



SYNTHESIS REVIEW SERIES: PAPER #6

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE:
**ADOLESCENT-FOCUSED
APPROACHES TO PREVENT
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
AND GIRLS**

Lessons from civil society organizations funded by the
UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women on prevention



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Produced by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

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Recommended Citation:

Majumdar, S. (2021), *Learning from Practice: Adolescent-Focused Approaches to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls* (New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women).

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Cover Photo: Girls show off their soccer SKILLZ at the Yomelela Primary School, Khayalitsha Cape Town, as part of an activity of Grassroot Soccer. Photo: UN Women/ Karin Schermbrucker



About the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded almost \$183 million to 572 initiatives in 140 countries and territories. In 2020, the UN Trust Fund managed a grants portfolio of 150 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 71 countries and territories across five regions, with grants totalling \$72.8 million. Grant recipients are primarily civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2018 (cycle 20), the UN Trust Fund has been funding only CSO projects. In 2020, the majority (58 per cent) of these CSOs are women's rights organizations.

About the learning from practice series on prevention

In this series the UN Trust Fund has prioritized engagement with what has – to date – been a fairly neglected area within research on prevention of violence against women and girls, practice based insights from civil society organizations. In 2020 it commissioned a synthesis of this knowledge emerging from 89 UN Trust Fund civil society organization grants, implemented or closed during the period covered by its 2015–2020 Strategic Plan. Findings were captured from two types of source documents from grantees: final progress reports (written by grantees) and final evaluation reports (written by external evaluators commissioned by grantees). The first step in the series was a synthesis review and identification of common approaches or thematic areas in prevention across the 89 projects, to determine the focus of knowledge to be extracted (Le Roux and Palm, 2020). Ten key thematic areas or “Pathways towards Prevention” (Box 1) were identified through an inductive process including a desk review of reports *and* a series of consultations

with grantees/practitioners in English, French and Spanish. The UN Trust Fund aims to analyse and co-create knowledge under each pathway. Each pathway has been analysed and the corresponding synthesis co-created by a researcher/s and ten grantees per pathway whose work generated significant practice-based insights on the particular theme and who could offer contextual and embedded best practices, challenges and useful tools on the topic that emerged from iterative learning from practice. The intended audience for this brief is threefold: (i) practitioners (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of EVAWG. The learning from practice series is intended to elevate practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in EVAWG. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter, summary brief available on the UN Trust Fund website.

BOX 1: PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION IDENTIFIED

1. Community Mobilization
2. Engaging faith based and traditional actors
3. Exploring intersectional approaches
4. Mobilizing Women
5. Training for behaviour change
6. **Adolescent-focused approaches**
7. Resistance and backlash
8. Adaptive programming
9. Working together for a survivor-centered, multisectoral response
10. Working together for law and policy implementation and reform

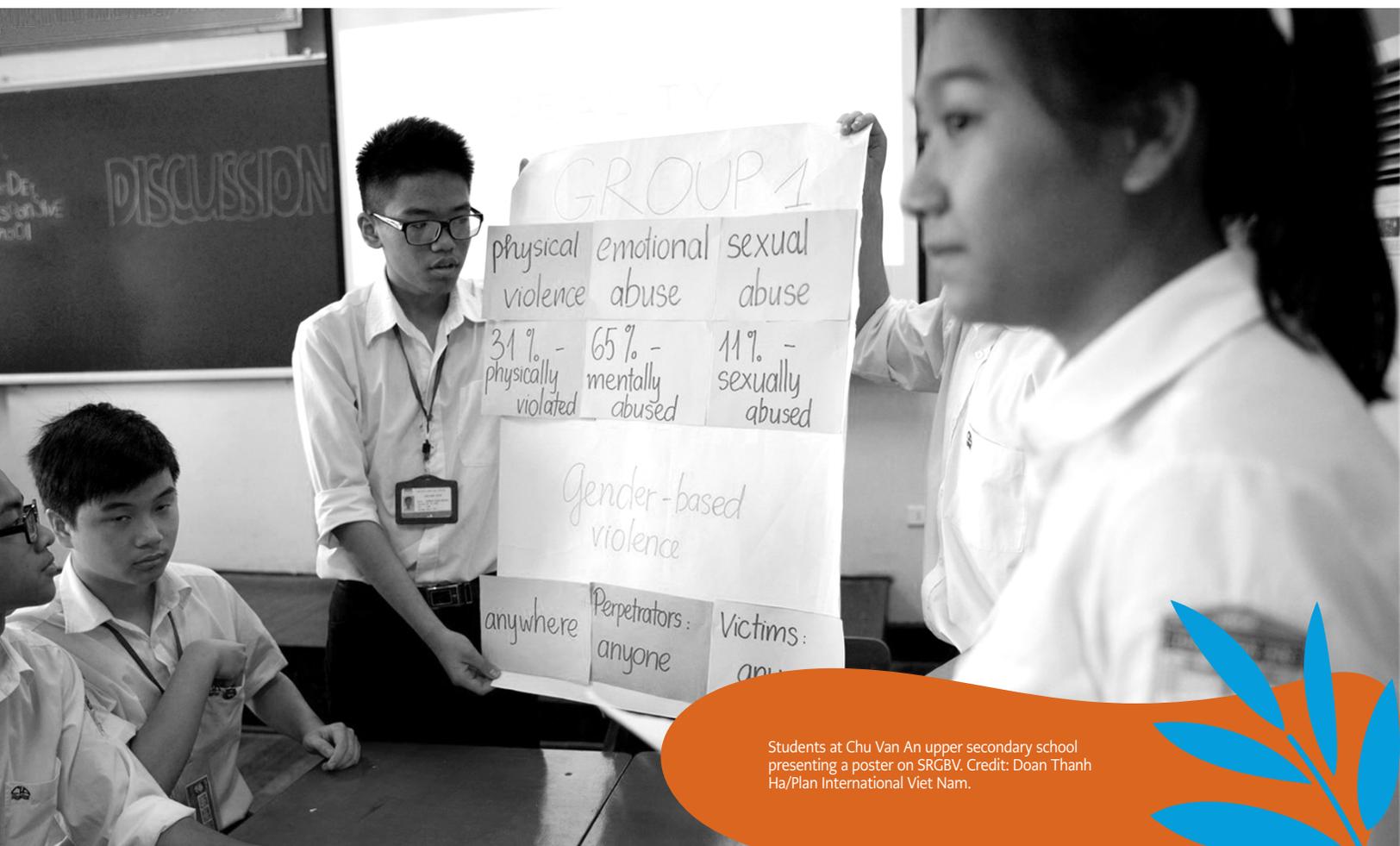
Acknowledgements

This synthesis review was developed by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, with invaluable advice from civil society organizations, UN Women staff and our external advisory group members.

In particular, we would like to thank the staff from the 10 UN Trust Fund projects whose practice-based insights, reports and experience are at the heart of this synthesis review. These projects are Amref Health Africa from Tanzania, Association Pour la Promotion du Développement Local from Cameroon, Autonomous Women's Center from Serbia, Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz from El Salvador, Grassroot Soccer from South Africa, the Mongolian Women's Fund, Restless Development from Nepal, Plan International Vietnam, the Ukrainian Women's Fund and the Women's Studies Centre from the State of Palestine. This project would not have been possible without their support and participation.

We would also like to thank our peer reviewers, Selina Palm from Stellenbosch University, Anna Alasweszki from the UN Trust Fund and Khamsavath Chanthavysouk from the UN Women EAW Section, for taking the time to review multiple drafts and provide invaluable feedback on the document.

Special thanks to the project's Advisory Group – Kalliopi Mingeirou from the UN Women EAW Section; Tesmerelna Atsbeha, Senior Programme Officer, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund; Natsnet Ghebrebrhan from Raising Voices; Lori Heise from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; Elizabeth Dartnall from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative; Alice Kerr-Wilson, senior associate at Social Development Direct and mentor at The Prevention Collaborative; and Monica Biradavolu from Qualanalytics. Gemma Wood, Daniele Elizaire and Amélie Contharet, from the UN Trust Fund, coordinated and managed the production of the document with support from whole team.



Students at Chu Van An upper secondary school presenting a poster on SRGBV. Credit: Doan Thanh Ha/Plan International Viet Nam.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Adolescent-focused approaches as a means of preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) are an important area for intervention and research. Adolescence is a critical time for both boys and girls, but adolescent girls in particular face new gendered risks at this life stage, because of their increased vulnerabilities to various forms of violence and harmful practices. Although it is a time when girls are more vulnerable to certain forms of violence, it is also a promising entry point for early VAWG prevention efforts. However, researchers and practitioners recognize that there are still evidence gaps when it comes to adolescent-focused approaches to preventing violence. The common use of the phrase “women and girls” over the past several years, while an improvement on efforts aimed at women only, has not resulted in the tailored interventions urgently needed to prevent and respond to specific forms of violence against adolescent girls, and prevention interventions for girls are still largely bundled with those targeting women or children.

Methodology

This synthesis review aims to draw out some cross-cutting best practices, challenges and lessons from 10 diverse interventions to prevent violence against adolescent girls across various settings. These interventions, each centred on a different form of violence against girls, were funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund). The interventions focused solely on adolescents (both boys and girls) or an adolescent-focused programme was a subcomponent of a wider multilevel programme (targeting women and girls, men and boys, parents, households, schools, communities and institutions). Through content analysis and coding of monitoring reports, evaluation reports and transcripts of focus group discussions with key staff from the 10 projects, this synthesis review aims to put practitioner-based insights into conversation with the existing evidence on the topic.

Five key themes/project design decisions emerged inductively from the insights of practitioners implementing UN Trust Fund-funded intervention activities with adolescents. The sections of the synthesis review are structured according to these five themes. Although they are presented separately here, practitioners see them as closely linked and mutually reinforcing design elements.

- 1. Building self-efficacy, confidence and skills for preventing violence.** In seeking to achieve this, adolescent girls' perception of their safety was often the starting point for the intervention, especially in the absence of prevalence data (or given limited capacity to collect it) for the target age group, region and/or intersecting identity. An initial analysis of perceptions of safety of girls and key stakeholders around them (parents, teachers, etc.) can help to inform several aspects of violence prevention programming, according to practitioners. It can help in determining which spaces and entry points are to be prioritized (safe homes/parenting interventions, safe schools interventions or legal/policy-level work, or some combination thereof), the design of curricula, and even how and to what extent boys are included in training sessions (mixed-gender interventions or girls-only spaces, or some combination thereof staggered over time). Given the heightened sense of lack of safety that girls feel in most spaces they occupy, according to baseline surveys and focus groups, all 10 projects worked on twin tracks: (i) carving out girls-only safe spaces (separate from women's safe space programming and mixed-sex programming) and (ii) recognizing that existing public and private spaces are gendered and feel unsafe to girls, and incrementally working to reclaim those spaces for adolescent girls.
- 2. Ensuring that training methodologies are diverse and age-appropriate and that training is frequent.** Constant adaptation throughout the project (which relies heavily on the skills of front-line change agents) is key to meeting adolescent girls

“where they are” – that is, taking into account their immediate circumstances, ages, schedules and safe spaces. These will vary considerably across time and space, even during the life of a project. Practitioners also stressed the need for initial pilots and small-scale testing. Through these, most found that deepening their engagement through more frequent follow-up and intense work with adolescent girls was necessary to go beyond awareness-raising and achieve behavioural outcomes. Increasing the intensity of interventions, however, also comes at the cost of scale – deeper and more intense engagement with fewer stakeholders means more limited reach. Moreover, although practitioners emphasized the need to increase the intensity of interventions, they also pointed out that if interventions were too long there was a higher risk of training fatigue and dropout; this highlights the need for flexibility in curriculum planning.

- 3. Mobilizing agents of change among and around adolescent girls.** All the projects in the sample were multilevel interventions, and all practitioners stressed that adolescent girls need role models. Some felt that existing authority figures in their lives (e.g. parents and teachers) should be transformed into role models, whereas some aimed to create role models outside girls’ regular environment (e.g. youth football coaches and community facilitators), and some sought to create role models among adolescents themselves (i.e. peer-to-peer approaches). Regardless of the approach taken to role models, practitioners also emphasized the need to create agents of change among girls themselves. Girl-led programmes are promising because they restore dignity, give girls the capacity to aspire and encourage innovation; however, when scaling up interventions, challenges remain in maintaining the quality of the programme and measuring its impact. Promoting adolescents as leaders and promoting youth–adult partnerships are growing areas of work in violence prevention that may need more careful testing and documentation to find effective approaches.
- 4. Designing prevention interventions for adolescents in resource-constrained environments 'where there is an absence of youth-friendly services, laws**

and policies. All 10 UN Trust Fund projects offer lessons and insights on designing programming in resource-constrained environments where services are neither accessible to adolescents nor youth-friendly. To overcome this challenge, different projects took different paths. Several practitioners worked to develop a unified model for providing assistance to young victims of violence, by giving young activists a voice and a seat at the table, to push for more adolescent-friendly services. Several civil society organizations (CSOs) also worked in partnership with other CSOs on creating an enabling environment for adolescent-friendly services, by pushing for policies, budgets, frameworks and the implementation of laws such that violence against adolescent girls, especially those who are at risk, does not fall through the cracks.

- 5. Creating gender-transformative programming to increase the influence and impact of youth activism.** The 10 UN Trust Fund projects and their evaluations offer important lessons with regard to multilevel gender-transformative programming. None of the projects were single-level or trying to bring change only with individual agents of change in one setting or space; they all had multilevel theories of change and attempted to change a whole set of norms, values and beliefs at societal level. The evaluations of these projects are also unique in that, through qualitative or mixed-methods data, they provide rich detail on how change occurs at different levels, often in entirely unpredictable ways, and how actions at one level have a knock-on effect on another. Therefore, they also capture the ways in which gender-transformative approaches can be disruptive, and can lead to resistance, backlash and often non-linear change. Multilevel and gender-transformative change requires partnership and solidarity across multiple types of organizations with different missions but the common goal of eradicating violence against girls; this can help in finding the most meaningful and sustainable strategies. Moreover, developing adaptive learning systems and alternative evaluation styles (alternatives to an experimental design) is essential to projects working on gender-transformative change and systems change with multiple actors.

In addition, these five design elements were also considered in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

A clear view of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is only beginning to take shape, and several estimates suggest that the impact on the rights and health of women and girls has been devastating. For interventions that use schools as an entry point, the closure of schools for almost a year has meant significant delays in and the suspension of programming, with CSOs being concerned about the well-being of girls, in particular because of a lack of communication. Furthermore, school closures in lockdown and economic crises resulting from the pandemic in several countries are making girls more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment both online and offline, and children are more likely to be exposed to violence in the household (Wood and Majumdar, 2020). Practitioners are particularly concerned about at-risk girls such as those with disabilities or those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities, who are at increased risk of violence during lockdown. Girls also face barriers to accessing accurate, official information and public service announcements owing to limited access to public spaces, group gatherings (i.e. in safe spaces) and outreach activities.

