

Technical Brief

From Commitment to Action

Towards a Gender-Transformative Approach to Addressing School Violence in the Asia-Pacific Region

Harmful gender norms and expectations perpetuate and impact patterns of school violence. Therefore, addressing school violence effectively and sustainably requires a gender-transformative approach. This brief demonstrates how gender norms manifest in patterns of school violence, including school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in the Asia-Pacific region. It considers how prevention and response efforts can be gender-transformative – actively challenging and changing harmful gender norms, stereotypes and power dynamics. It presents promising initiatives from countries across the region, while making the case for greater attention to and investment in harnessing the transformative nature of education and contribute to safe and respectful schools and societies.

This brief acknowledges that data and research investigating violence in and around schools in the region is limited. The existing evidence presented in the brief shows that violence is still prevalent in schools across the Asia-Pacific region, while policy commitments have not yet translated into meaningful action to reduce it. The brief argues that the lack of evidence should not prevent governments and other education actors from taking action. It calls on governments and education actors to implement holistic and gender-transformative programmes and policies that can improve school safety for all learners and reduce violence in schools, based on best practice and existing research. The brief also advocates for further evidence-gathering to inform policy making and programming in the region.

Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence

The Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) was created in 2014 to respond to SRGBV by raising awareness and finding solutions to ensure schools are safe, gender-sensitive and inclusive environments, where boys and girls can learn to unleash their full potential. The Group has expanded to more than 100 members representing 50 organizations, including humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, and regional and national offices.

www.ungei.org/what-we-do/school-related-gender-based-violence

This technical brief draws on examples presented during a *Learning Symposium on School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) in the Asia-Pacific region (25–27 April, 2023, Bangkok)*. The meeting was convened by co-chairs of the Global Working Group to End SRGBV, UNESCO and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), in partnership with Safe to Learn, Transform Education, UNFPA Asia-Pacific Regional Office and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office.

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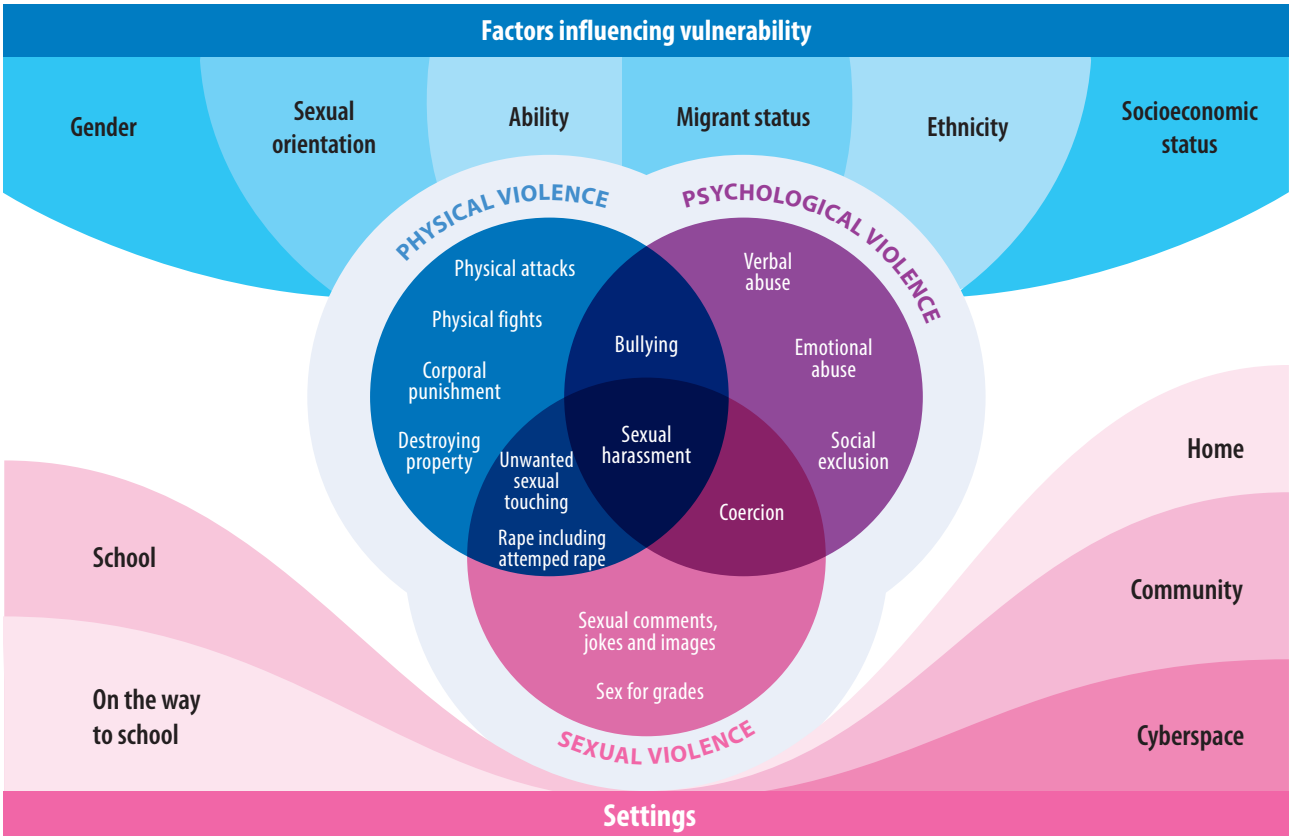
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The case for a gendered lens on school violence

