailored support and promote community healing and resilience.

How can communities heal collective trauma?

Community trauma in South Africa is deeply rooted in systemic violence, inequality, and social exclusion, negatively affecting both individual well-being and social cohesion. High rates of violence against women and children worsen this trauma, perpetuating cycles of harm. Community healing extends beyond individual therapy to include approaches that create collective spaces for recovery and resilience, addressing both psychological impacts and the social conditions that sustain violence. These approaches recognise that trauma is not only experienced individually but also disrupts social cohesion

and well-being at the community level. By centring collective healing, empowering local structures, and integrating trauma-informed approaches, these interventions address both the psychological impacts of violence and the broader social conditions that perpetuate harm. By enhancing social cohesion and enhancing emotional resilience, community healing directly supports efforts to prevent VAC and VAW and can help break the cycle of trauma and violence in affected communities.

Global evidence shows trauma-sensitive programmes delivered through community centres, schools and workplaces improve mental health, reduce isolation and build resilience.³⁶⁻³⁸ Restorative justice programmes focusing on dialogue and accountability reduce repeat offenses and strengthen community bonds.³⁹ Peer support and survivor advocacy turn personal healing into social change, while creative arts offer emotional release and collective remembrance.³⁹ Trauma-informed support groups provide safe spaces for survivors, children, and families to process experiences and develop coping skills. For children, trauma support is often integrated into school and community settings through age-appropriate activities such as art, play therapy and storytelling, which help children process trauma in a non-threatening way.³⁸ By working with families, support groups can focus on strengthening family relationships, improving communication, and equipping caregivers with trauma-informed parenting skills.³⁸ In child- and youth-care centres, trauma-informed care programmes train caregivers to recognise signs of trauma, respond with empathy, and create stable, nurturing environments for children.³⁸

Community healing initiatives also often include creative expressions such as community art projects or memorial events, which provide alternative avenues for emotional release and collective remembrance.³⁹ These initiatives require collaboration with community structures and leadership, including faith leaders and traditional authorities, to ensure that healing processes are culturally relevant and accessible.

In South Africa, effective community healing processes are diverse and contextually grounded often including dialogue platforms, trauma-informed support groups, creative expression through art and music, and restorative justice circles. Dialogue platforms, such as the SAFE-PR Platforms used by MOSAIC, facilitate open communication and shared understanding, allowing community members to process traumatic experiences together.³⁰ Restorative justice circles, as implemented in communities like Manenberg and Lavender Hill, are another approach.³⁹ These circles provide structured spaces for open communication, conflict resolution and collective healing, supporting the rebuilding of trust and resilience among families, and the broader community on issues affecting children.

Case 15: The WEAVEⁱ Collective – Unravelling the power of women’s movements in addressing violence against women and girls

Thelma Oppelt and Benita Moolmanⁱⁱ

The WEAVE Collective (Women Engaged Against Violence Everywhere) is a global initiative committed to addressing violence against women and girls. Researchers and activists from Australia, India, South Africa and Nicaragua collaborated to document feminist movements’ contributions to engendering policy to end violence against women and girls at local, national and global levels. Using feminist and Indigenist methodologies, WEAVE centres marginalised women’s voices, and highlights historical struggles, political milestones and ongoing activism. The global study examines themes of patriarchy, state repression, systemic racism and decolonisation across borders. In an era of shrinking democratic spaces, WEAVE encourages building solidarities to inspire collaborative learning and fostering collective resistance and knowledge-sharing.⁵⁵

The global project sheds light on the lessons learnt by feminist movements in addressing violence against women and girls. In Australia, feminist movements expose the systemic erasure of indigenous women’s rights which have been disregarded and ignored in government policies. The erasure of indigenous women perpetuates the

dehumanisation of indigenous communities. In Nicaragua, feminist activism, once central to legal reforms, now faces severe repression under an authoritarian regime, with women’s rights organisations being dismantled and annihilated through government criminalisation of women’s activism. In India, the state enforces carceral control over women, suppressing feminist activists who challenge patriarchal and caste-based violence. In South Africa, feminist movements navigate fluctuating state responses, from early post-apartheid collaboration to later hostility, continually resisting gender-based violence through protest and policy advocacy. While they have played a key role in shaping legal reforms, they still face state ambivalence and social backlash particularly with regards to policy implementation.

WEAVE highlights how feminist movements not only demand policy change but also ensure that laws reflect real experiences.⁵⁶ By weaving together personal stories and empirical evidence, women’s movements create lasting impact, reshaping societies to end violence.