Conclusions and recommendations

This synthesis review offers concluding insights and recommendations that emerged from putting these 10 projects into conversation. Four cross-cutting conclusions are as follows: (i) first, practitioners' insights suggest that there are specific needs and risks that are quite unique to adolescence, which need to be addressed in prevention programming. This reinforces that programming for adolescents should not be bundled together with programming for women or children. (ii) Second, although the focus of this review was adolescent-focused approaches including both boys and girls, the emphasis of the projects was much more on girls than boys, and therefore the uptake was much greater among girls than boys; consequently, practitioners stressed the need for less ad hoc and better-targeted strategies for engaging boys through adolescent-focused approaches. (iii) Third, different types of CSOs have different strengths in engaging adolescents in prevention programming, but all emphasized that partnerships

with local and grass-roots youth and women's rights organizations were key to their success. (iv) Fourth, all the CSOs found that their projects created a legacy of "symbolic resources", which were a key component of empowering adolescent girls.

Ten recommendations are offered on engaging adolescents in VAWG prevention. These are informed by practitioner insights from the 10 projects, but also by the process of synthesizing these insights. The recommendations target three specific groups.

Recommendations for practitioners are as follows: (i) co-produce prevention programming with adolescents, (ii) conduct safety audits to understand safety concerns in the immediate environments of adolescent girls, (iii) consider multiple ways of creating safe spaces and of mobilizing change agents around girls, and (iv) choose entry points carefully and consider multiple entry points for engaging adolescents based on the form of violence being addressed and recognizing the continuum of violence.

Recommendations for policymakers and donors are as follows: (i) develop adaptive learning systems, especially to meet the needs of those facing multiple and intersecting risks, (ii) consider how to include explicit recognition of the risk of perpetration of violence within adolescent-focused prevention programmes, and (iii) foster partnerships and fund collaborative work between different types of VAWG prevention organizations with the common goal of reducing violence against girls.

Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG are as follows: (i) conduct more research in collaboration with practitioners on designing prevention programmes that work with a diverse group of adolescents, (ii) develop evaluation and learning tools for gender-transformative programming aimed at preventing violence against girls, and (iii) develop ethical and safe ways of conducting research on violence against girls remotely, as implemented during the pandemic.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
Amref	Amref Health Africa –Tanzania
AWC	Autonomous Women’s Centre
CSO	civil society organization
DOET	Department of Education and Training
FGD	Focus group discussion
FGMC	Female genital mutilation and cutting
GBV	gender-based violence
GRS	Grassroot Soccer
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IPV	intimate partner violence
LGBTI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
MWF	Mongolian Women’s Fund
NGO	non-governmental organization
RCT	randomized controlled trial
SRGBV	school-related gender-based violence
ToT	training of trainers
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UN Trust Fund	UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women
UWF	Ukrainian women’s fund
VAC	violence against children
VAG	violence against girls
VAW	violence against women
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WRO	women’s rights organization
WSC	Women’s Studies Centre

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescent-focused approaches as a means of preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) are an important area for intervention and research.

Adolescence is a critical time for both boys and girls (see box 1), but adolescent girls in particular face new gendered risks at this life stage, because of their increased vulnerabilities to various forms of violence and harmful practices. According to the recent World Health Organization estimates, VAWG starts early on in girls' lives, and almost one in four ever-married or partnered adolescent girls in the 15–19 age cohort are estimated to have already been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021). Sixteen per cent of young women aged 15–24 had experienced this violence in the 12 months prior to the study. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), increased risks of intimate partner violence (IPV) are also closely linked to early and forced child marriage, and it is estimated that one in three girls in the world are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2014). Global studies on violence against female adolescents and young adults in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) also confirm high rates of force, during their first sexual experience (as high as 42 per cent in some settings), and a greater burden of recent IPV relative to their adult counterparts in several countries (Decker et al., 2015). In addition, when compared with their younger or male counterparts, although adolescent girls experience much of the same violence directed towards younger children, such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse by family members or caregivers, and school violence, they are also vulnerable to forms of violence directed towards women, such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and cutting (FGMC) and other harmful practices that begin at this age, dating violence and intimate partner homicide (Ellsberg et al., 2017).

BOX 1: DEFINING ADOLESCENCE

This review uses the United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization's definitions of children as aged 0–17 years, adolescents as aged 10–19 years and adults as aged 18 years and above. However, we also recognize that, although this is the United Nations definition, in practice, girls aged 15 and above are often considered “women” in research and programmes focused on intimate partner violence, especially if they are married or have children. Violence against older adolescent girls aged 15–17 therefore often falls within the domains of both violence against women and violence against children (Guedes et al., 2016).

Gender inequality, the root cause of VAWG, is exacerbated during adolescence.

Gender disparities in access to education, health, and economic and social opportunities increase at this age. Although gender socialization begins well before, it is often reinforced during adolescence, and pressures to conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity increase (Barker et al., 2011). These unequal gender norms and attitudes are widespread across geographical and sociocultural settings, and are steeped in wider structural inequalities that shape gender and authority. They are often internalized by adolescents before they reach adulthood, and have important implications for both perpetration of violence and victimization (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). This holds true in development settings and in humanitarian settings because of the intersectionality of age and gender, and additional and exacerbated risk factors relevant to emergencies (Stark et al., 2020).

Although adolescence is a time of heightened vulnerability to certain forms of violence for girls, it is also a promising entry point for early VAWG prevention efforts

(UN Women, 2015; Guedes et al., 2016; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). Reducing risks and enhancing protective factors with regard to both victimization and perpetration can help to transform social norms and patterns of behaviour around gendered violence, which can set a long-term trajectory for adulthood and help to break the cycle of violence. There

are several interventions for ending VAWG around the globe targeting adolescent girls that have demonstrated through rigorous evidence that violence against them is preventable. The RESPECT framework synthesizes critical evidence on seven strategies for preventing violence, and interventions working with adolescent girls generally encompass all of them. These strategies are (i) promoting healthy and respectful relationships among adolescents and providing high-quality sex education, (ii) empowering girls by building their self-confidence and negotiation skills, (iii) ensuring youth-friendly services and providing adolescent girls with relevant information on them, (iv) reducing poverty and economic insecurity for girls through cash transfer programmes, (v) ensuring their environments are safe, particularly ensuring safe schools¹ and youth-friendly public spaces, (vi) ensuring that child and adolescent abuse is prevented through parenting interventions and (vii) transforming norms and attitudes underlying violence against adolescent girls, often through community-based interventions, which can help to reach marginalized adolescents, such as girls who are married or out of school, or girls with disabilities, who are at increased risk of violence and who are likely to be overlooked without intentional efforts to reach them.²

However, researchers and practitioners recognize that there are still evidence gaps when it comes to adolescent-focused approaches to preventing violence.

The common use of the phrase “women and girls” over the past several years, while an improvement on efforts aimed at women only, has not resulted in the tailored interventions urgently needed to prevent and respond to specific forms of violence against adolescent girls, and prevention interventions for girls are still largely bundled with those targeting women or children (Save the Children, 2020). There are concerns that interventions that explicitly focus on adolescents do not adopt a much needed gender-transformative lens (UNICEF, 2020a), and that if they do it often comes at the cost of inadvertently excluding adolescent boys (Promundo and SVRI, 2011). As a result, the specific needs and vulnerabilities of adolescent girls are still largely invisible and “falling through the cracks” in the development of policies and programmes to end violence against children (VAC) and violence

against women (VAW) (Patton et al., 2012; Ellsberg et al., 2017). Three additional evidence gaps remain when it comes to adolescent-focused programming: (i) the role of parents in adolescent-focused approaches (Digolo et al., 2019), (ii) the role of teachers and the school community around girls (UNGEI, 2019) and (iii) the specific needs of adolescent girls facing intersecting types of discrimination (Stark et al., 2020). Many researchers and practitioners advocate for a more explicit focus on adolescent girls when designing and evaluating interventions to ensure that global efforts to end violence consider their specific needs and are inclusive of them. Researchers therefore stress the need to identify entry points and innovative approaches to enable adolescent girls to access existing VAWG prevention and response services, especially adolescent girls with intersecting identities (DFID and Care International, 2017; Crooks et al., 2019).

This synthesis review aims to draw out some cross-cutting best practices, challenges and lessons from 10 diverse interventions to prevent violence against adolescent girls across various settings.

These interventions, each centred on a different form of violence against girls (VAG), were funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund). The projects that ran the interventions focused solely on adolescents (both boys and girls) or an adolescent-focused programme was a subcomponent of a wider multilevel programme (targeting women and girls, men and boys, parents, households, schools, communities and institutions). Through a desk review of the projects’ monitoring and evaluation reports, and through open-ended focus group discussions (FGDs) with key project staff and peer educators from the 10 projects, this synthesis review aims to put the evidence on the topic into conversation with practitioner-based insights.

Five key themes/project design decisions emerged inductively from the insights of practitioners implementing UN Trust Fund-funded intervention activities with adolescents (figure 1).

The findings are structured according to five themes, starting with adolescent girls themselves and anchoring prevention programming in their sense of safety (section 4.1), and moving on to ensuring prevention training

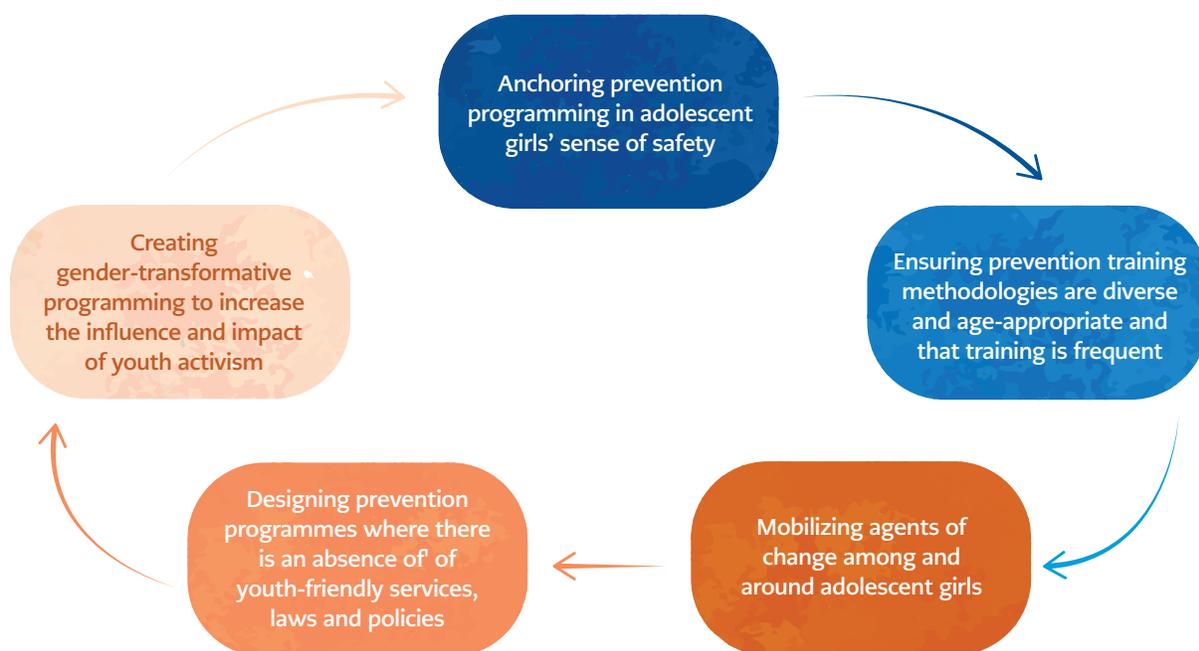
1 For whole-school programmes, see UNESCO and UN Women (2016), and UNGEI (2019).

2 The RESPECT framework has several commonalities with the INSPIRE framework; both recognize the importance of gender equality for violence prevention and highlight intersections between violence against children and violence against women.

methodologies are diverse and age-appropriate and that training is frequent (section 4.2); mobilizing agents of change among and around adolescent girls (section 4.3); designing prevention interventions for adolescents in resource-constrained environments and plus where there is an absence of youth-friendly services, laws and policies (section 4.4); and creating gender-transformative programming to increase the influence and impact of youth activism (section 4.5). In addition, these five

design elements were also considered in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (section 4.6). In addition to surfacing these various design elements, practitioners also emphasized that they were not siloed elements, and the order in which they are examined in the review does not suggest a particular chronological order or linear way in which these activities are to be carried out; rather, they are **mutually reinforcing elements** in designing comprehensive adolescent-focused approaches.

FIGURE 1:
Key design features of adolescent-focused approaches



The paper is structured as follows. It sets out the rationale for case study selection (section 2), provides a short methodological overview (section 3), and outlines the key findings and themes that emerged as salient (section 4). At the start of each of the six thematic sections, there is a box featuring a short summary of the literature related to the theme. These are not comprehensive overviews but are meant to introduce and accompany the practitioner-led insights and examples, and also to

show how current literature can be complemented, extended and, at times, challenged by insights from practitioners. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers and donors are presented in section 5.

2. CASE SELECTION

Adolescent-focused projects form a significant part of the UN Trust Fund grant portfolio and, of those, 10 diverse projects have been selected, targeting various settings (family, school, community), groups (girls with disabilities, girls in humanitarian contexts) and forms of violence (school-related VAG, harmful practices, IPV, child maltreatment).

Some of the projects, for instance, specialized in a particular form of violence against adolescent girls and used that as an entry point to design the project. Of the 10 projects, two focused on preventing **harmful practices against adolescent girls through a community-based approach**; Amref Health Africa –Tanzania (Amref) worked on reducing the incidence of FGMC among girls in Serengeti through a community-based approach, and Restless Development worked on reducing the incidence of *chhaupadi*, a harmful menstruation practice in far and mid-western Nepal, by involving community actors at several different levels (although the project was youth-led). Restless Development’s project design was based on the idea that strengthening local structures would ensure continuity of actions aimed at abolishing *chhaupadi* practices through creating commitment to changing harmful social norms, which had strong roots in the community. Both projects offer important lessons for school-only or home-only programmes on how to engage entire communities to support prevention programmes focused on adolescent girls.

For some, the entry point was not a specific form of violence against adolescent girls but, rather, the **creation of safe environments for adolescents, using a strong gender lens**. For instance, Plan International Vietnam deployed a whole-school approach, and worked with local civil society organizations (CSOs) to develop a gender-responsive schools pilot project across 20 urban schools in Hanoi. It used a pool of 30 cross-school teachers as master trainers, and in each school strongly centred 800 boy and girl leaders aged 13–18 years to form gender-transformative youth team leader clubs. Youth team leaders were trained to equip and support their peers and to use innovative social media approaches. The project also engaged teachers, staff and parents through the school

association, for the development and implementation of codes of conduct for gender-responsive schools including comprehensive sexuality education. From the start, the project also collaborated closely with the Hanoi Government Department for Education, to ensure the sustainability and potential scalability of the pilot.

