

Preventing Gender-Based Violence and Femicide among Adolescent Girls

Evidence-Based Strategies for Collective Action



UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa
Education for Health and Well-being





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Three questions this session answers



1

How big is the problem for adolescent girls, and how does violence escalate to femicide?



2

What does the evidence say works to prevent it, and what does not?



3

What does collective action look like, and who does what?

A working definition: femicide is the intentional killing of a woman or girl with a gender-related motivation. It is the end point of a continuum of violence, and it is preventable.



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Femicide: the most extreme and most preventable form of GBV

50,000

women and girls killed by an intimate partner or family member in 2024

137

killed every day: one woman or girl every ten minutes

60%

of all intentional killings of women and girls are by a partner or relative, against 11% for men

3.0

per 100,000: Africa has the highest regional rate, with about 22,600 victims



The home is the most dangerous place for women and girls. The 2024 figure is marginally below 2023, but this reflects data gaps, not progress. In South Africa, three women a day are killed by an intimate partner, a rate of 5.5 per 100,000, about five times the global average, and fewer than one in five intimate partner femicides ends in a conviction.

Sources: UNODC and UN Women, *Femicides in 2024 (2025)*; SAMRC fourth national femicide study, 2020/21 (2024).



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For girls, the violence that ends in femicide starts in adolescence

1 in 4

ever-partnered girls aged 15 to 19 has already experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence (24%). One in six (16%) did so in the past year. That is close to 19 million girls worldwide.

Prevalence is highest in low-income settings and reaches 40% in central sub-Saharan Africa. Countries with higher female secondary enrolment and gender-equal inheritance laws have lower rates.



246 million

children and adolescents experience some form of gender-based violence in and around school every year



1 in 3

learners is bullied at school each month; girls are more likely to face sexual harassment, psychological bullying and cyberbullying



Up to 40%

of the gender-based violence adolescent girls experience occurs at school

Sources: Sardinha et al., *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health* (2024); UNESCO and UN Women *Global Guidance on SRGBV*; UNESCO (2024).

Every stage of the continuum is a chance to intervene



Where prevention acts

Norms and education: CSE, whole-school approaches, community activism, work with boys and men

Early recognition: teachers, peers, parents and health workers trained to spot control and escalation

Response and protection: safe reporting, survivor-centred services, risk assessment, justice that convicts

Sources: UN Women, *Five essential facts about femicide (2025)*; SAMRC Gender and Health Research Unit; UNODC and UN Women (2025) on technology-facilitated violence as an escalation factor.



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Why adolescent girls face heightened risk



Society

Patriarchal norms that tolerate violence and control of girls; weak or unenforced laws; limited femicide data; under-funded women's organisations



Community and school

Schools that are unsafe or silent on violence; age-disparate and transactional relationships; alcohol and firearm availability; faith and traditional leaders not engaged



Family and relationship

Child marriage; exposure to violence at home; controlling partners; economic dependence; no one to tell



Individual

Leaving school early; poverty; disability (girls with disabilities face far higher risk); HIV; previous victimisation; low knowledge of rights and services

What protects girls

- Staying in secondary school (higher female enrolment is linked to lower IPV)
- Gender-equal laws, including inheritance and marriage age
- Delayed marriage and first sex; comprehensive sexuality education
- Economic security for girls and households
- Safe, trusted adults and peers who can recognise control and act
- Functioning referral and justice pathways

Sources: Sardinha et al. (2024); WHO RESPECT framework; UNESCO and UNGEI; SAMRC.



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Prevention is possible: the global evidence base

~50%

Well-designed programmes implemented consistently over two to three years have reduced intimate partner violence by around half in several trials.

Of 96 RCTs and quasi-experiments, 44% showed significant reductions in violence and 19% promising results. 40% of studies targeted adolescents.

