



Break the silos. Break the cycle.

Integrated approaches to end violence against women and children

South Africa's Constitution guarantees women and children the rights to dignity, equality, and freedom from violence. It places a clear duty on the state to protect and fulfil these rights through effective laws, services, and systemic reforms. Similar obligations to prevent and respond to violence against women and children are stipulated in international and regional law. These commitments are reinforced in the Sustainable Development Goals and AU Agenda 2063, which recognise gender-based violence as a priority issue and call for coordinated, multisectoral action.

The *South African Child Gauge 2025* highlights the human, social and economic costs of violence and explains how violence against women and children intersect. Alongside key recommendations to build an ecosystem of support targeting families, schools and communities, it showcases promising programmes and practices from experts in the field. This brief summarises these recommendations.

What are the human, social and economic costs of violence against women and children?

Violence against women and children is widespread in South Africa – leaving no family, school or community untouched. Approximately one in four women,¹ and nearly one in every two children² have experienced violence in their homes, schools or intimate relationships.

A life-course perspective is critical in understanding the intersections between intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence against children (VAC) as it highlights the prevalence of different forms of violence at different stages of life and how these types of violence intersect and reinforce one another.³

Experiencing or witnessing IPV increases children's risk of developing mental health problems, engaging in aggressive, risk-taking behaviour, struggling to form healthy relationships, and failing to perform at school – in ways that impact on their lifelong

health, education and employment prospects.⁴ In addition to the impact on their physical and mental health, women who experience IPV are more likely to use corporal punishment or harsh parenting with their children.

Responding to violence places a heavy burden on the health system, social services and the criminal justice system. It also equates to a huge loss in human potential, social capital and economic productivity that costs South Africa an estimated 5% of GDP.⁵ Yet, violence can be prevented – early, coordinated interventions can minimise harm, disrupt intergenerational cycles of violence, maximise the potential of individuals and render communities safer and more resilient.

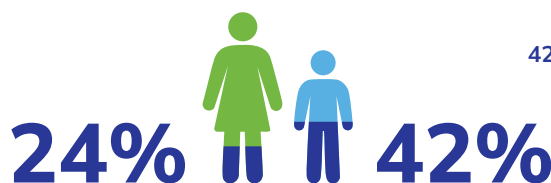
How do violence against women and children intersect?

Violence against women and children intersect. IPV and VAC often co-occur in the same households, share the same risk factors, and drive an intergenerational cycle of harm.⁶ Poverty, unemployment and overcrowding increase stress, conflict and violence in the family, which is often fuelled by the abuse of alcohol.⁷ And both are underpinned by harmful social norms that justify men's use of violence to exert power and control, and 'discipline' women and children.

IPV and VAC also fuel an intergenerational cycle – where children grow up with violence, they replicate what they have experienced in their own adult relationships. Girls who experience or witness domestic violence are more likely to become victims and boys to become perpetrators of violence, and both are more likely to use violence to discipline their own children.⁸

An intersectional lens reveals that vulnerable groups such as adolescents, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQI+ community experience higher levels of violence and experience significant barriers in accessing protection and support services.

24% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their intimate relationships



42% of children have experienced some form of maltreatment – including physical, sexual and emotional abuse and/or neglect.



Violence can be prevented by building an ecosystem of support

Strengthen systems

Close the policy—implementation gap



South Africa has put in place an expansive range of laws and policies to prevent violence against women and children namely, the Domestic Violence Act, the Children's Act and the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF). But this vision has not been realised due to poor implementation and accountability. In addition, policies are often siloed and focused on criminal justice rather than prevention and healing.

Key policy priorities include the need to:

- Integrate an intersectional lens on VAC and VAW across all legislation and policy.
- Prioritise the completion and implementation of the Integrated Prevention Strategy; and Victim Support Services Bill.
- Regulate the marketing and sale of alcohol through the Liquor Amendment Bill.
- Prioritise violence prevention in the review of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy to ensure that violence prevention is embedded and strengthened across the full suite of ECD services in order to support pregnant women, young children and their families at scale.

Invest in prevention



South Africa is failing to uphold its constitutional and international obligations to fund services to protect women and children from violence. Funding remains inadequate and is being steadily eroded by austerity

cuts. It also varies dramatically across provinces. Most of the current spending is on response services, and government urgently needs to increase investment in prevention to break the intergenerational cycle of violence.