Similarly, the Mongolian Women’s Fund (MWF), the national women’s fund in the country, worked to introduce violence prevention approaches in school environments in Baganuur district and Dornod province. These prevention approaches were the first of their kind at national level, prior to which only services had been delivered in the school context. The MWF engaged with adolescent girls but also with many different actors, such as teachers, school administrators, parents, communities and public officials, to develop knowledge, skills and support for violence prevention, and, like Plan International Vietnam, lobbied for establishing a mechanism for local budgeting for violence prevention to ensure the sustainability of the project.

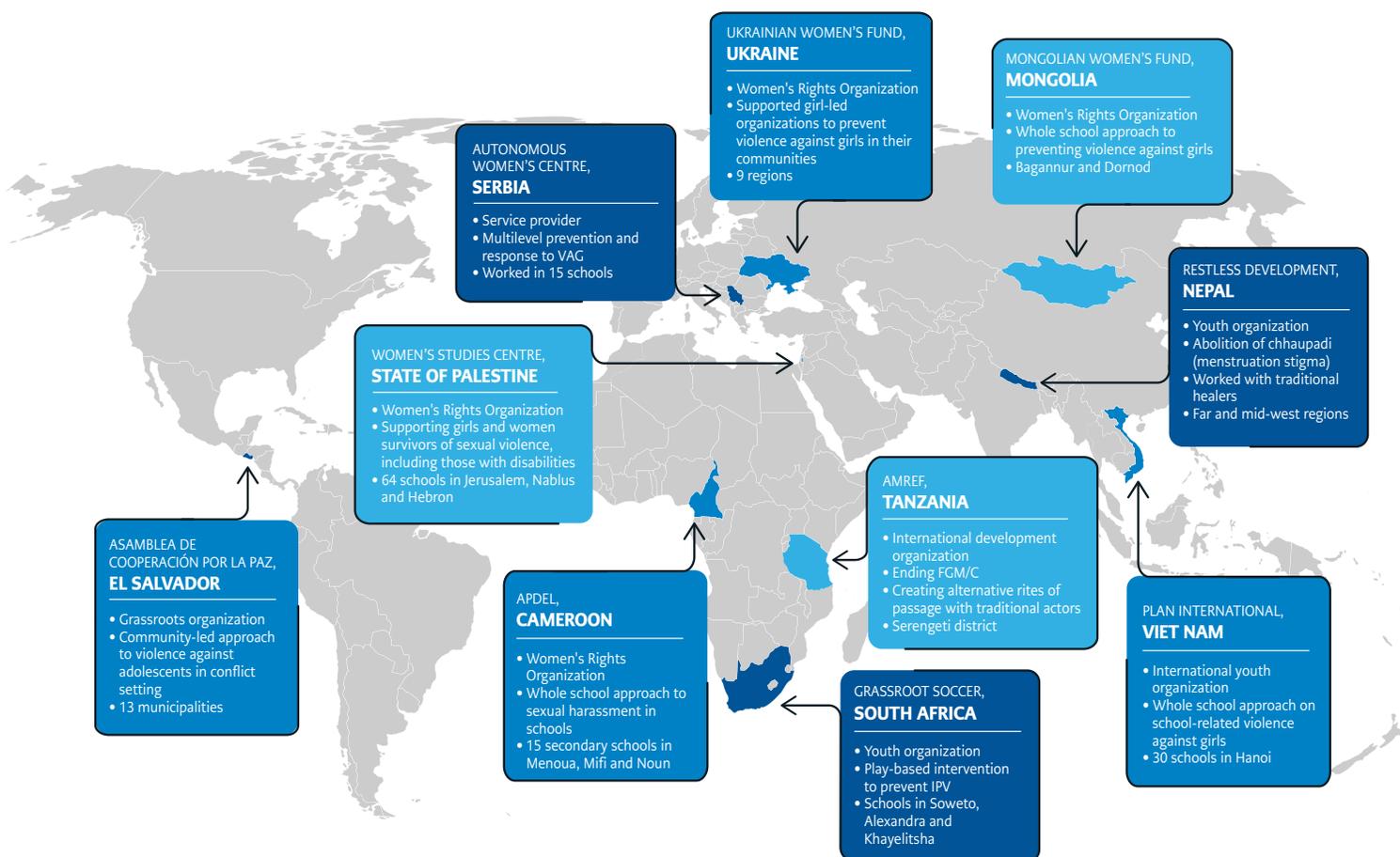
The Autonomous Women’s Center (AWC) in Serbia worked to prevent violence against adolescent girls and create safe spaces in schools and universities, especially for older adolescent girls, through a girl-led informational and educational campaign complemented with a grass-roots group-based education approach. Another project that sought to create safe environments for girls was implemented by L’Association Pour la Promotion du Développement Local (APDEL) in Cameroon. The project aimed to break the silence surrounding sexual harassment in secondary school settings, in particular in the West Region (Mifi and Menoua departments), collect data on rates of sexual harassment for dissemination and advocacy, and enhance the capacities of school staff to provide counselling and mediation services aimed at the social reintegration of female survivors.

Although schools and universities present an opportune space for intervention, they are but one of many intervention sites. Some projects found an entry point not in a school or community but in a particular strategy the aim of which was to build the self-confidence and self-efficacy of girls **through a specialized medium or**

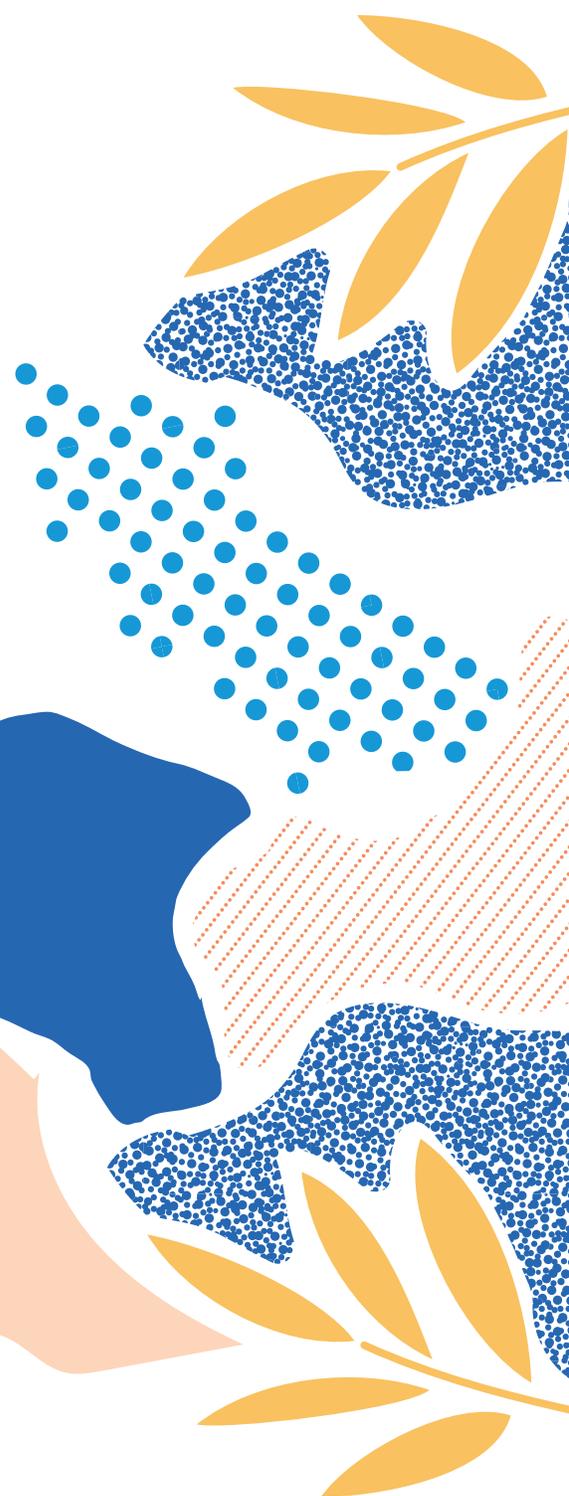
strategy such as play-based or art-based interventions. For instance, Grassroot Soccer (GRS) in South Africa rolled out an educational intervention that was tailored to use the language of soccer to engage adolescent girls and boys in both mixed-sex and single-sex activities around choosing gender-equitable intimate partnerships and preventing and addressing violence in their lives. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Women's Fund (UWF) worked on supporting girl leaders in initiatives aimed at preventing violence among female adolescents and young people in communities, disseminating information to raise awareness, assisting in promoting non-violent behaviour towards girls and women among male peers and encouraging victims of violence to seek help. One of the mediums it found most effective was art therapy, an informal communication approach that made it possible to transform the educational process into a proactive search for new alternatives to violent behaviour, without pressure or the imposition of ideas by experienced teachers.

Finally, some projects took **adolescent girls themselves as the starting point** (rather than a particular form of violence or a particular space or strategy) and aimed to enable them, by providing life skills and knowledge, to be able to navigate any space – home, relationships, school and public spaces. For instance, in the State of Palestine, the Women's Studies Centre (WSC) specifically targeted adolescents with disabilities and their families to increase their skills and knowledge to prevent sexual violence in schools and communities. In addition, in El Salvador, in the context of ongoing conflict and high rates of crime and violence, Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (ACP) attempted to create the space for prevention of violence against adolescent girls – an often-overlooked area of work in humanitarian and conflict-affected settings. For a snapshot of all projects, see Figure 2.

FIGURE 2:
The ten UN Trust Fund projects included in this synthesis review



All projects ultimately touched on all levels of the socioecological model (Heise, 1998) – that is, working across individual, household, community and society levels – regardless of their initial entry point, and all were anchored in partnerships with local youth organizations and women’s rights organizations (WROs). As we will discuss later, they invested heavily in creating an enabling environment at the community level for youth activism in particular, to strategically push policymakers to take action. In addition, in most countries these organizations were the first to try to galvanize local- or national-level support for prevention programmes specifically for adolescent girls. There are therefore some important lessons from this sample on the limits on and opportunities for early advocates in this area of work. Finally, and most critically, each organization brings a unique vantage point to this programming, which indicates that there are opportunities for fruitful partnerships when it comes to rolling out adolescent-focused approaches.



3. METHODOLOGY

This synthesis review focuses on surfacing (mining, analysing and synthesizing) practice-based insights relevant to adolescent-focused approaches to VAWG prevention. An inductive approach was taken to exploring the why and how of engaging adolescents, using selected documentation (monitoring and evaluation reports) from the 10 projects. Although an overarching question (“What can we learn from projects that have worked on adolescent approaches?”) guided the whole process, the synthesis review does not aim to answer pre-decided research questions in a deductive way; rather, it opens up space for diverse practitioner priorities and reflections to take centre stage. Therefore, although further guiding questions were developed as the process evolved, the themes explored and insights emerging in this synthesis review were strongly determined by the practice-based

insights in project reports. This does mean, however, that information is lacking where historical project documentation did not discuss certain issues or gaps were left in their reflections. The main process (document review) was complemented by a brief review of other literature, as well as FGDs with representatives of the 10 projects. The FGDs collected data (see appendix A on the UN Trust Fund website for the FGD questionnaire), with new insights emerging from putting different adolescent-focused approaches into conversation with each other. The themes (directly shaped by practitioner insights) that emerged were used to structure the synthesis review. The conclusions include a set of tailored recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and donors, and researchers working in the field of ending VAWG.



Women participating in a project from AMREF in the Serengeti region of Tanzania where the project is aiming to end female genital mutilation. Credit: UN Women/UN Trust Fund: Gemma Wood.

4. KEY THEMATIC LESSONS EMERGING FROM PRACTICE

4.1. Anchoring prevention programming in adolescent girls' sense of safety

LITERATURE REVIEW

In most contexts and spaces, adolescent girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual and reproductive health and rights complications, be subjected to harmful practices or school dropout, and experience IPV or sexual abuse during adolescence (UN Women, 2015). Adolescence is also the age when perceptions of safety are shaping and firming up, and adolescents understand the role of their peers and adults in mitigating or exacerbating violence and the role that external resources in their environments play in protecting them from violence. Research suggests that adolescents' perception of their levels of safety in their environments can affect their involvement in risk behaviours, decision-making and responses to interventions designed to prevent violence (Herrman and Silverstein, 2012).

Carrying out safety audits and perceptions of safety studies before designing the project can therefore help implementers to understand how girls are particularly affected by violence and identify factors that can affect their perception of their safety in their environments (see "Environments made safe" in the RESPECT package for examples). These data become especially pertinent for project design in the absence of prevalence data on violence against adolescent girls – data that often fall through the cracks in data on VAC and VAW (Guedes et al., 2016). According to a recent UNICEF report,

“while SDG indicator 16.2.1 was designed to monitor violent discipline against children aged 1–17, almost all available data are limited to children < 15 years old, leaving an important gap in data for adolescents aged

15–19. Similarly, most national IPV estimates are limited to women and girls who are *already married or cohabiting*, excluding violence within informal romantic partnerships common among adolescents. As a result, most IPV research does not capture the full range of sexual abuse that adolescents experience, including violence by informal partners, attempted (not just completed) forced sex, non-physical sexual coercion, and cyber abuse (i.e. by text or online) (UNICEF, 2020a, p. 11).”

This scarcity of data is further increased for adolescent girls from marginalized communities. In conflict and humanitarian settings for instance, girls' already fragile support networks, limited access to safe public spaces and tenuous claim on schooling are further strained by crises and displacement (IRC, 2017). In addition, despite the pervasiveness and high risk of VAG, the international responses on research, policy and practice tend to miss the crucial and vulnerable stage of adolescence, and adolescent girls fall through the cracks in prevention and response programming, as they are either too young for those targeting women or too old for child-friendly programmes. Similarly, there are currently very few data on violence against adolescent girls of marginalized ethnicities and socioeconomic status and those with disabilities, and there are even fewer on what is effective. Much more work is therefore needed on how adolescents who face multiple and intersecting types of discrimination perceive their safety and navigate their diverse settings and on how prevention programmes can be tailored to their diverse needs (SVRI and Equality Institute, 2020).

For practitioners, adolescent girls' perception of their safety was often the starting point for the intervention, especially in the absence of prevalence data (or given limited capacity to collect it) for the target age group, region and/or intersecting identity. To tailor the violence prevention intervention and to know where to start when building self-efficacy, life skills and confidence, practitioners deemed it crucial to first understand the full extent to which girls feel safe and confident in navigating their myriad environments – homes, schools, refugee camps, public spaces and digital spaces. As a practitioner and peer educator from AWC in Serbia stated during FGDs,

“It was only after beginning the intervention, did I realize how much girls live with the constant fear of getting raped, whether in schools or on their way in and out of schools” (FGD, 5 March 2021).