Approach	Evidence and example
Economic transfers and cash plus life skills	Cash and in-kind transfers that keep girls in school: 8 of 10 strong studies cut child marriage. INSPIRE 2025 update lists cash plus life skills as a top-evidence strategy for reducing sexual violence.
Combined economic and social empowerment	IMAGE (South Africa) cut IPV by about 55%. Stepping Stones and Creating Futures (Durban) reduced men's IPV perpetration and improved mental health.
Community activism on norms	SASA! (Uganda) cut women's physical IPV by about half; Indashyikirwa (Rwanda) cut women's IPV experience by 55% in couples.
School-based, whole-school approaches	Good School Toolkit (Uganda) cut physical violence by staff by 42%; Right to Play (Pakistan) cut peer violence by about a third; healthy relationship education reduces adolescent IPV.
Parenting and couples programmes	Reduce harsh parenting, child maltreatment and, in several trials, IPV. Work with boys and men works best when gender-transformative and combined with other components.

Sources: Kerr-Wilson et al., *A rigorous global evidence review (What Works, 2020)*; Jewkes et al. (2021); Little et al., *INSPIRE update, Lancet Child and Adolescent Health (2025)*; Malhotra and Elnakib (2021); Devries et al. (2015); Abramsky et al. (2014); Pronyk et al. (2006).



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Ten design features separate success from failure



1

Rigorously planned

with a clear theory of change
rooted in evidence



2

Address multiple drivers

such as gender inequity, poverty,
poor communication and marital
conflict



3

Gender and power analysis

at the centre, not added on



4

Participatory learning

that builds critical reflection,
communication and conflict skills



5

Age-appropriate design

tailored to adolescents' stage of
life and relationships



6

Well-designed manuals

so delivery is faithful across sites



7

Support for survivors

integrated, with working referral
pathways



8

Optimal intensity

longer duration, multiple
sessions; one-off workshops do
not change behaviour



9

Well-trained, supervised staff

selected for gender-equitable
attitudes



10

Multiple stakeholders

engaged across family, school,
community and services

Source: Jewkes, Willan, Heise et al. (2021), Elements of the design and implementation of interventions associated with success, IJERPH 18: 12129.



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Strategy 1. Make schools the frontline of prevention



Whole-school approach

Codes of conduct for teachers and learners, positive discipline, safe physical spaces, leadership accountability. Strongest INSPIRE-rated evidence for preventing youth violence.



Curriculum that changes norms

Comprehensive sexuality education and healthy relationship education build critical reflection on gender, consent, control and help-seeking. UNESCO's Connect with Respect is designed for the ESA region and now being scaled.



Teachers who recognise and act

Train teachers to identify controlling behaviour, dating violence and abuse, and to refer safely. Teacher training is central to the O3 Programme's safe-school work.



Reporting and referral that works

Confidential reporting channels, a trained focal person, links to health, social welfare and police. Learners must trust that disclosure leads to protection, not punishment.

Evidence anchor: the Good School Toolkit halved fear of teachers and cut physical violence by staff by 42% in 18 months; school-based programmes in the STOP-DRV-GBV review reduced dating and relationship violence, with effects strongest where skills practice and school-wide structural components were included.



Strategy 2. Keep girls in school and reduce economic dependence

What the evidence shows	
Cash and in-kind transfers for girls' schooling	Clearest pattern of success against child marriage: 8 of 10 medium to high quality studies positive. Reduce early pregnancy and HIV risk (Zomba, Malawi).
Cash plus life skills for adolescents	Rated among the highest-evidence strategies in the 2025 INSPIRE update for reducing youth violence including sexual violence.
Combined economic and gender-transformative programming	IMAGE (microfinance plus gender training, South Africa) reduced IPV by about 55%; economic inputs alone do not reliably reduce violence.
Girls' safe spaces and clubs with livelihood skills	Reduce sexual violence and early marriage (for example, ELA in Uganda); effects depend on quality and duration.



Implications for education and social protection

- Enforce re-entry policies for pregnant and married girls; track return rates
- Link school bursaries and social grants to retention of girls through secondary school
- Bundle life-skills and CSE with cash, not cash alone
- Raise and enforce the legal age of marriage at 18 with no exceptions
- Fund girls' clubs, mentorship and safe spaces as part of school and community programming

Sources: Malhotra and Elnakib (2021) *Journal of Adolescent Health*; Little et al. (2025); Baird et al. (2012); Pronyk et al. (2006); Bandiera et al. (2020).