- Implementing the Sector Funding Policy will help set priorities, ringfence money for prevention, and expand access to effective programmes.
- The NSP-GBVF commits to developing and costing a core package of services. This should include gender-transformative parenting programmes, prevention programmes in schools and communities, Thuthuzela Care Centres, Family Violence, Child Abuse and Sexual Offences units, shelters and victim-friendly justice services.
- Non-profit organisations are essential partners as they provide vital services such as psychosocial support, shelters and prevention programmes often reaching remote or underserved communities.
- Flexible funding is essential to support survivor-centred and family-responsive programming.

Support the workforce



Preventing and responding to violence against women and children requires a well-coordinated, skilled, and adequately resourced workforce across sectors such as health, social services, education, justice, and law enforcement. This workforce plays a vital role in delivering integrated prevention and response services to individuals,

families, and communities. Supporting this workforce demands sustained adequate resources, standardised protocols, intersectoral training, workforce well-being measures, and proper supervision.

- Service providers need to look beyond the individual and support other members of the family affected by violence.
- Shared competencies can help ensure staff have the skills to provide trauma-informed and gender-responsive services.
- Supervision and support is essential to address vicarious trauma and burnout.
- A national workforce audit and plan would ensure a more equitable distribution of human resources to strengthen access to services in rural communities.

Use data to plot a pathway to justice



Reliable, standardised data are essential to understand, prevent and respond to violence against women and children. Collecting and analysing both scientific and administrative data – including details on survivor–perpetrator relationships, risk factors and service use – enables targeted interventions and evidence-based policy planning.

- A basic set of administrative data indicators should be agreed upon by the different sectors to enable effective monitoring. This should include geolocation or place names to enable spatial analysis at district and/or local level.
- Self-report prevalence surveys (including measurement of VAC and VAW together) need to be conducted at least

every 10 years using the exact same measurement to allow comparability of data and monitoring of trends.

- The Department of Social Development needs to work towards the analysis and routine reporting of data linked through the National Integrated Social Protection Information System (NISPIIS) and ensure they are used to inform service delivery.



Strengthen leadership and coordination

Coordination involves aligning laws, policies, systems, and services to address the interconnected needs of women and children affected by violence. It matters because effective coordination – grounded in trust, shared accountability and real-time collaboration – ensures cohesive prevention and response efforts while balancing the need for both integrated and specialised services.

- Services for women and children often operate in silos, but working together can help align services, reduce duplication, clarify roles and streamline referral pathways.
- Working at the intersection also requires collaborative case management and joint planning and decision-making to ensure that services uphold the best interests of both women and children.
- Strengthen coordination by addressing relational barriers such as mistrust and power imbalances through regular dialogue, opportunities to get to know one another, joint planning, and reflection spaces that foster collaboration across VAC and VAW sectors.

Transform services and mobilise communities

Health services



Maternal and child health services have the potential to intervene early in the life course and prevent violence against women and children at scale. This requires a more explicit focus on violence prevention in the Road to Health Booklet, Side by Side Campaign and the education of health workers to ensure that they adhere to guidelines for screening and identifying women and children at risk and refer them to support services

- Adolescent girls are at increased risk of sexual violence and IPV, yet they often struggle to access support services due to negative attitudes from health care workers. We need to expand adolescents' access to a basket of services including sexual and reproductive services, violence prevention and teen parenting programmes.
- Greater effort is needed at a district level to map local services, strengthen referral pathways and coordinate care with the Departments of Social Development and Basic Education.

Social services



Social services play a critical role in preventing and responding to IPV and VAC by supporting families, addressing root causes of violence, and promoting recovery and resilience.

- Programmes such as Parenting for Lifelong Health can prevent domestic violence by improving relationships and promoting non-violent conflict resolution and child discipline. To be effective, they must intentionally target both forms of violence, adopt a gender transformative approach and engage men as partners in shared caregiving and decision-making.
- Similarly, family-strengthening programmes like Sugira Muryango, address the root causes of conflict and promote positive relationships by supporting healthy communication, challenging harmful gender norms, and ensuring families are documented and can access social grants.
- Many women come to shelters with their children.⁹ They need support with their own recovery, and help to regain their independence, and fulfil their caregiving responsibilities

including accommodation and psychosocial care for their children.¹⁰

Schools



Schools and early learning programmes can be powerful catalysts for change – by creating safe, respectful and caring environments where children can learn and thrive.