And they reported that this feeling of lack of safety remains even in spaces that are designed to be youth-friendly, for example soccer fields or online forums for young people, which practitioners find are largely occupied and/or dominated by boys. Therefore, over time, gender norms internalized by adolescent girls make it less and less acceptable for them to be seen in mixed-gender spaces (IRC, 2017). The spatial boundaries within which adolescent girls can move around – how far they can travel, where they can go with or without being accompanied and what they can do in those spaces – are firmly set out and upheld by sanctions in all contexts that practitioners worked in and have important implications for programme design.

An initial analysis of perceptions of safety of girls and key stakeholders around them (parents, teachers, etc.) can therefore help to inform several aspects of violence prevention programming, according to practitioners. It can help in determining which spaces and entry points are to be prioritized (safe homes/parenting interventions, safe schools interventions or legal/policy-level work, or some combination thereof), the design of curricula, and even how and to what extent boys are included in training sessions (mixed-gender interventions or girls-only spaces, or some combination thereof staggered over time). It affects not only project strategies but also practical concerns such as how long girls can stay after school to attend the

programme and still feel safe returning home, or whether to host them in public or private spaces. In addition, it has very important implications for whether or not girls feel safe travelling to service providers by themselves when necessary. Several practitioners found this to be one of the biggest barriers to accessing services for adolescent girls. To illustrate how project design must be informed by initial studies on safety, the WSC, when working on a violence prevention project in the State of Palestine, faced multiple barriers with regard to data when it came to girls with disabilities. There were some data suggesting that sexual assaults and rape (including family incest) were steadily on the rise when the project began, but there were very limited data on sexual violence among adolescent girls. This was because of widespread underreporting, especially on adolescent girls with disabilities. Through a baseline study, it found that perceptions of safety even in adolescence varies considerably with age and gender, with older adolescent girls having a much greater sense of awareness of sexual violence compared with their younger or male counterparts. Moreover, among girls with disabilities in particular, the internet and peer interactions were considered the most unsafe spaces, and limited availability of accessible reading materials on the subject was pointed out as a major gap (see section 4.2 for more information on how curricula and materials were designed accordingly).

To enhance self-confidence, sense of safety and life skills, almost all projects worked on twin tracks: (i) carving out girls-only safe spaces (separate from women's safe space programming and mixed-sex programming) and (ii) recognizing that existing public and private spaces are gendered, and incrementally reclaiming those spaces for adolescent girls. GRS South Africa, for instance, found through a survey that girls feel very unsafe in almost all the environments they inhabit – home, school, streets, markets, places where they catch taxis and parks (in declining order of perception of safety). To address this, GRS adapted its soccer-based curricula and the activities of the all-female SKILLZ Street and worked on a mixed-sex Generation SKILLZ programme to pilot a VAWG prevention component. For the all-female programme, female near-peer mentors known as Coaches were recruited and trained extensively through a 5-day training course and were then mentored through follow-up sessions and supportive supervision.

After that, they delivered educational interventions in four schools, which stretched over 20 sessions. The Generation SKILLZ curriculum took place over seven sessions, in which male and female learners participated in a combination of mixed-sex and single-sex activities. Conversations on the unpacking of gender norms, the intersections of alcohol and drug use with violence, unsafe sex and HIV infection, and sexual and reproductive health and rights were encouraged, as was active listening (GRS UN Trust Fund annual report, year 1). As a practitioner from GRS pointed out during the FGDs,

“The initial days were just about reclaiming public spaces for girls. We went up to boys in soccer fields with the girls to normalize girls occupying and being seen in that space” (FGD, 5 March 2021).

The external evaluation found that these acts of reclaiming space and building self-confidence allowed the girls to feel a greater sense of control over their lives, increased their self-efficacy and stopped them feeling isolated (see appendix B on the UN Trust Fund website for results and link to evaluations). Similarly, in another project, it was deemed necessary to create safe spaces online for girls and to first expand their visibility and influence on social media – in Serbia, AWC designed a comprehensive girl-led informational and educational campaign entitled “I can say no”. The campaign was designed to encourage the participation of young people, while some activities were implemented directly by AWC. Campaign elements included the dissemination of print, audio and video materials; an internet site; social networks (Facebook and Instagram posts); online applications and interactive games (on how certain real-life situations should be handled and the opinions of girls), vlogs created by young adolescent girls, and data collection on sexual harassment among young people and promotion of the results.

Practitioners also take into account how adolescent girls’ differing and intersecting identities shape their individual and collective experiences, and thus their perceptions of their safety in the myriad spaces they occupy. For instance, in El Salvador, ACP worked with adolescents in a conflict setting. Within that setting, it worked with high-risk adolescents such as pregnant and younger adolescents. Youth advocates did not feel fully confident in advocating for their safety and did not feel

seen because there were few data on the violence faced by adolescents at the municipal or national level, or there was no specific budget in the municipal youth unit to attend to their specific needs. The project worked to make visible the problem of violence against adolescents to the government and to galvanize support from other civil society stakeholders, by generating knowledge through local and participatory diagnoses for the elaboration of municipal policies, research at the national level on the progress and challenges in complying with the special comprehensive law for a life free of violence for women and the consolidation of a national system of data and statistics and information on violence against women. Staff from the organization also stressed the need for additional safety planning in the future, and the need for continuous mentoring and building a dynamic of reciprocal empathy, trust and support in this context of insecurity and high crime rates, so that youth community leaders could continue to carry out their work safely.

Practitioners also pointed to how it is not uncommon for girls to feel more unsafe after the project has ended.

During FGDs, several practitioners pointed out how in some situations increased awareness of the various forms of violence left girls with the feeling of being unsafe: For instance, Autonomous Women’s Center stated that,

“There were several girls who said, I would never want to be in a relationship any more, it’s too scary” (FGD, 5 March 2021).

In fact, AWC’s evaluation survey results indicate that girls in the intervention group feel less safe post-intervention than girls in the control group. Interviews with these girls revealed that the reason they feel less safe post-intervention is because they now know how to recognize violence and know the different forms of violence, but feel that despite their knowledge they “cannot influence the outside world”. Similarly, in Mongolia, the key goal for the MWF’s project was to increase boys’ and girls’ knowledge and change their perceptions of violence in the school environment, and help them to acquire a certain degree of confidence in their right to enjoy a safe environment in school. Although the final survey report and interviews with girls during the final evaluation visits demonstrated increased awareness on the girls’ part of their rights, which has translated into their intolerance of

violence in school and other settings, in the interviews they also raised more concerns about their safety than in the baseline interviews. They also raised concerns about spaces that had not been brought up during the baseline interviews; for example, girls raised concerns about their safety on the internet and in other spaces, such as on the roads to and from school and in school toilets.

Interpreting perceptions of safety post-intervention is complex and any implications of this for whether the project was effective or not have to be carefully considered. Practitioners reiterated that this is not necessarily negative, as it can lead to increased self-protection, but if it grows disproportionately to the risk it can have a negative impact on the girls by heightening fear once the project has ended. They emphasized that in such situations, although the behaviours and actions of men and boys, and focusing on girls' self-efficacy, and building their skills and confidence can affect their continued sense of safety and well-being, continued handholding and mentoring by agents of change around them that goes beyond the life of the project to build an enabling environment for girls is essential for adolescent-focused programming (see section 4.3 for more on agents of change).

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Safety audits emerged as an important tool for designing prevention projects for adolescents, especially in the absence of prevalence data.
- Reclaiming public and private spaces was seen as a critical first step to changing the spatial boundaries imposed on girls at this age.
- Some practitioners reported girls feeling more unsafe after the project, emphasizing the importance of key agents of change among and around them and of ensuring that adolescent-friendly services are available to them during and after the project.

4.2. Ensuring that training methodologies are diverse, age-appropriate, frequent

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the design of training methodologies and curricula (for both in-school and out-of-school activities) that are used to support prevention programmes focused on adolescents. When it comes to designing training methodologies and curricula, it is now well documented in the literature that training and workshops (for both women and girls) that are intensive and go beyond one-off sessions, that integrate experiential methodologies and critical self-reflection, that are well adapted to the local context, and that ensure facilitators are well-trained and mentored throughout the project, are more likely to be effective in preventing VAWG (Kerr Wilson et al., 2020). Participatory group training approaches are also seen as promising when it comes to IPV prevention, specifically among young people in the Global South. For VAC interventions, several design elements of parenting interventions are well documented – for instance, Digolo et al. (2019) found that promoting self-reflection on power imbalances in relationships and family well-being, encouraging discussions on effects of gender socialization on child development and building skills to manage children's behaviour can help to reduce VAC and/or IPV.

When it comes to adolescent-focused approaches, there are fewer studies identifying cross-cutting design elements that are effective or promising, and even fewer studies unpack the design elements necessary to make training inclusive and effective for a diverse cohort of adolescent girls facing multiple and intersecting types of discrimination. Moreover, although it is evident that training and curricula need to be tailored to diverse contexts, more research could be conducted on how to tailor programmes rather than using a “one size fits all” approach.

All CSOs recognized that there is an important balance to be struck between adapting and applying an evidence-based training methodology that has worked elsewhere and developing a new methodology designed for a specific context (see appendix B on the UN Trust Fund website for details on the methodologies used in each project). Plan International Vietnam, for instance, adapted its training curriculum from existing curricula such as the Yaari Dosti and Sakhi Saheli programmes, Program H and Program M, Plan International’s Learn without Fear campaign, United States Agency for International Development’s Doorways programme, and Paz y Desarrollo’s Love Journey, but it tailored it to the context through the active and meaningful involvement of students. The training used a children’s rights and gender equality framework, including gender-responsive teaching practices, positive discipline methods and response to violence. The curriculum was used to train a key pool of 700 teachers as agents of change in 20 schools in Hanoi, including lower and upper secondary schools and high schools. They were trained and supported through a 2-year training programme. This created a strong front line of teachers, who played a key role in tailoring the intervention to suit their schools’ contexts.

Adapting an approach to the context relies heavily on the skills of the front-line change agents to tailor training to the diverse and often unpredictable needs of adolescent girls (see section 4.3 for more on the front line and agents of change). One of the key ways in which this is achieved is by training, supporting and mentoring them to co-create the discourse with adolescent girls through careful groundwork and creative improvisation to bring them into the centre of project design, rather than working with an entirely homogenized and fixed training script without tailoring it to them (see more on youth–adult partnerships in section 4.3):

We made an explicit shift from saying that we were “educating girls” towards a “school-based” approach that targeted all relevant beneficiaries in the school setting, and this proved to be a successful strategy, as it contributed to creating safer environments for girls and boys with a long-term impact on culture and norms in these schools, led by the girls and schools themselves with support from us (MWF, final report).

This adaptation also alludes to an important move away from a gender-exclusive, top-down lens towards a bottom-up, gender-transformative lens (see section 4.5). Similarly, in Nepal, Restless Development worked with local WROs and youth organizations to co-create discourse and ground the projects in local narratives so that the organization was not seen as coming from the outside to change social norms. It found that a purely human-rights-based argument for ending the harmful practice was often perceived by the community as too narrowly legal and created faith-based or cultural defensiveness, or led to family conflict.

Striking a balance between a uniform delivery of organizational training and careful improvisation at the front line is hard, and in contexts where top-down rote learning and pedagogical training is the norm, facilitators often fall back on scripts. An interesting example is pointed out by the GRS evaluation, which finds in its observation of the SKILLZ Street Plus project in schools that Coaches were sometimes reciting scripted lessons, following the pedagogical practice of predetermined scripts and looking for pre-decided answers to aspects of IPV and HIV/AIDS prevention. According to the evaluators, this is both a strength and weakness of the project: it ensures that young people gain vital knowledge regarding social problems and invaluable information that clearly buttresses personal health. However, it simultaneously creates an atmosphere where learning is based on predetermined correct and incorrect answers rather than personal exploration of difficult socioemotional challenges.

All practitioners, after designing and piloting the training, had to course-correct to meet the diverse needs of adolescent girls, especially those with intersecting identities or specific needs. Several projects working on IPV prevention and fostering healthy relationships, for instance, found in the first year that the training sessions had largely been designed for heterosexual couples – the modules on relationships only included heterosexual examples in case studies and scenarios. There was very little in the curriculum that affirmed young lesbian girls’ choices in relationships, and therefore a need was identified for the curriculum to include some discussion on same-sex relationships. Mid-course reflection and monitoring data on uptake of the curriculum revealed patterns in who was more likely to attend or benefit from training and who was getting left

out. For example, GRS, on reviewing its session attendance records, found that female participants who were already in relationships were less likely to attend. They resisted discussions around intimate partnerships and negotiation in an intimate partner relationship, whereas adolescent girls who were not in intimate partnerships were much more receptive and likely to attend. Not only that, but there were differences in achieved results by age group. Taking into account the results of post-program surveys, as well as attendance figures, it found that girls younger than 14 reported higher levels of self-efficacy, benefits of playing soccer and gender-equitable attitudes than girls 14 years and above. Based on this learning, GRS strengthened the capacity of the Coaches to make the program content more accessible to the target groups it was not reaching. Similarly, WSC from the State of Palestine, even when working with girls with disabilities from the beginning, found that tools had to be developed to suit adolescents of different age groups and different disabilities – all training materials were turned into colouring books and stories for young adolescents, and case studies and educational material for older adolescents or university students. The stories, case studies and materials were made available in braille for visually impaired people, and were recorded for adolescents with mental disabilities.

In relation to this, all practitioners stressed the need for interventions that were designed to take into account the immediate circumstances, ages, schedules and safe spaces of adolescent girls. Girls from Soweto in South Africa had several afternoon responsibilities and concerns (caring for siblings, housekeeping responsibilities, spending time with friends and partners and wariness of travelling home after interventions) that put constraints on their ability to stay after school. Similarly, in Viet Nam, the project found it extremely challenging to plan around the busy schedules of students, especially those in high school, to implement the project. The project eventually integrated the training into the existing schools' structures and programme. To reach huge numbers of students in schools, instead of organizing extra class activities, the project made use of head teachers' time with students every Monday or Saturday to deliver the knowledge and skills to students through classroom sessions. For student-led activities, communication events were organized on the second month of the

school year when the students were not very busy with their studies. In addition, in the 2015–2016 school year, through a 2-day refresher training course for the youth community leader clubs, the project built on its first year of experience by working with students to standardize the school communication events and youth-led communication initiative.

As a practitioner from Serbia stated, there is a need to design curricula to engage “where young people are”, and where they are varies considerably across time and space, even during the life of a project.

Although the project had initially planned most of its activities in-person, to ensure that the project message was communicated using forums and channels that adolescents frequent a combination of offline and online activities was implemented during the project. Online training sessions were conducted, Instagram was leveraged, video blogs were posted on YouTube on topics concerning online and sexual harassment, and AWC participated in the youth conference Teen Talk 2017, where a workshop on myths and facts about VAG in intimate partner relationships was held with an audience of approximately 400 young people.