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Strategy 3. Shift the norms that drive violence



Community activism

- SASA! (Uganda): trained community activists; physical IPV against women roughly halved after three years
- Indashyikirwa (Rwanda) and COMBAT (Ghana): significant reductions in IPV
- Works when intensive, sustained and led by local people, not one-off campaigns



Boys and men as part of the solution

- Gender-transformative group education (for example Stepping Stones) reduced men's perpetration by about 38% over two years
- Most effective when combined with economic, school or community components
- Engage male teachers, coaches, fathers and young men as allies against control and violence



Parents, faith and traditional leaders

- Parenting programmes reduce harsh discipline, child maltreatment and, in some trials, IPV
- Religious and traditional leaders shape marriage, discipline and reporting norms; UNESCO's work with INERELA+ and Faith to Action Network shows they can be allies
- Reach caregivers through schools and community radio

Sources: Abramsky et al. (2014); What Works community activism brief (2019); Jewkes et al. (2008); Kerr-Wilson et al. (2020).



Strategy 4. Interrupt escalation before it becomes femicide



Spot the warning signs

Controlling behaviour, threats to kill, strangulation, injuries needing hospital care, weapons, separation, stalking including online, multiple forms of abuse



Assess and manage risk

Standard lethality and risk assessment tools in schools, clinics, police and social services; shared protocols; protection orders that are enforced



Survivor-centred services

One-stop centres, post-rape care, shelters, psychosocial support, adolescent-friendly services; girls are less likely to disclose unless services are safe and confidential



Justice that delivers

Fewer than one in five intimate partner femicides in South Africa ends in conviction; investigation quality, case tracking and specialised courts matter



Control the means

Firearm regulation and alcohol availability are associated with femicide; South Africa's alcohol bans during COVID-19 coincided with fewer femicides

Sources: SAMRC femicide studies (2022, 2024); UN Women and UNODC (2025); WHO RESPECT framework, Services ensured and Poverty reduced strategies.

The role of schools in secondary prevention: a trained teacher or counsellor is often the first adult a girl tells. Every school needs a named focal person, a referral directory and a protocol agreed with health, social development and police.



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Strategy 5. Count every girl: data, monitoring and accountability

4 in 10

intentional killings of women and girls worldwide cannot be classified as femicide because the data needed is missing. Trends can only be tracked in the Americas and Europe.

Africa records the highest rate and the weakest data. Most countries cannot disaggregate femicide by age, so adolescent victims are invisible.



Adopt the UNODC and UN Women Statistical Framework

Classify gender-related killings consistently across police, prosecution, health and statistics offices; disaggregate by age and relationship to perpetrator



Establish femicide watches or observatories

Independent review of every femicide to identify where systems failed and what to change, as in several Latin American and European countries



Measure violence in and around schools

Use validated SRGBV indicators in EMIS and school surveys (UNESCO and UNGEI guidance); track reporting, referral and outcomes



Evaluate and publish

Fund rigorous evaluations of prevention programmes in the region and report results, including null findings; align with ESA Commitment monitoring

Sources: UNODC and UN Women (2025); UN Women, *Five essential facts about femicide*; UNESCO and UNGEI, *School violence: why gender matters and how to measure SRGBV* (2023).



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Collective action: who does what



Department of basic education

Whole-school policies, CSE and Connect with Respect in curriculum, teacher training, reporting and referral, re-entry and retention of girls



Health and social development

Adolescent-friendly services, post-rape care, psychosocial support, risk assessment, cash-plus programmes, shelters



Police and justice

Enforce protection orders, investigate and convict, specialised units and courts, firearm and alcohol regulation, femicide data



Communities, faith and traditional leaders

Lead norm change, end child marriage, support reporting, hold perpetrators accountable



Young people

Peer education, bystander action, youth-led monitoring (for example AfriYAN, #NotMySchool), design and evaluation of programmes



Civil society and women's organisations

Deliver and scale proven programmes, provide services, advocate and monitor; must be funded sustainably



Technology and media

Remove image-based abuse and harassment fast, support reporting, run edutainment and community radio that shifts norms



Development partners and UN

Fund multi-year, evidence-based prevention; support evaluation; convene through ESA Commitment, RESPECT, INSPIRE and Safe to Learn

Frameworks: WHO RESPECT Women (2019); INSPIRE (2016, updated 2025); UNESCO and UN Women Global Guidance on SRGBV; ESA Ministerial Commitment (2021); South Africa NSP on GBVF.

Thank you

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