

# **What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Key Findings**

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# What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Key Findings

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is understood as “the violent and abusive behaviour carried out predominantly by men directed at women and girls precisely because of their gender” (Equally Safe strategy, 2016).

This paper focuses on **primary prevention** - preventing violence before it happens, through interventions that target key risk factors for violence perpetration and experiences.

## Approach

The review is structured around three key questions:

- 1) What works to make environments safe?
- 2) What works to transform attitudes, beliefs and norms?
- 3) What works to prevent honour based violence (HBV), including female genital mutilation (FGM)?

### Effective Interventions

There is strong evidence that interventions focused on **modifying unsafe physical school environments** are **effective** in preventing VAWG.

An example of this type of intervention is the *Shifting Boundaries* programme

### Promising Interventions

- Bystander programmes (e.g. Mentors in Violence Prevention)
- School-based programmes to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships
  - Of these programmes, there is strong evidence that *Safe Dates* is an **effective** intervention

### Mixed Interventions

- Education as a sexual violence prevention strategy

### Inconclusive Interventions

Due to the current limited research it is not yet possible to draw reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of the following interventions:

- Awareness campaigns and edutainment
- Domestic abuse disclosure schemes
- HBV interventions
- Interventions to prevent female genital mutilation

## Diversity and different experiences of VAWG:

Different groups within society are disproportionately and differently affected; it is vital to understand the needs of different groups. The experience of victim-survivors and the effectiveness of interventions may vary greatly depending on their protected characteristics, identity, and access to resources. There are additional barriers to disclosing domestic violence among women from ethnic minority populations. Overall, there is limited evidence of what works for different populations.

## What is out of scope?

This report focuses on pre-criminal justice and prevention-focused interventions. Perpetrator programmes such as the Caledonian System and domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPPs) are therefore **out of scope**.

However the What Works to Reduce Reoffending (2015) report, which is due to be updated in 2021, will review the international evidence on programmes to reduce reoffending. The full out of scope list is available in main report [here](#).

## Moderating Factors: Key Findings

It is important to recognise the moderating factors, potential facilitators, and potential barriers.

Accounting for these factors can encourage effective implementation of evidence-based interventions. The implementation of interventions to prevent VAWG must apply their guiding principles for effective programming (WHO, 2019):

### Core values

- Put women's safety first and do no harm
- Promote gender equality and women's human rights
- Leave no one behind

### Generate and Disseminate Knowledge

- Develop a theory of change
- Promote evidence informed programming

### Programme Design

- Use participatory approaches
- Promote coordination
- Implement combined interventions
- Address the prevention continuum
- Take a life-course approach

As demonstrated in the tables below, accounting for the barriers to successful interventions is important in applying them.

## Points for reflection:

1. VAWG is multi-faceted, takes many forms, so a holistic approach is required.
2. Understanding the primary cause (gender inequality) is fundamental to informing prevention.
3. It is important to account for cultural context when applying interventions. Much of the available high-quality evidence is from high income countries (e.g. USA, Canada). Scotland also has adopted a gendered approach where VAWG is defined as being a cause and consequence of systemic, deep-rooted women's inequality.
4. Behavioural change is difficult to measure. Many of the attitude focused interventions in educational settings focus on changing participants' attitudes. However, the relationships between attitude change and behavioural change is unclear.
5. Early intervention and prevention-focused interventions (e.g. with young people) may have longer-term, wide-reaching impacts in changing both attitudes towards and perpetration of VAWG.

## Directions for Future Research

- **Further evaluations of interventions**, both in Scotland and elsewhere, are **necessary to understand 'what works'**. For interventions classified as 'inconclusive', evaluative evidence would be beneficial for understanding the impacts of these interventions on preventing VAWG. Evaluations should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand the impacts and effects of each intervention.
- More longitudinal research is required to understand the **effects of primary prevention interventions for VAWG over time**.
- **While challenging, research that measures behavioural changes as a direct outcome would be welcome**. Evidence on how attitudinal change impacts long term behavioural changes is often promising but sparse.
- Future research focused on understanding interventions that may be effective for **preventing HBV, FGM and commercial sexual exploitation would be valuable**.
- The evidence linked to preventing coercive and controlling behaviour as an explicit outcome is limited and **could be explored further in relation to existing primary interventions**.
- It is not yet possible to draw conclusions on what the COVID-19 pandemic means for what works to prevent DA and other forms of VAWG. **How the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the content and design of prevention-focused interventions should be monitored**.