CSOs stressed that, although it may seem effective to give adolescents a lot of new information in a short time, an environment also needs to be established for open reflection, where it is acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them. They emphasized that this is essential because ultimately the programmes are as much about adolescents reflecting on their personal health and choices, and developing self-esteem and a sense of self-worth, as they are about learning and gaining information from the project.

Practitioners suggested that small changes to the curriculum and training sessions could help in this; for example, according to GRS, additional “breathing space” could be inserted into curricula, and participants could be asked to write their most significant stories of change, thus opening up more time for reflection and allowing participants to raise their concerns (GRS, year 2 report and FGD, 5 March 2021).

All practitioners found through initial pilots and small-scale testing that deepening their engagement through more frequent follow-up and intense work

with adolescent girls was necessary to go beyond awareness-raising and achieve behavioural change outcomes.

In Serbia, for instance, although the majority of adolescent girls and boys assessed the online and offline activities as interesting and adapted to their generation, the AWC team, peer educators and even adolescents themselves commented that follow-up after training should be more thorough and continuous. Similarly, in Mongolia, the MWF piloted and tested violence prevention classes, and found that building a strong understanding of the topic in a few hours was unrealistic and would at best raise awareness without resulting in the necessary shift in skills, attitudes and behaviours among adolescents. Thus, the project team and the target schools came to a decision that (i) more hours of training are required at each grade and (ii) the class for each grade had to be on different topics. As of the end of the first year of the project, the programme was planned to last 24 hours: 8 hours for each for the ninth to eleventh grades, to gradually build skills and raise awareness. These classes were intended to be taught and mainstreamed/integrated into the civic education classes of the school programme.

Increasing the intensity of interventions, however, also comes at the cost of scale – deeper and more intense engagement with fewer stakeholders means more limited reach.

Reflecting on the project evaluation, the AWC Serbia team considered that spreading out activities across a large number of communities and schools had indeed influenced the amount of effort that could be invested in working in each of the schools and the intensity of the training. In that respect, achieving both deeper change and larger numbers was not possible through training alone, especially for smaller organizations (international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the sample, such as Restless Development, Amref and Plan International, were indeed able to strike a balance between scale and intensity in the same time frame).

Moreover, although practitioners emphasized the need to increase the intensity of interventions, they also pointed out that if the interventions were too long there was a higher risk of training fatigue and dropout; this highlights the need for flexibility in curriculum planning. GRS South Africa, for instance,

midway through the project, reviewed its attendance records and found that the 19-session programme was too long and that participants struggled to attend all the sessions. Even for those who completed all the sessions, GRS felt that there were too many to get through and, as girls pointed out, after a point Coaches also ceased to be “cool” figures to connect with and were seen as “teachers” instead (see section 4.3 for more on the different key agents of change around girls). Moreover, their assignments also began to amount to too much additional homework. Therefore, GRS adjusted the length of the programme in the second and third years. A flexible curriculum is therefore key to coping with unpredictable events and suboptimal implementation environments to constructively address implementation challenges and still contribute to prevention.

No matter which age group they targeted, all practitioners reflected that they could have started with a younger age group for more preventive impact.

For most, the youngest cohort were still adolescents, and they suggested the need for interventions for younger children to be developed and tested. Given that values, attitudes and behaviours are firmly established through family, community and early socialization by the time children are 10 years old, they felt that it was harder to undo harmful gender norms during adolescence than it might be if prevention work started earlier. Working with young adolescents (10–14 years) and their social networks to promote equitable gender norms is also an emerging area of research, and gaps in knowledge remain on how gender norms are shaped among adolescents early on; gender-transformative programming is needed to undo this. This is discussed in section 4.5.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Constant adaptation of the prevention training methodology requires the skills of front-line change agents, and is key to meeting adolescent girls “where they are” – that is, taking into account their immediate circumstances, ages, schedules and safe spaces.
- Although it is desirable for young people, coaches and learners to gain a lot of information in a short time, it is important to include “breathing space” in curricula and training methodologies/plans to allow for mistakes and course correction.
- Frequent interactions and in-depth training sessions are key for going beyond awareness-raising to achieve behavioural outcomes, but if the training course is too long and intense, there is a higher risk of fatigue and dropout.

4.3. Mobilizing agents of change among and around adolescent girls

LITERATURE REVIEW

An important design consideration in adolescent-focused approaches is finding and mobilizing the primary agents of change in prevention programming to anchor and sustain the intervention. Another knowledge brief in this series details the journey CSOs take to transform at-risk women and survivors into agents of change; however, the considerations for adolescents are worth noting separately, because the literature on it is still nascent. In the different types of prevention programming with adolescents, three types of agents of change (and combinations thereof) can be found: (i) adolescents, their peers and near-peers, (ii) the adults surrounding the adolescents and (iii) a range of school-based actors, such as teachers and school administrator.

When it comes to **adolescent-led** programming, the literature is sparse. However, there is some work that investigates the effectiveness of peer-to-peer programming. At this life stage, the role of peers

becomes paramount and social norms formation is at its strongest, as seen in the Global Early Adolescent Study (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). Sanctions for deviating from gender norms are enforced by parents and peers. Effective strategies are considered to be those in which adolescents initiate or share decision-making and responsibility with adults, promote the strengths and diversity of young people and foster their decision-making, responsibility and learning in a safe and supportive environment (Wong et al., 2010), thereby seeing adolescents not just as target groups but as collaborators, partners and leaders in violence prevention programming. Such programmes have been successful in a variety of settings for violence prevention, especially in reaching adolescents from marginalized communities (see Struthers et al., 2019, p. 19 for summary of evidence). However, the literature also recognizes challenges in recruiting, mentoring and sustaining the involvement of adolescent girls in a manner that goes beyond tokenism and supports them to safely handle the complexity of issues related to violence. Another type of change agent is what is referred to in the literature as “near-peers” (Struthers et al., 2019). They are slightly older than the target age group for the intervention. Although the literature on specifically near-peers is limited, there is some evidence to suggest that they are considered more approachable, particularly for interventions on IPV and sexuality education.

In addition to adolescent-led programming, some programmes are designed to empower and work with the **caregivers** around adolescent girls as agents of change. Literature on the value of involving actors such as parents and guardians in addition to the girls themselves (i.e. multilevel or intergenerational interventions versus girls-only prevention programmes) is limited (Haberland et al., 2018). However, there is evidence to suggest that standalone parenting programmes can lead to significant reductions in both IPV and child maltreatment or harsh discipline (Doyle et al (2018) for Bandedereho in Rwanda and Ismayilova and Karimli (2018) for the Graduation Approach in Burkina Faso). Most of these programmes reiterate that a stable, nurturing relationship with one or more parents during a child’s early years is critical for violence prevention – but most

focus on younger children only, are largely involving only mothers, reinforcing unpaid and unequal labour, and there is still much less prevention programming on parenting interventions specifically for older adolescents (Digolo et al., 2019).

Apart from parents, **teachers** can also be an important point of contact for adolescents in schools and universities, and optimizing their skills and ability to prevent, identify and respond to violence has been shown to have some impacts. Training sessions for teachers and school staff are important for preventing school-related VAG, as what children learn and how it is taught are fundamental to their experiences in school. To tackle violence in and around schools, teachers must be more aware of the various dynamics in their classrooms, including gender, power, and racial or ethnic dynamics. In addition, they must be more aware of their own biases and behaviours (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016, p. 66). Careful facilitation and working in partnership with teachers can yield powerful results – for example, Devries et al. (2015), in their evaluation of the Good School Toolkit in Uganda, found statistically significant changes in prevalence of VAC in schools that had undergone a violence prevention intervention – this included violence against girls, boys and children with disabilities, perpetrated by both teachers and peers. Children also gained a sense of being listened to and reported a shift in power dynamics between children and teachers. However, there is still relatively limited evidence on the efficacy of these agents of change for sustainability, for older adolescents, and for other forms of violence such as IPV or non-partner sexual violence against adolescents.

An important aspect of working with caregivers, teachers, parents and near-peers who are identified to be agents of change surrounding adolescents is the recognition that there may also be perpetrators of violence among them. In fact, evidence suggests that the most common perpetrators of physical and emotional violence in LMICs, for both boys and girls across a range of ages, are household members, with prevalence often surpassing 50 per cent, followed by student peers. Existing data also indicate high prevalence of physical violence from teachers towards students (Devries et al., 2018). Therefore,

harnessing their potential to engage as primary change agents around adolescent girls without addressing their complicity in perpetration can be risky, and speaks to the potential of expanding the conversation on VAG to include these non-gendered forms of violence in schools.

All the projects in the sample were multilevel interventions, and all practitioners stressed that adolescent girls need role models. Some felt that existing authority figures in their lives (e.g. parents and teachers) should be transformed into role models, whereas some aimed to create role models outside girls' regular environment (e.g. youth football coaches and community facilitators), and some sought to create role models among adolescents themselves (i.e. peer-to-peer approaches). This section describes these differing approaches and their pros and cons, as illustrated by the projects; overall, the choice of approach seems to have been governed largely by the form of violence being tackled by the project, with some agents of change deemed better suited to tackling certain forms of violence than others.

Girl-led prevention programming

As discussed in the previous sections, all the projects in the sample empowered girls as agents of change in their own lives, for example by building their skills, confidence and self-efficacy. However, some of the projects went a step beyond this to empower girls to bring about further change in their communities. They did so through peer-to-peer approaches, or approaches where the girls are trained to raise awareness and foster skills. **Projects that mobilized adolescents as change agents found peer-to-peer approaches promising, especially at the pilot stage or on a small scale; however, they also identified limitations of the approach and pointed out that more research is needed to fully understand its applicability in relation to different forms of violence and at scale.** For instance, the UWF provided grants, supported capacity development and provided training to support initiatives by girl-led organizations, whose aim was to prevent violence among teenage girls in their local communities. Those who graduated from the UWF First Step to Success programme found:

“...that girls involved in work with their peers on issues of violence against girls have several advantages in comparison with teachers and parents. Young people have similar values, understand teenagers they communicate with. Teenagers show a high level of trust to their peers; they are equal in relations and have similar inner worlds and experiences. Young people have the same attitude to the problem, the same educational, cultural and social level. They understand each other through non-verbal and verbal cues ... It creates higher self-esteem, confidence in themselves, feeling of dignity not only in young trainers, but also in peers they work with. Among weaknesses of the methodology, there can be possible distortion of transferred information, insufficient life experience of teenagers, and lack of knowledge on certain issues interesting for their peers, but they haven't been trained on yet” (UWF, annual report, year 1).

As the project was rolled out, having received proposals from all nine target regions across Ukraine, UWF recognized that much more work was needed to collectivize them, to create networks between them and WROs, and to boost their knowledge on different forms of violence.

An important reason for promoting local adolescent-led approaches, as identified by practitioners, is the potential for innovation and tailored approaches to violence prevention. i.e., As APDEL Cameroon identified:

“Working with adolescents brought innovative learning. Each person brought a new idea: ‘I want to talk to my friend, but maybe using this method’” (APDEL Cameroon, FGD, 5 March 2021).

Plan International Vietnam worked to empower girls to lead their own initiatives by providing small seed grants. Based on these, the girls came up with communication and advocacy plans in their communities and Plan International Vietnam provided mentorship:

“We found the experience from the seed grant incredible. They are so creative. They decide what they want to do with the grant, so, for example, in one school, they used the funds to go from school to school together to talk about how violence occurs among peers. In another school, a group took the \$200 and produced a radio

programme on different forms of violence. In another school, they designed a special costume, which they wore while riding bicycles around their communities to raise awareness. Where we see potential and innovation, we fund it and then we can provide training and communication, but they produce the messaging really, in a way that speaks to their peers directly and gets to the heart of the issue. (Plan International Vietnam, FGD, 5 March 2021)

In addition to peer-to-peer approaches, projects have also empowered girls to become agents of change in their communities and schools and create shared awareness with adults on issues of violence against adolescent girls. However, one of the challenges of this approach was that it was consistently not taken very seriously by adults:

“A general lack of trust and respect towards young girls and boys as leaders and trainers was observed among school teachers” (UWF, final report).

Plan International Vietnam, for instance, as part of its whole-school approach to violence, empowered adolescents to form peer support groups, and shift the awareness of other students, and the School Management Board, teachers and parents to play active roles and participate in activities relating to violence prevention. Midway through the project, however, it recognized that additional effort had to be made to signal the leadership of young adolescents. As a small step in that direction, it changed the name “peer support group” to “youth team leader club” to promote the image/position of students as agents of change leading activities, to attract the participation of other students and to signal to adults their leadership in preventing VAG in schools. The name itself also created momentum and increased the willingness of students and adults to participate in the activities. As practitioners from Plan International Vietnam reflected in their FGD,

“We want to look at adolescent girls and boys – they are not beneficiaries, they are the change agents. We want them to be the leaders of the movement for gender-based violence (GBV) in schools. It’s the right age to make them leaders and we are hopeful that they will bring change because they can influence not only their peers, but also adults and governments.” (FGD, 5 March 2021).

Promoting adolescents as leaders, and promoting youth–adult partnerships are therefore growing areas of work in violence prevention that may need more careful testing and documentation to find effective approaches.

There is growing evidence in the literature and practice on neighbourhood crime on the merits of youth–adult partnerships for reducing violence (Ohmer, 2020). These differ slightly from traditional intergenerational programmes that involve young people with older adults; they foster similar goals, including promoting relationships, mutual support and community engagement. In essence, collective efficacy is developed when young people and adults trust one another and work together to solve problems (Ohmer, 2020). Some of the UN Trust Fund projects demonstrate how this can be done, but much more work and documentation is needed on this. The project from Ukraine in particular offers some important insights, as it piloted effective cooperation among adults and young people through art. UWF found art methods to be effective in bringing girls and boys together to discuss behaviours and promote a strong stance against VAW among young boys and girls. Art techniques and an informal communication approach made it possible to transform the educational process into a proactive search for new alternatives to the violent behaviour rather than imposing ideas from above through teachers. It was also an important non-violent communication experience for teens. Art therapy also proved to be an efficient method for working with at-risk adolescents in particular, as it allowed them to discuss and promote tolerance, and helped them to communicate traumatic experiences without becoming overwhelmed or dissociated from their feelings. The art form, such as story-making, role-playing or drawing, acted as a “third party” that could help victims of violence to tell their story safely, and to own their narrative with facilitation and support from adults.

