



LEARNING FROM PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES: ISSUE NO. 6

# ADOLESCENT-FOCUSED APPROACHES TO PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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 Schermbucker

## Background

Adolescent<sup>1</sup>-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.

## About this brief

This brief is a summary of a longer synthesis review and 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 United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund). The interventions focused solely on adolescents (both boys and girls), or an adolescent-focused approach was a subcomponent of a wider multilevel project (targeting women and girls, men and boys, parents, households, schools, communities and institutions). By synthesizing monitoring reports, evaluation reports and transcripts of focus group discussions (FGDs) with practitioners from the 10 civil society organizations (CSOs), this brief aims to put practitioner-based insights into conversation with the existing evidence on the topic.

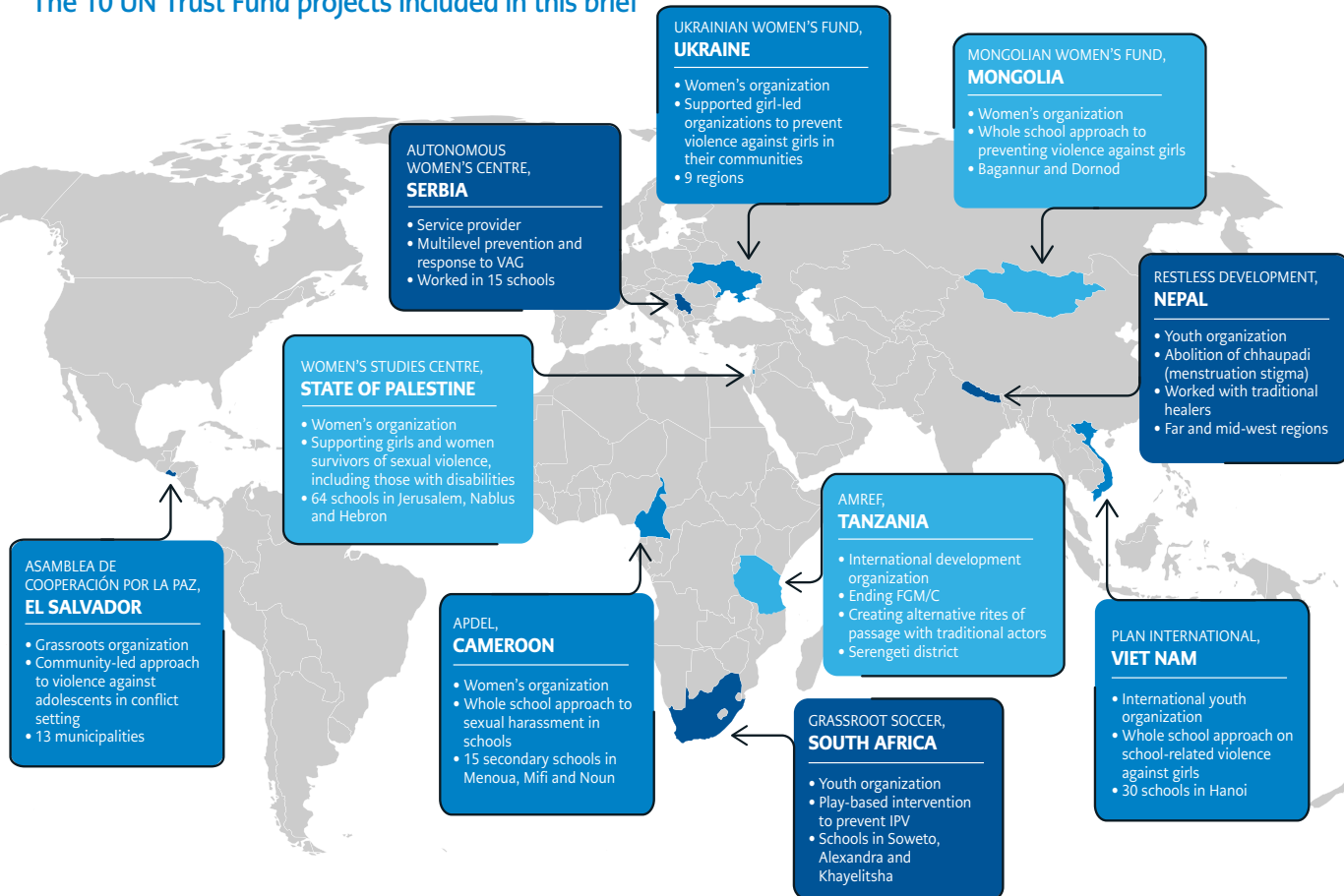
<sup>1</sup> This review uses the United Nations Children’s Fund and World Health Organization’s definitions of children as aged 0–17 years, adolescents as aged 10–19 years and adults as aged 18 years and above. However, we also recognize that, although this is the United Nations definition, in practice, 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).

## Case studies

The cases selected are 10 projects conducted in 10 countries implementing adolescent-focused approaches in various ways. The selected projects were carried out by a range of CSO types: women’s organizations, youth and girl-led organizations, human rights organizations and faith-based organizations. These different identities enabled the organizations to engage with adolescents through various entry points. The projects focused on several forms of VAWG, including menstrual stigma (*chhaupadi*) in Nepal, female genital mutilation and cutting in Tanzania, dating violence in South Africa and violence against specific groups of girls, such as ethnic minorities and girls with disabilities in Serbia, El Salvador and the State of Palestine. While some used a community-based approach, some focused on the creation of safe environments for adolescents, using a strong gender lens, and others used a specialized medium or strategy such as play-based or art-based interventions.

Moreover, while some were grass-roots organizations (the Ukrainian Women’s Fund (UWF)), some were national women’s funds (Mongolian Women’s Fund) and others were international non-governmental organizations (Plan International Vietnam). Project grant sizes ranged from \$70,000 to \$1 million. Regardless of scale and approach, they all 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.