## What works? Intervention-specific information

### Effective

Evidence that the intervention is associated with a positive impact on preventing violence, based on a moderate or strong evidence base.

Type of Intervention	Evidence of effectiveness in preventing violence	Moderating factors <sup>1</sup> (where available)
<b>Interventions focused on modifying unsafe physical school environments</b>  (e.g. <i>Shifting Boundaries</i> ; USA)	<b>Effective:</b> A number of high-quality evaluations of this intervention indicate that there were reductions in perpetration and victimisation of sexual harassment, peer sexual violence, and adolescent relationship abuse.	<b>Potential facilitators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Combining classroom and building-level interventions is more effective in reducing sexual harassment and violence than classroom intervention alone.</li><li>Such programmes could work with younger children (beyond current 11-14 age of participants) to “invoke a true primary prevention effort”.</li></ul>

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<sup>1</sup> Factors which might facilitate effectiveness or act as a barrier to effectiveness

## Promising

Findings were positive but not to the extent that they constituted evidence that an intervention was 'effective'.

### Attitude and behaviour-focused interventions: bystander programmes in various settings

(e.g. *Mentors in Violence Prevention*, (MVP); USA and Scotland)

**Promising:** There is strong evidence that bystander programmes that encourage prosocial behaviours among peers are promising in preventing VAWG.

#### Potential facilitators:

- Embedded within school curricula and cultures
- Longer, cumulative, and sequential programmes that are delivered over time
- Programme well-run with effective training and support for mentors
- Continual programme development to ensure socio-cultural relevance
- Wide range of teaching approaches (including role play)

#### Potential barriers:

- Mentor workload
- Strain on time
- Existing evaluations predominantly focus on attitudinal change rather than the reduction of violence as an explicit outcome.
- Limited evidence on the long-term effectiveness of these programmes, with more longitudinal research needed.

### School-based programmes promoting equal relationships

(e.g. *Safe Dates*, *The Fourth R*; USA, Canada)

**Promising:** There is evidence that school-based programmes which seek to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships (through developing life skills, improving knowledge of abuse, and challenging social norms and gender stereotypes that increase the risk of violence) are promising.

Of these programmes, there is strong evidence that the *Safe Dates* programme is **effective**.

#### Potential facilitators:

- Content underpinned by evidence-based theory and appropriately tailored to the target audience
- Multiple sessions over time, that aim to change attitudes and norms rather than simply provide information
- Should be incorporated into school policies
- The skills building component is a crucial component to lead to positive outcomes
- For men, programmes delivered in mixed male and female groups are more effective than those presented in all-male groups.

## Mixed

Studies with contrasting results and/or body of evidence

### Education as a sexual violence prevention strategy in higher education settings

(e.g. rape prevention and reduction programmes; USA, Scotland)

**Mixed:** There is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of education as a sexual violence prevention strategy in higher education.

There is limited robust evidence that looks at rape prevention programmes in both the short-term and longitudinally.

### Potential facilitators:

- Longer term education programmes with frequent sessions
- Professionally-facilitated education
- Targeted at single-gender audiences
- Offered at various times throughout students' time in higher education
- Workshop-based
- Part of multiple approaches or holistic approach

### Potential barriers:

- Rape prevention programmes have less effect on men at a higher risk of committing rape

## Inconclusive

Insufficient evidence to make a judgement on impact.

### Awareness campaigns and edutainment

(Australia, England and Wales and other high income countries)

### Domestic abuse disclosure schemes

(England and Wales, New Zealand, Scotland)

### Honour-based violence (HBV) interventions

### Interventions to prevent Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

**Inconclusive:** Due to a limited body of research it is not yet possible to draw reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of these interventions.

This evidence summary was undertaken by Rebekah Miller of Justice Analytical Services, Scottish Government. Access the full report [here](#) and *Effective Investments: A Summary of What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls for Policy and Practitioners* [here](#). Contact: [Rebekah.Miller@gov.scot](mailto:Rebekah.Miller@gov.scot)



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