Parents

None of the 10 adolescent-focused approaches were standalone parenting interventions, nor did any have components of it, but all projects involved parents to varying degrees in their interventions. Projects working on harmful practices in particular emphasized the importance of engaging parents. In Nepal for instance, youth organization Restless Development worked to eradicate *chhaupadi*, the long-held and widespread practice affecting girls and women in the far- and mid-western regions. The harmful

practice is rooted in the belief that during menstruation women are “impure” and need to therefore be removed from the household to live in a cow shed, usually for 5–7 days every month. They do not have access to food such as milk and milk products during this time. Pregnant women also give birth in *chhaupadis* and remain there for 10–14 days with the same level of restrictions on food intake. As they are considered impure, they are forbidden from making physical contact with family, schools and the community. The common physical and psychological implications of *chhaupadi* are malnutrition, dehydration, poor hygiene, exposure, animal attacks and rape. Given that the practice is all-pervasive, the project worked at multiple levels, mobilizing young students, volunteer peer educators, traditional healers, community gate keepers, local CSOs and local institutions such as Ward Citizen Forum, citizens’ awareness committees and the District Women and Children Office. A large part of the effort was directed towards sensitizing parents and community leaders on negative impacts of *chhaupadi*, and emphasizing that they had much to learn. Incremental work and partnership between adolescents and parents helped to develop locally embedded narratives on the ill effects of *chhaupadi*, which pressurized government stakeholders to act. In addition, by the end of the project, girls and young women were able to discuss openly with male family members and parents the effects of *chhaupadi*, thus reversing the underlying norm that girls cannot openly discuss those ill effects with adults (Restless Development, final report, p. 65).

Even if projects did not involve parents directly, for several projects, reaching parents indirectly through adolescent girls to bring about transformative change was an explicit part of their theory of change.

Almost all the evaluations pointed to the fact that girls who were part of intensive training felt empowered to negotiate with regard to their rights, break barriers and gender stereotypes in their own families, and begin open discussions with them for the first time. Some grantees also pointed out how these interventions have inadvertently served as conduits for reaching mothers who may be experiencing IPV; during FGDs, several practitioners mentioned instances of boys and girls approaching peer educators and student counsellors to report having witnessed IPV at home and discuss options for helping their mothers. They therefore acknowledged the need to intentionally seek out intersections between

IPV and VAC interventions in future, thereby echoing the recent push for this in the literature.

In fact, some projects, especially those that used schools as the primary entry point, found it challenging to design effective parental engagement strategies that went beyond indirect reach and ad hoc meetings.

For instance, Plan International Vietnam, which piloted a whole-school approach in 20 schools in Hanoi and worked on a primarily adolescent-led model, decided to engage with parents through the available mechanism of parent-teacher meetings to have conversations about violence. It recognized during the project that although this was a pragmatic approach it did not produce the desired results. It was envisaged that the principals/vice-principals together with the master trainers could discuss VAG in schools during parent-teacher association meetings, but the discussions, usually conducted towards the end of the parent-teacher association meetings, were not very effective in retaining the interest of parents and guardians who were primarily there to discuss their children's academic performance in school. Plan International recognized that its project efforts had moved towards engaging with and building capacities of teachers, rather than parents. Although the project had still been able to reach close to 50,000 parents to raise awareness and garner their support for creating an enabling environment, it found that there were few

effective strategies for deeper parental engagement at the time that could be replicated or built from the ground up “due to the difficulties in finding the time and platform to delve into the private and restricted spaces that define families and the parent-child relationship” (annual report, year 2) while using schools as an entry point.

The critical need for effective engagement with parents and caregivers in adolescent-focused approaches became apparent, as several practitioners pointed to how, if they do not offer their support, parents can become barriers to violence prevention interventions. For instance, when asked who tends to get left behind in programmes for adolescents, the FGD group was unanimous that, in addition to girls from marginalized communities, girls whose parents do not give their consent for them to attend are left out of these interventions. To overcome this, GRS moved towards conducting one-on-one meetings with parents during home visits and initiated phone calls, which played a significant role in increasing the uptake of HIV testing among adolescents. Practitioners also recognized that, in addition to getting parental consent, it is important to get them to take responsibility for gender-equal socialization. As several practitioners pointed out, this is because they are often dealing with the downstream effects of parents not having taken that responsibility early on.



Students and activists in the City of Kruševac participate in an awareness raising activity within the project of the Autonomous Women's Center. Credit: Alternative Center for Girls NGO, City of Kruševac, Serbia.

Teachers

A key component of whole-school approaches in particular was to engage teachers as agents of change, and work incrementally to transform their norms and behaviours around violence against adolescents.

Their role and function is deemed crucial, ranging from information-sharing for referral and reporting and implementation of school policies on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) to, most critically, value formation. The MWF in Mongolia, for instance, placed strong emphasis on teachers as role models, and teachers were seen as key agents who should lead the implementation of GBV prevention in the schools. According to FGDs it conducted with teachers, prior to the intervention, violence in school settings was perceived as normal and teachers did not pay attention unless it was elevated to a critical level, but through training sessions with the project they became strong allies in the movement to prevent violence. However, within the first year of the project, MWF also recognized that majority of the high school teachers had strong traditional values in terms of gender roles. Although they were taught to deliver training sessions on GBV, this was not sufficient to change their own behaviour, and the project worked to address the critical self-reflection required first.

Some practitioners found that projects needed more tailored approaches to work with different groups within teachers and school staff. For instance, in Serbia, AWC found that the level of interest among wider academic staff varied considerably, and only younger members of faculty staff would be interested in engaging in this type of activity. As one of the peer educators stated, “Older generations of professors are near retiring and are not motivated to be educated on the issue, or to work on improving the situation.” To have a deeper understanding of the needs of educational professionals, AWC conducted several follow-up meetings with them to get an insight into the gaps in teachers’ knowledge and skills, and obstacles that they face in preventing and reacting to SRGBV, knowledge that helped in designing a more comprehensive and better-adapted education programme that included more focused and frequent follow-up for educational professionals.

Teachers’ motivation to be involved in violence prevention programming is also linked to wider institutional incentives. In Mongolia, the schools showed

support for the initiatives of the trainers to train high school teachers and made it mandatory for all high school teachers to attend these 1-day training courses taught by the trainers. In this context, it seemed to work and participation of a large number of high school teachers contributed to the success of the project in providing safe environments for girls. On the other hand, in South Africa, GRS’s evaluation, for instance, found that although the project had excellent relations with the students and soccer teams, there may have been an opportunity to develop more embedded relationships with the school administration and teachers – this was partly because the schools for the intervention were chosen by the Education Department based on high levels of teenage pregnancy, rather than GRS selecting schools that demonstrate an interest in the programme. Without buy-in from schools, support for the use of space and other resources, such as teachers’ time, were strained and it was difficult to link the programme to the core business of the school and its management team (GRS, final report, p. 8).

Near-peers

On agents of change outside of caregivers and teachers, several practitioners pointed to the value of creating agents of change among near-peers. GRS, for instance, trained young adults from the community as “Coaches” and mentors for HIV and IPV prevention programmes with adolescent girls, and in its early monitoring reports, it observed that Coaches were perceived by girls as occupying an intermediary role somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. This uniquely positioned the Coaches as both older mentors able to relate to adolescents’ sexual and social challenges and individuals armed with resources to guide them through that process.

Provision of self-care and connecting the near-peers to a wider group/networking was seen as critical for sustaining the movement. For example, in El Salvador, ACP empowered older adolescents and young people to be change agents, but recognized, particularly in the context of a conflict setting, that there was a need to strengthen and address the emotional health of young people who provide support to women, girls and adolescents. This was particularly important when they were in contact with survivors of violence. Through feedback from participating young people, the project identified the need to strengthen their resilience and address the vicarious trauma experienced. The project

determined that providing more support for self-care and also connecting them with each other might be some ways of addressing emotional health. The women who participated in these networks managed to build a dynamic of reciprocal, empathetic trust and sisterly support, which allowed them to break the silence and strengthen their self-determination. Similarly, in South Africa, the coaches and peer educators themselves brought up this need for networks and support; they believed that the network of coaches could be improved through social media platforms to link them together and excursions or team-building/appreciation sessions. The lack of a solid network may have contributed to coaches' perceptions that they were not adequately supported in schools in the recruitment of learners. The coaches who participated in the research also felt that more could have been done to support their professional development.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Multiple types of agents of change around girls have been mobilized and trained in adolescent-focused approaches (near-peers, teachers and parents), but each comes with its own pros and cons that need to be carefully considered.
- Girl-led programmes are promising because they restore dignity, give girls the capacity to aspire and encourage innovation; however, when scaling up interventions, challenges remain in maintaining the quality of the programme and measuring its impact.
- Promoting adolescents as leaders and promoting youth–adult partnerships are growing areas of work in violence prevention that may need more careful testing and documentation to find effective approaches.

4.4. Designing prevention programmes where there is an absence of adolescent-friendly services, laws and policies

LITERATURE REVIEW

Providing high-quality services to adolescent girls who have experienced violence is an important contribution to the continuum of VAW prevention (see Essential Services Package in UN Women 2018 and see chapter on “Services ensured” in the RESPECT package). Evidence suggests, however, that fear of perpetrator retaliation, stigma, low trust in the justice system, lack of awareness and, most critically, lack of access to high-quality, adolescent-friendly services results in high rates of non-disclosure of IPV and non-partner sexual violence among adolescent girls. Services for adolescents, much like prevention programming for them, often fall through the cracks (Ellsberg et al., 2017). There are therefore several opportunities for building constructive collaborations between child protection systems and services for women survivors of violence to address the needs of adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2020a). This includes laws and policies about reporting, how to refer to and interact with child protection authorities, and how to help survivors and their children access services, including parenting support.

However, very often practitioners are designing interventions in resource-constrained environments, without quality access to services, which can pose considerable risks to adolescents willing to report. Community volunteers or the primary agents of change surrounding adolescent girls are often trained and mentored to play an important role, as part of prevention programmes, to act as a bridge between adolescent girls and state agencies or CSOs by providing referrals, accompaniment and support for survivors who wish to disclose or access services (see “Services ensured” in the World Health Organization’s and UN Women’s RESPECT implementation package). More evidence is required, however, to fully understand the potential risks and benefits of working through community actors as first points of contact for adolescents, and, more broadly, the challenges of designing prevention interventions

in resource-constrained environments, and where services are simply hard to reach for adolescents, or are not adolescent-friendly.

All 10 UN Trust Fund projects offer lessons and insights on designing programming in resource-constrained environments where services are neither accessible to adolescents nor youth-friendly. As one practitioner said,

“To work with girls within an environment where services are not perfect, and often tend to judge young adults for seeking SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] services, it is important also to set expectations with girls; we can’t always promise that their problems will be solved given that it’s hard to change service provider attitudes within 3 years” (FGD, 5 March 2021).

To overcome this challenge, different projects took different paths. In South Africa, GRS **brought the services to the girls, communicated their specific challenges to service providers and accompanied them to the service providers.** Through youth-friendly soccer tournaments, GRS provided girls with access to HIV testing services. By decentralizing the provision of services from traditional health facilities, well known for the lack of youth-friendly services, GRS gave girls the confidence to test for HIV. The common challenges of stigma and the absence of youth-friendly services were exacerbated by under-resourced and overburdened health facilities in impoverished communities. These facilities face a high demand for services, understaffed facilities and limited resources to address the needs of the community. Adolescents are consequently required to endure long queues, inconvenient service times and limited confidentiality when accessing health services. To address this, GRS Care Coordinators also communicated the significant challenges faced by adolescents in accessing health services to local health facilities and community-based organizations. By building relationships with local health facilities, GRS was able to help participants’ to access HIV testing services, and treatment and care services. GRS also arranged specific clinic visit times and point people in local clinics. Interviews with survivors also indicated that they felt supported by trusted females (GRS Coaches) in their peer groups to access services. GRS, through its Caring Coaches and Care Coordinators, overall improved the access that girls have to these life-saving services, and the support that girls

received gave them the confidence to access services. This was a crucial area of the intervention for addressing the intersections between HIV, GBV and IPV.

Some projects have worked not only to bring services to girls but also to develop a unified model/standard for providing assistance to young victims of violence, by giving young activists a voice and a seat at the table.

The UWF, for instance, given its unique vantage point as the national women’s fund, was able to gather a group of experts including representatives of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and representatives of women’s organizations that have several years of experience in providing services for victims of violence, as well as young activists from the pilot regions engaged in the project activities. The experts discussed peculiarities and difficulties of providing services to young women and girls who suffer from violence, analysed the existing situation with the services and created an algorithm for developing a unified model. This was critical in the context, as in 2015 when the project began there was no such uniform model of work with young girls who experienced VAW, and social/welfare workers practised different approaches while working with such girls, not all of which were evidence-based and efficient. Apart from standardizing the delivery model, the project also acknowledged that prevention projects can very quickly increase the demand for services, and that it is important for projects to recognize and plan for that.

Evaluations have credited the projects not only with bringing services to girls, and bringing girls to service providers, but also with introducing school policies, codes of conduct and sex education into curricula for the first time in their countries, regions or municipalities.

Most of those interviewed as part of the evaluation of the Aman programme conducted by WSC in the State of Palestine considered the programme (which has since been adopted by the Ministry of Education) one of the most important extracurricular programmes, as it was the first to engage with a subject that was considered taboo despite its importance, in addition to being the first to raise the issue of sexual violence and ways to protect against it. In Cameroon, APDEL’s project opened discussions on sexual harassment in the target school institutions for the first time, which made it possible to make it an institutionalized topic of conversation, to pinpoint the extent of the problem and to share the means to fight against it.

Practitioners admitted that this type of institutionalization was impossible to do alone and required building alliances across the United Nations, government bodies and CSOs (see section 4.5 for more on partnerships), particularly for work on violence against adolescent girls, which often falls through the cracks for several organizations. Plan International Vietnam worked with the Department of Education and Training (DOET) to influence changes and recognition of the model for replication, keeping UN Women, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund in the loop and working in partnership with them to lobby together at the national level. Thanks to their combined efforts, in July 2015, the Gender-responsive School model was officially put in the national programme on GBV for 2016–2021, approved by Prime Minister. DOET also acknowledged the model of school counselling office set up by the project and commissioned a feasibility study to expand this model to all schools. In addition, DOET also used the Gender Responsive School model as a reference for developing the decree on educational environment of safety, healthiness, friendliness, prevention and response to school-based violence, and for creating grounds for gender-responsive schools nationwide.

In addition to policy change, several projects influenced budget allocations around SRGBV and violence against adolescent girls. For example, in Mongolia, the crime prevention councils demonstrated awareness of GBV and willingness to include GBV prevention in their policies and budget allocation. In addition, Plan International Vietnam's Gender-responsive School model has been recognized by central ministries, namely the Ministry of Labour – Invalids and Social Affairs and Ministry of Education and Training, while formulating the following: (i) the national action plan on GBV prevention and control, (ii) the circular on implementation of school counselling services in all schools and (iii) the decree on friendly, safe school and prevention of school violence. Plan International's insights based on the Gender Responsive School model were included in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs policy discussions, which in turn contributed to the inclusion of a safe, friendly, violence-free schools model comprising a comprehensive set of interventions in the National Thematic Project on Prevention and Response to Gender-based Violence 2016–2020 and Vision for 2030, which the Prime Minister of Viet Nam approved on 22 July 2016.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- All projects emphasize the absence of adolescent-friendly services in their contexts, and offer key insights on taking this into consideration when designing prevention programmes, especially in resource-constrained environments.
- Several practitioners worked to develop a unified model for providing assistance to young victims of violence, by giving young activists a voice and a seat at the table, to push for more adolescent-friendly services.
- Several CSOs worked in partnership with other organizations on creating an enabling environment for adolescent-friendly services by pushing for policies, budgets, frameworks and the implementation of laws such that violence against adolescent girls, especially those who are at risk, does not fall through the cracks.