- This includes modelling non-violence in the classroom through the use of positive discipline, including lessons on healthy relationships, gender equality and conflict resolution in the curriculum, and creating a school climate that does not tolerate any form of violence or discrimination.
- Schools can also play a pivotal role in identifying and supporting children at risk by monitoring early warning signs (eg changes in attendance and performance), and creating a space where children feel safe to report abuse and are supported after cases are referred to protection services.

Communities



Strong, caring communities help protect women and children from violence. Engaging the whole community – including political, religious and traditional leaders and institutions – is essential to challenge and transform social norms that justify violence against women and children.

- Men and boys are part of the solution and need opportunities to explore and develop more positive forms of masculinity based on care and respect.
- Community activists also need to be supported in their efforts to mobilise communities, support survivors, advocate for justice and hold services accountable.
- Partnering with communities to identify local hotspots enables targeted interventions, ensures collaboration between police and neighbourhood watches, and promotes safer physical environments through infrastructure upgrades such as improved street lighting.

The *South African Child Gauge* is an annual publication of the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, that tracks progress for South Africa's children to support evidence-based policy and programming.

This policy brief presents the key findings of the *2025 Child Gauge* which focuses on the intersections of violence against women and children and the full book can be accessed at ci.uct.ac.za

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Get in touch

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Integrate services to disrupt the cycle ...

Recognising the intersections of violence against women and children and taking a family-centred approach will streamline services, improve efficiencies and ensure that both women and their children are able to access care and support.

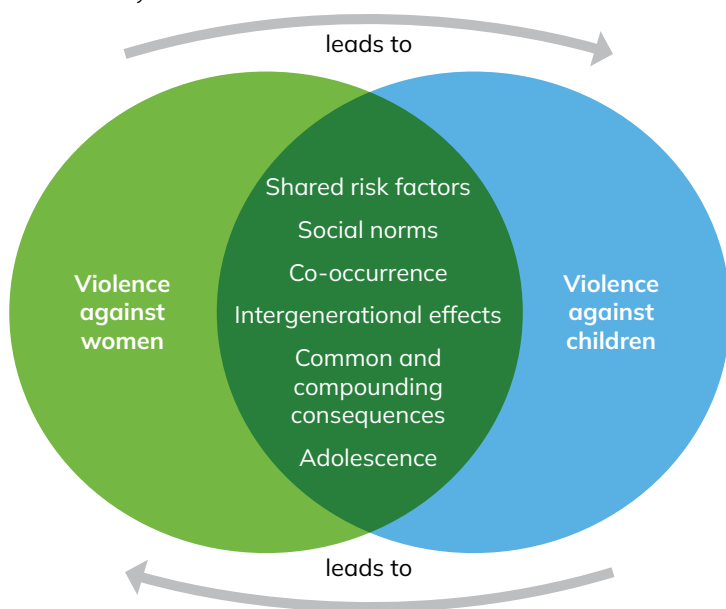
To work effectively at the intersections of violence against women and children we need to:

1. Recognise that violence against women and children are interconnected
2. Intervene early to prevent further harm and disrupt the intergenerational cycle of violence
3. Ensure that prevention programmes include both men and women and actively challenge and transform harmful gender norms that justify the use of violence to resolve conflict or enforce discipline and control
4. Embed violence prevention and response into existing systems and services including health, education, social development and justice – to extend reach and ensure sustainability

5. Respond to the needs of both women and children affected by violence simultaneously through integrated services to ensure that everyone affected by violence gets the help they need
6. Adopt a trauma-informed approach to ensure that women and children feel safe, supported and in control.

... and yield a high return on investment

Preventing violence against women and children yields significant returns on investment. Intervening early to break the cycle of violence alleviates the burden on health, social and criminal justice services. It enhances human capital and social cohesion, and it boosts economic development. Improving coordination avoids duplication and saves costs, while adopting an integrated approach ensures that no one is left behind.



Source: Fulu E, McCook S & Falb K. *What Works Evidence Review: Intersections of violence against women and violence against children.* September 2017. Available at www.whatworks.co.za. 2017.

Trauma-informed approaches
not only address the immediate psychological and social wounds inflicted by violence but also facilitate long-term community healing.

Gender-transformative approaches
advance gender equality by challenging harmful gender norms and power imbalances; strengthening positive norms that promote more equitable behaviours – especially around care responsibilities; and transforming the social structures, systems, and policies that sustain inequality.

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