**FIGURE 1:**  
The 10 UN Trust Fund projects included in this brief



This brief is divided into six main sections that describe the key lessons arising from the case studies: (i) important entry or starting points for CSOs engaging adolescents in VAWG prevention; (ii) how CSOs have tailored programming to adolescents' diverse needs; (iii) how CSOs have engaged agents of change around adolescents to enable VAWG prevention; (iv) how CSOs design prevention programmes where there is an absence of youth-friendly services; (v) how CSOs have promoted gender-transformative strategies to prevent VAWG; and (vi) how CSOs have adapted adolescent-focused approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. The brief concludes with lessons and recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and donors, and researchers.

## Key lessons learned from practitioners implementing adolescent-focused approaches in VAWG prevention

### 1. What was the starting point for the CSOs when engaging adolescents in VAWG prevention?

#### **Anchoring prevention programming in adolescent girls' own sense of safety.**

Adolescent girls' perception of their safety was often the starting point for the intervention, especially in the absence of VAWG prevalence data (or given limited capacity to collect it) for the target age group, region and/or intersecting identity. As a practitioner and peer educator from the Autonomous Women's Center in Serbia stated during the 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.

**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).

#### **To illustrate how project design must be informed by initial studies on safety, the Women's Studies Centre, when working on a violence prevention programme 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 programme began, but there were very limited data on sexual violence against adolescent girls. This was because of widespread underreporting, especially on adolescent girls with disabilities. Through a baseline study, the Women's Studies Centre found that perceptions of safety even in adolescence vary considerably with age and gender, with older adolescent girls having a much greater awareness of sexual violence than 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.

#### **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. Some practitioners during FGDs 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". This emphasizes

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 programme.

## 2. How did the CSOs ensure that the programmes were tailored to adolescents' diverse needs?

**The majority of the projects used training methodologies and worked iteratively to ensure they were diverse, age-appropriate and 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. Plan International Vietnam, for instance, adapted its training curriculum from existing curricula but tailored it to the context through the active and meaningful involvement of students.

**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.

**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 are the norm, facilitators often fall back on scripts.** An interesting example is pointed out by the Grassroot Soccer evaluation in South Africa, which found 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 intimate partner violence and HIV/AIDS prevention. According to the evaluators, this is both a strength and a weakness of

the programme: 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.

**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. **caregivers, 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). Several practitioners pointed to the value of creating agents of change among **near-peers**. Grassroot Soccer, for instance, trained soccer coaches as facilitators and mentors for HIV and intimate partner violence 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 adolescence.

## 3. How did the CSOs engage agents of change around adolescents to enable VAWG prevention?

**Practitioners also emphasized the need to create agents of change among girls themselves and, in this regard, girl-led programmes were seen as promising.** They restore dignity, give girls the capacity to aspire and encourage innovation, and there are many lessons from practitioners on girl-led prevention programming, an area of work where literature remains relatively sparse. For instance, the UWF provided grants, supported capacity development and provided training to support initiatives by girl-led organizations that aimed 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" (annual report, year 1).

**Practitioners point to the successes but also the challenges of girl-led programming.** For instance, when scaling up interventions, challenges remain in maintaining the quality of the programme and measuring its impact. Another challenge was that girl-led approaches were consistently not taken seriously by adults across contexts: *"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, to shift the awareness of other students and the School Management Board, teachers and parents, to encourage them 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 violence against girls 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 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 growing areas of work in violence prevention** that need more careful testing and documentation to find effective approaches.



Betty Mteweke, a market trader in Dar es Salaam, in her market stall which is now a safer place for women to conduct business. Photo: Equality for Growth

#### 4. How did the CSOs design prevention programmes where there is an absence of youth-friendly services?

**All 10 UN Trust Fund projects offer lessons and insights on designing programming in resource-constrained environments where services are either inaccessible to adolescents or not 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 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.

**External evaluators 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 the Women's Studies Centre 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 discuss ways to protect against it and possible referral pathways for young girls. In Cameroon, L'Association Pour la Promotion du Développement Local'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.

#### 5. How did the CSOs promote gender-transformative strategies in adolescent-focused programming to prevent VAWG?

**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. 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.

**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. For instance, in Nepal, Restless Development trained adolescent girls, community leaders and traditional healers, and in parallel built the capacity of local CSOs, especially women's rights organizations 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 having a directive in place for almost a decade, it is woeful that we still hear about girls dying in chhaupadi huts. Programmes aiming 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” (Grassroot Soccer, annual report, year 2).

### HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT THE WAYS IN WHICH CSOS ENGAGED WITH ADOLESCENTS FOR VAWG PREVENTION?

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. 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. 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.

## Lessons learned

**This synthesis review offers concluding insights and recommendations that emerged across the 10 projects.** Four cross-cutting conclusions are as follows: 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. 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. 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. 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 – practitioners, researchers and donors.

### Recommendations for practitioners are as follows:

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 (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, as well as the lack of prevalence data for their target age group.

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

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 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.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:**

This brief is authored by Shruti Majumdar, and is part of a series of briefs produced by the UN Trust Fund. For the longer synthesis review on which it is based, and others in the series, see the [UN Trust Fund Learning Hub](#).

Visit the [UN Trust Fund evaluation library](#) for access to over 100 final external evaluations of projects supported by the UN Trust Fund, including most of those mentioned in this brief. The library is searchable by country and theme.

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[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 from Mongolia](#), [Restless Development from Nepal](#), [Plan International Vietnam](#), the [Ukrainian Women’s Fund from Mongolia](#) and the [Women’s Studies Centre from the State of Palestine](#).

## About the UN Trust Fund

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.



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