4.5. Creating gender-transformative adolescent-focused programming

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescent-focused approaches have significant potential to transform harmful gender norms and behaviours to promote adolescents' right to spaces free of violence. Although such approaches are geared primarily towards individual agents of change, they are also an opportunity for creating systemic change in the spaces that adolescent girls occupy. However, patriarchal norms that diminish girls' autonomy and bodily integrity and perpetuate violence are not localized in one or another time and space – violence occurs throughout their lives and is a continuum of insecurity that affects their experiences at home, in and out of school, in public space and in the community (Plan International, 2018). Accordingly, researchers have called for interventions that employ a life-course and gender-transformative approach that addresses the root causes of gender inequalities and works to transform harmful gender roles, norms and power imbalances (UNICEF, 2020a).

However, there is limited work on the identification of effective design elements and key principles of such gender-transformative programming, with regard to adolescent-focused approaches.

The evidence is limited partly because measuring gender norms at community or societal level or even measuring changes over time is still an emerging area of research across all strategies of violence prevention, and even more so when it comes to adolescent-focused approaches. Existing methods often measure individual gender attitudes as a proxy for changes in norms, despite an increased awareness that these measures may not accurately capture community-level or large-scale societal-level changes in norms or behaviours (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). As a result, the emphasis on gender-transformative programming has not been commensurate with a shift in evaluation practice to take a complex systems approach that can capture changes that are complex, non-linear and multilevel. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are not usually appropriate or feasible for evaluating change across high levels of the ecological framework (e.g. national action, policy reform, multisectoral collaboration and whole-system strengthening) or multiple levels at once; these are precisely the strategies that are essential for long-term, sustainable change (Guedes et al., 2020). In addition, much research has been conducted on – but not with – adolescent girls, particularly those who belong to marginalized groups (Crooks et al., 2019). Such research runs the risk of further oppressing already marginalized groups (Charlton, 2000). Some recent work evaluated a school-based comprehensive sex education intervention in Mexico through a complex adaptive systems approach, identifying in detail how a gender-transformative approach can be potentially disruptive to existing social norms and how interactions between different levels of the intervention produced can gradually prevent IPV (Makleff et al., 2020).

The 10 UN Trust Fund projects and their evaluations offer important lessons with regard to multilevel gender-transformative programming. None of the projects were single-level or trying to bring about change only with individual agents of change in one setting or space; they all had multilevel theories of change and attempted to change a whole set of norms, values and

beliefs at societal level. The evaluations of these projects are also unique in that, through qualitative or mixed-methods data, they provide rich detail on how change occurs at different levels, often in entirely unpredictable ways, and how actions at one level have a knock-on effect on another. Therefore, they also capture the ways in which gender-transformative approaches can be disruptive, and can lead to resistance, backlash and often non-linear change. Most critically, the evaluations are all grounded in the voices of adolescent girls and are participatory in design.

From all the projects, it is apparent that being gender-transformative entails cultivating among adolescents a set of new skills and capabilities that defy traditional and generationally transmitted gender norms. These changes manifest themselves most dramatically in the process of youth activism, and as more girls enter spheres of activity beyond the norm they further break down long-standing normative restrictions. The projects provide them with an opportunity to practice constructing a collective identity through small but concerted action. A young girl saying no to FGMC in Serengeti, another girl having an open conversation on menstruation and its harmful impacts with her parents in Nepal, or another one pushing violence against adolescents to be “made visible” to the government through her advocacy and through data in post-conflict El Salvador: these are behavioural changes at the individual level, but these changes are difficult without a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationships of power at the household and community levels and without the formation of and support of new partnerships.

In other words, gender-transformative adolescent-focused programming is a deeply political process that entails undoing existing gender norms/perceptions and buttressing individual behaviour change with group and societal support, and vice versa. It goes beyond nudging adolescents and agents of change around them towards new forms of behaviour. Individual behaviour change and group-level work are mutually reinforcing, and there is more continuity than meets the eye between, on the one hand, individual acts of resistance and norm shift among adolescent girls in their homes and schools and, on the other, the more visible and dramatic forms of collective action, such as

community-led and youth activism to shift collective norms and implement laws and policies. For instance, in Nepal, Restless Development trained adolescent girls, community leaders and traditional healers, and in parallel built the capacity of local CSOs, especially WROs and youth organizations, to initiate campaigns and advocate for abolishing *chhaupadi* at village and district levels. This resulted in strong commitments from development officers in local governments to allocate their own budgets to awareness-raising activities (Restless Development, annual report, year 2). The local district officer admitted that “despite have a directive in place for almost a decade, it is woeful that we still hear about girls dying in *chhaupadi* huts. Programmes aimed to abolish *chhaupadi* practices should continue to focus on young people and adolescent girls and boys through schools, but it is also important that awareness-raising campaigns continue and at this very local level, we allocate funds towards it.” Restless Development also worked with national-level stakeholders through media campaigns, both print and radio, throughout the year to attract the attention of government agencies, and engaged directly with senior parliamentarians, who expressed their commitment to bringing in a draft bill following wide consultation. This reinvigorated the commitment of peer educators, who, in turn, emboldened the youth clubs on the ground to continue their peer-to-peer work. According to the chair of a youth club,

“We got support from peer educators to reform our club, set agendas to conduct various in-school and community-level activities during meetings and life skill camps. It was very difficult to organize activities and meetings before this project, but now our club organizes regular meetings once a month” (RD annual report, year 2).

Practitioners also point to how shifting gender norms occurs at an uneven pace, and when norms have shifted more quickly for the community, but not as quickly for girls themselves, this can pose serious safety risks for girls. In Tanzania, for instance, the internalization of harmful beliefs by women and girls themselves meant that for some girls, even when their parents refused FGMC, they themselves

resorted to dangerous methods of performing FGMC on themselves with razor blades (self-cutting) because of their internalized beliefs and desire to conform with social norms set by their peers. Some practitioners suggested risk assessments prior to programming with the support of adolescents themselves, to identify potential risks as far as possible. This situation speaks to the uneven pace of change when it comes to different actors in the community.

Advocacy and collective action are considered necessary by practitioners not only because they buttress individual behaviour change, but also because they can have a knock-on effect on other levels of intervention. Much more time and investment is needed to adequately capture this type of non-linear change. For example, in Serbia, a mid-course obstacle to the successful implementation of project activities occurred in 2017 with the withdrawal of the educational package on learning about sexual violence against children for pre-school, elementary and secondary schools just 6 months after their introduction. The package had been developed by the Belgrade-based non-governmental organization (NGO) Incest Trauma Center, with the support and supervision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. The packages were envisaged as a teaching aid and had been developed as a result of the first National Study on the Social Problem of Sexual Abuse of Children in Serbia. However, the negative reactions by some social actors (because of an alleged introduction of sexual education through these packages, encouragement of homosexual relations and inappropriateness of the topics for the children’s age, and disruption to tradition) led the Ministry of Education to withdraw the packages from use. The early monitoring reports of AWC also note a general drop in trust of school staff and principals in the work of CSOs, as well as a drop in motivation of teachers and reluctance to introduce the topic of violence when working with students. AWC reacted with a press release reminding the government of the complex system for licensing training that the state itself had established, and reminded the minister about the laws and international documents concerning elimination of violence that the government had committed to. AWC also took measures to try to prevent negative

impacts by meeting with senior ministry officials until project staff received affirmation from the ministry of its support for AWC's project. In short, although being gender-transformative is critical, these transformations in short periods of time are often disruptive for some community actors, and work at one level can generate backlash at another level and cause setbacks. Projects therefore emphasized the need to continually galvanize and maintain support for ongoing activities in addition to implementing the activities, which became critical for all, especially because they were the first in their contexts working to bring about systemic change to prevent VAG in this age group.

For several such activities intended to create an enabling environment, in particular youth-led campaigns and advocacy work, it is difficult to measure their direct impact on prevention; this is partly why measuring gender-transformative programming needs a diverse methodological toolkit for evaluations that go beyond RCTs). There is consensus among practitioners that this has a strong iterative and cumulative impact on visibilization of the problem and its root cause, which in turn is crucial for community level work on the project. More documentation of this process is necessary:

“We are not doing this work iteratively enough. Many more process data and mid-term evaluations are needed to fully grasp this interaction between individual behaviour and deep-rooted culture. Change takes time, but it’s important we learn iteratively so that we can measure the multi-sector, multilevel work needed to bring change” (Amref Tanzania, FGD, 5 March 2021).

To effect multilevel and gender-transformative change, partnership across multiple types of organizations is key. This is because each type of organization brings something to the table from its own unique vantage point. Local WROs and youth organizations, for instance, can prevent backlash by creating narratives that are locally grounded and resonate with local actors, rather than being seen as coming from the outside. In Nepal, for instance, Restless Development used women's groups and organizations as a platform to discuss *chhaupadi* and increase networking among them. The women's groups

were instrumental in galvanizing local support for the work of the volunteer peer educators. Their support helped to create local narratives that led to changes in the behaviour of people in the community on issues such as letting girls stay inside their homes, have good food and maintain personal hygiene. For other organizations, especially in Serbia, Mongolia and Ukraine, partnerships with local WROs helped to ground the project in local narratives and buffer against the community backlash that is typical of gender-transformative programming. On the other hand, INGOs also felt that they too had a strong role to play in pushing the needle and getting government buy-in: “when we were speaking to the DOET in Hanoi, we brought evidence on prevalence of GBV not in Hanoi only – so that they don't think they are the only ones. Plan International had simultaneously conducted research in four other countries, so we shared this data with them. We re-emphasized that this an issue that's faced even by developed countries. And this helped convince the government that they are not alone in this fight.”

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Initiating multilevel and gender-transformative change requires partnership across multiple types of organizations to find the most meaningful and sustainable ways of preventing VAG.
- Developing adaptive learning systems is essential for projects working on gender-transformative change and system change with multiple actors.
- Changes that disrupt the status quo quickly can be high-risk for adolescent girls, and these risks can be identified and planned for at the design stage, in consultation and partnership with adolescents.

4.6. Adapting adolescent-focused approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic

LITERATURE REVIEW

A clear view of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is only beginning to take shape, and several estimates suggest that the impact on the rights and health of

women and girls has been devastating. The impact of the pandemic for adolescent girls in particular is being felt through increased violence, and simultaneously delayed programming and suspended VAWG services (UN Women, 2020).

The pandemic is expected to cause significant delays in programmes working to end FGMC and child marriage (UNFPA, 2020). For interventions that use schools as an entry point, the closure of schools for almost a year has resulted in significant delays and the suspension of programming, with CSOs being concerned about the well-being of girls, in particular because of a lack of communication. Furthermore, school closures in lockdown and economic crises resulting from the pandemic in several countries are making girls more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment both online and offline, and children are more likely to be exposed to violence in the household (Wood and Majumdar, 2020). Practitioners are particularly concerned about at-risk girls such as those with disabilities or those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, who are at increased risk of violence during lockdown. Girls also face barriers to accessing accurate, official information and public service announcements owing to limited access to public spaces, group gatherings (i.e. in safe spaces) and outreach activities. For instance, a recent Save the Children child and youth survey in Lebanon found that girls were twice as likely to have not left the house at all during lockdown as their male counterparts (Save the Children, 2020). In essence, the existing constraints on physical mobility and perceptions of lack of safety discussed at the beginning of the synthesis review have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

We know from past crises that not only does violence against adolescents increase during these times, but it is also likely to go uncounted, unrecognized and unattended. For instance, during the 2013–2015 Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa, response efforts focused on containing the disease and reducing the number of new cases to zero, and although this focus was important, protocols were never established to protect adolescent girls and young women during the outbreak (Onyango et al., 2019). As quarantines and school closures were put in place to contain the

spread of disease, women and adolescent girls were vulnerable to coercion, exploitation and sexual abuse, some of which resulted in unwanted pregnancies. Young women and adolescent girls were also unable to attend community meetings where education and instructions were given about how to protect themselves from contracting the disease. Although the number of Ebola-virus-infected patients and deaths were recorded accurately, victims of violence during the outbreak went uncounted, unrecognized and unattended.

Projects are therefore seeking alternative locations for their programmes, for example by taking their curricula, advocacy and training online, or reducing the scale of the programmes and gatherings. This, however, results in serious constraints on the ability of projects to continue programming to the same extent. Moreover, girls' limited access to phones and the internet also means that services adapted for the COVID-19 pandemic that rely on these technologies will fail to reach many in need.

During the pandemic, as a result of the compounded effects of school closures and rising economic insecurity, several grantees lost their primary entry point for engaging girls at a time when the pandemic was simultaneously resulting in an increase in several forms of VAG. In Viet Nam, the pandemic affected the lives of all adolescents who were part of the school-based approach, as schools were closed for almost a year and only reopened in February 2021. The government encouraged taking classes online, but this left out several adolescents who did not have access to the internet and, in Viet Nam in particular, these are disproportionately adolescents from ethnic minorities. Moreover, several of their parents lost their source of income, and this led to children dropping out of schools. In an effort to still be able to reach these out-of-school adolescents, Plan International Vietnam is aiming to diversify its channels of communication to adjust to the “new normal”. It is also working in parallel to push for increasing the minimum age of marriage, and to reach at-risk girls and girls who have been abused by their families during the lockdown. When schools were closed, counselling taking place through schools also stopped, and Plan International Vietnam is working towards a model that makes school counselling available even

if schools shut down again. Similarly in Nepal, Restless Development faced disruptions to several of its projects because of school closures, and it is aware that during school closures many parents withdrew their girls from schools and married them secretly as a coping mechanism.

Projects that worked on out-of-school girls, community-led approaches or whole-school approaches – that is, those that had alternative contact points with girls – were less disrupted by the pandemic. For instance, Amref in Tanzania reported that programming at the community level continued, and front-line workers followed local health protocols and safety precautions when entering communities. This meant that by and large it was still able to reach girls and continue advocacy against FGMC. On the other hand, projects that worked primarily through schools and did not have alternative ways to ensure the safety of girls had to pause and reflect more on alternative modes of programming, and alternative modes of reaching them and creating safe spaces for them elsewhere.

NGOs in urban centres faced disruptions to their programming because the work of several of the smaller NGOs and local women’s organizations in the provinces that they work in came to a grinding halt. The MWF in Mongolia reported massive disruptions to its operations and programming. As an organization that works largely through local NGOs, especially in the countryside, it struggled to continue programming. In the countryside, adolescents and women in rural areas do not have access to smartphones, and although they are now being taught how to use them, progress is slow. As most of the MWF’s staff are in the centre of the province, those in rural areas cannot reach them:

“We can see women’s NGOs are facing technical capacity issues – but we can’t finance them, and we can’t give just them the technology overnight and expect operations to continue. But we are doing what we can in the centre. We know, for instance, that family-related violence or domestic violence has increased, so we have financed shelter houses where possible” (MWF, FGD, 5 March 2021).