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While children are often included in these healing processes/dialogues, they are not consistently or actively engaged to lead these processes. Another example of a dialogue approach is the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF), which brings together government, civil society and researchers working on violence to promote evidence-based interventions and promote an ethic of mutual care and inclusion among, further strengthening the ecosystem for violence prevention.^{32, 40}

Examples of trauma-informed community healing approaches involving children in South Africa include the work of organisations like the Seven Passes Initiative, Net vir Pret, and the Hantam Community Education Trust, which lead holistic youth violence prevention programmes. These organisations implement holistic approaches that engage children, work closely with families, and provide age-appropriate support in both school and community settings. A key feature of these initiatives is their focus on building safe, inclusive environments where children can openly discuss challenges and develop coping skills. For example, programmes often include creative

arts, sports, and dialogue circles that encourage self-expression and emotional processing. Tools such as persona dolls and calming music help children manage bullying and discrimination while supporting their development.⁴¹

Nonetheless, reviews of community healing interventions reveal several challenges. Limited resources, a shortage of trained mental health professionals, and fragmented NGOs hinder programme reach and sustainability. Volunteer-led support risks secondary trauma and burnout among lay counsellors, requiring strong support systems. Stigma and power dynamics can reduce participation and community ownership. Measuring impact is difficult because standard tools often miss nuanced outcomes like shifts in community trust or restored social bonds. Much evidence is qualitative and context-specific, limiting generalisability. More research is therefore needed to identify effective healing components, adapt interventions to diverse settings, and scale programmes sustainably. Supporting and retaining lay counsellors, integrating indigenous knowledge and using trauma mapping are crucial. More research is also

needed to evaluate how community healing intersects with creating safer community environments and the prevention of VAC and VAW.³⁸

Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter demonstrates the need for a paradigm shift in the prevention of VAC and VAW – from superficial awareness campaigns to genuine forms of community engagement that empower community members as active agents of change. It emphasises that meaningful solutions emerge when communities are deeply involved as active drivers of change and can challenge top-down approaches that treat them as passive beneficiaries. Effective community engagement is crucial for empowerment and local action, enabling communities to gain a deep understanding of local risk and protective factors in order to co-create contextually relevant solutions, and sustain social norm and behavioural change initiatives over time.

The chapter highlights how engaging communities in VAC and VAW prevention requires diverse, integrated approaches targeting multiple community actors while prioritising local capacity building. Successful strategies require sustained partnerships that build local leadership and capacity in VAC and VAW prevention by empowering local leaders, community structures and service providers through collaborative training and ongoing support.

Partnerships with external actors and institutions can further strengthen community efforts by linking them to broader societal systems, reinforcing prevention initiatives. Central to these efforts is the active participation of women and children in shaping solutions and advocacy. In particular, the chapter stresses the critical importance of including children as integral members of their community through the use of participatory and age-appropriate approaches in order to design child-friendly interventions and empower them as advocates for change.

The chapter also underscores the need for community healing to address collective trauma and promote social cohesion and elements essential for sustainable VAC and VAW prevention. It emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed interventions embedded within schools and communities, that support survivors, and build local capacity to enhance emotional resilience and overall community well-being.

Community healing initiatives, such as dialogues, arts-based activities and memorials, help strengthen social cohesion and social networks. These trauma-informed approaches are

most effective when strategically layered within educational, empowerment, social norm and behavioural interventions.

The chapter also highlights the critical role of community engagement in safety and built environment planning as a key component of preventing VAC and VAW. While safety and physical environment planning have standalone impacts, their effectiveness is significantly amplified when integrated with social CPTED and social norm and behavioural change interventions. Furthermore, community action must build upon systemic and structural interventions, as violence at the community level often rooted in broader structural inequalities. This includes interventions to actively transform harmful social norms that are shaped by patriarchy, gender inequity and restrictive cultural and religious beliefs.

Despite these promising directions, numerous challenges to effective community engagement were acknowledged. These included difficulties in establishing equitable partnerships that value local knowledge equally alongside expert knowledge, and in dismantling entrenched power hierarchies that favour top-down approaches. The chapter also stresses the need to strengthen local capacity so community members can meaningfully co-develop, advocate for, implement and evaluate interventions. There is some evidence that community participation is often limited when involvement is voluntary, unpaid or lacking in incentives, especially in resource-constrained settings. In addition, children are often excluded from prevention efforts, highlighting the necessity of recognising their agency and safely involving them in intervention design.

Finally, the chapter cautions against short-term or superficial efforts, as achieving meaningful and lasting change in preventing VAC and VAW in communities requires sufficient dosage and intensity of social norm change interventions. Significant gaps in rigorous research and evaluation of community-level interventions remain. Studies often focus narrowly on individual outcomes and risk factor changes, and frequently overlook the broader, interconnected impacts of violence prevention on protective factors such as social cohesion, community responses and support, as well as the links to legislation and policies. These broader impacts are essential for effectively reducing violence against both women and children at the community level and in society at scale.

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