As local and national governments around the world respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic,

it is critical that girls’ voices are part of these processes.

However, most of the world’s governance structures and policy spaces coordinating such efforts have failed to institutionalize participation mechanisms for children and young people. Almost all practitioners in the sample have therefore taken to advocacy in the absence of a voice for adolescent girls in COVID-19 responses in most countries, to ensure their meaningful involvement. The MWF wrote a situational analysis on VAG in schools for the government and the United Nations, and in Cameroon APDEL gave young adolescent girls platforms to raise their issues and incentivized them to come forward on digital platforms. Several organizations have also used the time to gather data ethically and safely on the types and scale of violations during the pandemic, to make a case for the visibilization of violence against adolescents to their governments.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased gender inequalities and violence against adolescent girls; FGMC, child marriage and online violence have all been exacerbated by social isolation and rising economic insecurity.
- The pandemic has often imposed greater physical mobility constraints on girls than boys or their adult counterparts, which exacerbates their risk of experiencing violence, as they have been shut off from community-based and school-based safe spaces that they relied on for protection.
- Practitioners, especially those working in schools, faced severe disruptions to programming due to school closures. In addition, as detecting and responding to violence often relied on educational professionals, school-based counsellors and safe spaces created in schools, practitioners report concerns about the well-being of girls, especially at-risk and marginalized girls.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section offers concluding insights and recommendations that emerged from putting these 10 projects into conversation. It focuses on **four cross-cutting and overarching conclusions** that surfaced across the 10 diverse CSOs, and then provides some recommendations for practitioners, donors and researchers.

First, practitioners' insights suggest that there are specific needs and risks that are quite unique to adolescence, which need to be addressed in prevention programming. This reinforces that programming for adolescents should not be bundled together with programming for women or children. Practitioners reflected intensely on the risks and challenges in particular, and five risks surfaced repeatedly. (i) First, in instances where adolescent girls are trained as change agents through peer-to-peer approaches and are working in remote areas that may not have appropriate referral services, they may end up having to deal with ad hoc reports of violence as best they can, unsupported in real time. This may put both the survivor and the girls themselves at risk. (ii) Second, there are situations in which programmes have to consider carefully girls' safety in the programme design, space and timing. For example, when girls are kept after school for a few hours, it is important to ensure that their safety is prioritized and that travelling home late does not put them at further risk. This emphasizes the need to meet girls "where they are" in their everyday lives. Moreover, the programme itself and the increased awareness of various forms of violence and their consequences can often leave girls feeling more unsafe, and it is important that they feel supported. This is why building a strong supportive network around them is an important aspect of programming. (iii) A third risk that practitioners focused on was leaving out adolescents who are experiencing violence at home; they found that this often happened because their parents would not sign the consent form, thus excluding those most at risk by design. (iv) Fourth, several mentioned the risk that often the change agents mobilized to support adolescents are

perpetrators of violence themselves; this includes service providers, teachers, boys and parents. Recognizing this in the prevention programme and designing it accordingly was very important. (v) Fifth, as mentioned already, radical and disruptive changes in gender norms can pose a certain threat to the girls themselves; this is especially pertinent in the case of harmful practices such as FGMC and child marriage, as the programme itself can push these practices underground rather than eradicating them, putting girls at greater risk. **Several practitioners therefore suggested carrying out thorough risk assessments prior to programming, with the support of adolescents themselves, to identify risks as early as possible.**

Second, although the focus of this review was adolescent-focused approaches including both boys and girls, the emphasis of the projects was much more on girls than boys, and therefore the uptake was much greater among girls than boys, despite the fact that all the projects had at least one component of mixed-sex interventions. This could be partly because of the UN Trust Fund's own emphasis on ensuring that women and girls are primary beneficiaries of all grants. This is an area of work that local WROs in particular seemed to struggle with – that is, engaging boys meaningfully while still keeping the attention on girls. For instance, when it comes to programming and working in mixed-sex settings, several practitioners saw both the inclusion and exclusion of boys as a risk, expressing the sentiment that

“when you have boys and girls in the same space in equal numbers, the boys will claim the space. But at the same time you need them to hear about the programmes, in order for them not to trivialize, dissuade or further intimidate girls for attending – which will often happen during sessions” (GRS, FGD, 5 March 2021).

This resulted in several projects choosing to work with boys and girls separately or with more girls than boys in the room at a time. Another practitioner pointed out that, when it comes to engaging boys, most attention is generally paid to the group education aspect of prevention programming, when there are several other strategies for working with boys at other levels of the socioecological model, for example engaging them as part of an overall community mobilization process that includes everyone.

Third, different types of CSOs have different strengths in engaging adolescents in prevention programming, but all emphasized that partnerships with local and grass-roots youth organizations and WROs were key to their success.

While some organizations in the sample were youth-led, some were WROs, and some were development and human rights organizations. While some were prevention-focused, some came with a strong service provision history. In addition, while some were local grass-roots organizations focused on one or two regions, some were national-level organizations and national women's funds, and others were INGOs. Each reflected on its unique strengths and weaknesses. For example, AWC in Serbia has a long-standing history of providing services to survivors, and the UN Trust Fund project was one of its first projects working on prevention with adolescent girls. From the beginning, it knew it had to choose partners carefully to reach adolescent girls in a meaningful way:

“We are an organization based in Belgrade, primarily working on service provision; we had to find local partners for prevention, and the group of peer educators we therefore chose were youth activists from local grass-roots women's organizations. That was a good approach for us but also beneficial for them. A lot of women's organizations do not have a lot of financial and institutional support and it is very hard for them to be involved in these kinds of issues in a systematic way. In that sense, we provided a space for local grass-roots women's organizations to get involved and to involve more young women in their work. The whole group of peer educators came from these youth activists from WROs, and we created the training together: we provided an initial framework for the ToT [training of trainers], but at the same time we constantly tweaked the programme based on their feedback. Our biggest strength

as an organization was our feminist approach and our knowledge of referral systems and recognizing early signs of violence, and we had the opportunity to pass this on to others” (AWC, FGD, 5 March 2021).

Similarly, the MWF (a national-level women's fund), Restless Development (an international youth-led NGO) and Plan International Vietnam (an international children's rights NGO) found that working alongside a network of local CSOs/WROs, especially in areas where it did not have a presence, was critical. Plan International Vietnam worked as a technical partner, and relied on the expertise and knowledge of local CSOs in a mutually enabling relationship. Project staff reflected on the organization's strengths and weaknesses as an INGO:

“The perspective we bring as an INGO is not necessarily a perspective from the “outside”: we bring global evidence of GBV to governments. We are not talking about prevalence of GBV in Hanoi only, so that they don't think they are the only ones in the region with this problem. Plan International Vietnam had data in five countries simultaneously at that time, which we shared with the Department of Education. These are advantages of INGOs. But there are gaps, of course – the main one being we have to “work through the system” and shift perspectives in the government and teachers, and then we get to the students – so it takes time.” (Plan International, Vietnam)

Fourth and finally, all the CSOs found that their projects created a legacy of “symbolic resources” (the author's phrase) that were a key component of empowering adolescent girls. When asked to reflect on the most significant change during the FGDs, each practitioner shed light on an often intangible set of resources created by the project – for example, GRS South Africa mentioned how having a group identity and a group song brought the girls together, and AWC Serbia mentioned the creation of new slogans and songs that affirmed the girls' affiliation to a new collective identity as change agents. In addition, APDEL in Cameroon emphasized the value of girls coming together in a school club, MWF in Mongolia mentioned that the girls involved in the programme

spontaneously came together in a campaign called “We can bring change”. Plan International Vietnam reflected on the innovative ways in which girls came forward to collectively “visualize their existence and the existence of the violence they experience” in seemingly simple acts such as collective bicycle rides through the village wearing T-shirts with anti-GBV slogans that they had designed and painted themselves to raise awareness. These were ways of claiming their voice and their access to public and private spaces that were previously unimaginable, and they took on a new collective identity as change agents. This conception of girls as leaders, propagated by all the interventions through the creation of new rituals, songs and identities, facilitates a new form of solidarity exclusively among girls that propels them forward and is often the key to breaking the shackles of normative injunctions.

Ten recommendations are offered below on engaging adolescents in VAWG prevention. These are informed by practitioner insights from the 10 projects, but also by the process of synthesizing these insights. The recommendations target three specific groups: (i) practitioners, (ii) policymakers and donors, and (iii) researchers in the field of ending VAWG.

Recommendations for practitioners

(1) Co-produce prevention programming with adolescents. Practitioners emphasized the need for adolescents to be part of designing and implementing VAWG prevention programming to make it age-appropriate and nuanced, to address resistance to key messages and to ensure that it is tailored to meet diverse needs (in relation to gender, sexual identity, race and ethnicity) even in the same age group (e.g. in relation to gender, sexual identity, race and ethnicity). Adolescents have a right to participate in developing the programmes that will serve them, and, according to practitioners, programmes are also more tailored and effective when adolescents are partners in their design, development and implementation.

(2) Conduct safety audits to understand safety concerns in the immediate environments of adolescent girls. Safety audits are increasingly common in prevention programmes in humanitarian settings

(UNFPA, 2015, p. 38) and allow organizations to assess and identify risks based on geographical location, to understand broader safety and protection concerns in the immediate environment, and to monitor progress and changes over time. Safety audits can directly tackle concerns raised by most practitioners in the sample – namely different girls facing different sets of risks and adolescent girls experiencing a heightened sense of feeling unsafe in almost all spaces they occupy.

(3) Consider multiple ways of creating safe spaces and of mobilizing change agents among and around girls. Informed by an initial analysis or safety audit, consider carefully who may be the best change agents to mobilize around girls – near-peers, teachers, parents or peers, or some combination thereof. Similarly, for safe spaces, it is important to consider whether to carve out girls-only safe spaces (separate from women’s safe space programming or mixed-sex programming), while recognizing that existing public and private spaces are gendered, and incrementally reclaiming those spaces for adolescent girls.

(4) Choose entry points carefully and consider multiple entry points for engaging adolescents based on the form of violence being addressed and recognizing the continuum of violence. Patriarchal norms that diminish girls’ autonomy and bodily integrity and perpetuate violence are not localized in one or another time and space – violence occurs throughout their lives and is a continuum of insecurity that affects their experiences at home, in and out of school, in public space and in the community. Accordingly, researchers have called for interventions that employ a life-course perspective as key to adolescent-focused prevention programming in particular. Moreover, although school-based programmes and using schools as entry points are most popular for this age group, these risk leaving homes and communities and out-of-school girls out of adolescent-focused programming. As was evidenced during the pandemic, having multiple entry points and ways of reaching girls also ensures less disruption to programming in such a situation.

Recommendations for policymakers and donors

(5) Develop adaptive learning systems, especially to meet the needs of those facing multiple and intersecting risks. All practitioners, after designing and piloting the training, had to course-correct to meet the diverse needs of adolescent girls, especially those with intersecting identities or specific needs. This requires adaptive learning, which should be enabled and supported through investment by donors. This also includes creating the space to document the most significant change stories not only from project beneficiaries but also from practitioners on the front line, which can make it possible to identify and also intentionally cultivate what works in preventing VAG, especially the more intangible gains and symbolic resources that are often key to project success.

(6) Consider how to implement risk mitigation strategies and include explicit recognition of the risk that change agents around adolescent-focused prevention programmes may also be perpetrators. Practitioners and evidence suggest that the most common perpetrators of physical and emotional violence in LMICs across a range of ages are household members, student peers, teachers and services providers, and those are the same actors who are mobilized during prevention programmes to become agents of change. Although work has been done by researchers on perpetrators, perpetration and root causes, practitioners still pointed to the need for more support to make this visible in ways that are safe. Not funding perpetrator programmes specifically should not preclude an explicit recognition of some change agents being perpetrators and developing a risk mitigation strategy; having strong sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse policies across all levels in programmes that engage parents, caregivers, teachers and peers of adolescent girls is critical.

(7) Foster partnerships and fund collaborative work between different types of VAWG prevention organizations with the common goal of reducing VAG. Partnerships between organizations that engage with different groups of adolescents who are vulnerable to violence can build projects that

maximize resources and the strengths of different types of organizations operating at various levels – local, national and international. These partnerships can be mutually enabling for organizations that have different but complementary core missions – such as feminist-focused approaches, youth-led approaches and disability-informed approaches. In addition, they can also bring together different forms of prevention programming – for example, perpetrator programmes, parenting programmes, school-based programmes, IPV interventions (especially couples programming for adolescent couples) and VAC interventions – enabling practitioners to learn from each other to best serve the needs of adolescent girls. Finally, there is also potential for important cross-fertilization of lessons between adolescent-focused approaches in development and humanitarian settings, and this needs to be intentionally fostered.

Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

(8) More research is needed on designing prevention programmes that work with a diverse group of adolescents. When it comes to adolescent-focused approaches specifically, there are fewer studies identifying cross-cutting design elements that are effective or promising, and even fewer studies that unpack the design elements necessary to make training inclusive and effective for a diverse cohort of adolescent girls facing multiple and intersecting types of discrimination. Moreover, although it is evident that training and curricula need to be tailored to diverse contexts, more research could be conducted on how to tailor programmes rather than taking a “one size fits all” approach.

(9) Develop evaluation and learning tools for gender-transformative programming aimed at preventing VAG. The emphasis on gender-transformative programming in adolescent-focused approaches has not been commensurate with a shift in evaluation practice to take a complex systems approach that can capture changes that are complex, non-linear and multilevel. RCTs are not usually appropriate or feasible for evaluating change across high levels of the ecological framework (e.g. national action, policy reform, multisectoral collaboration

and whole-system strengthening) or multiple levels at once – and these are precisely the strategies that are essential for long-term, sustainable change. Therefore, methodological toolkits that engage a diverse set of methodologies and engage practitioners working in this field as equal partners are needed to capture the kind of complex and adaptive change that takes place in reality.

(10) Develop ethical and safe ways of conducting research on VAG remotely. There are several guidelines

around the ethical risks of conducting research during the pandemic on VAC (UNICEF, 2020a) and VAW (UNFPA, 2020), but there are specific risks relating to working with adolescents, especially on VAG, during the pandemic. This is particularly pertinent given the gendered and uneven impacts of the pandemic, and given that the violence experienced by them is more likely to go unrecorded and unrecognized, and yet again fall through the cracks in VAW and VAC prevention programming.



SKILLZ Coach Sonwabile (Sony) Dick celebrates with Grassroot Soccer SKILLZ Street graduate and volunteer, 15-year-old Yamkela Nqweniso in Khayelitsha, South Africa's fastest growing township. Credit: GRS/ Karin Schermbrucker.

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