Children and young people learn better in schools that are safe and inclusive. Yet for many students around the world, schools can be a place of violence and fear. Physical, sexual and psychological violence in and around schools, including online, affects children and young people everywhere. School violence can be experienced or perpetrated by students, teachers, other school staff or anyone involved with or visiting the school. In the Asia-Pacific region, around one-third of students aged 13–15 report being bullied in the past 12 months (UNESCO, 2019a). While there is little data on sexual harassment and sexual abuse in schools, small-scale studies suggest that it is a widespread issue (e.g. Puchakanit and Rhein, 2022; Talboys et al., 2017). Moreover, as young people are increasingly connected to the internet, there is growing concern in the region about cyberbullying and other forms of online violence (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2020; Jungup, Hsieh and Thornberg, 2020).

Many intersecting factors can influence the risk and impact of school violence, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, migrant status, socio-economic status and disability. Unequal gender norms and power dynamics that exist in most societies have a pervasive influence on violence, including school violence (Safe to Learn, 2021). Gender norms are informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender (UNICEF, 2022b). Unequal gender norms manifest in high levels of violence against women globally (WHO, 2021b). Such norms and expectations are also present in educational settings, influencing the behaviour and interactions of students and educators. Young people themselves recognize the burden of harmful gender norms and the constraints they impose on behaviours: boys are expected to be tough and never show their feelings, and girls are subject to inequitable standards that can limit their freedom and encourage passivity. Students who do not conform to traditional gender expectations can experience discrimination, social exclusion and bullying (JHU and UNICEF, 2022). The various forms of school violence, the settings where learners experience this violence and the factors influencing their vulnerability to experiencing such violence are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of school violence, settings and factors influencing vulnerability



Source: Adapted from UNESCO and UN Women, 2016

Recognition of the influence of gender norms on school violence has given rise to the term school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). SRGBV is defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of harmful gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). For some forms of SRGBV, the link to gender is explicit, such as sexual harassment which targets individuals based on their gender. Sometimes the role gender plays in shaping violence is implicit – such as corporal punishment, which is experienced more by boys than girls, reflecting gendered norms that associate toughness and physical discipline with masculinity. Because people carry individual biases shaped by their social and cultural settings, an act of violence can be gender-based even when the perpetrator is unaware of how their behaviour is influenced by gender (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023b).

The influence of gender is evident in patterns of school violence in the Asia-Pacific region (Fig. 2). While students of all genders can experience and perpetrate violence in educational settings, the nature and manifestations of violence differ along gender lines. Girls are more likely to face sexual and psychological violence, while boys are more likely to experience physical bullying, physical attacks and corporal punishment (UNESCO, 2019a, Oganda Portela and Pells, 2015; Safe to Learn 2023). Pressure to conform to dominant gender norms is high. Students who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+) experience higher rates of school violence than those who conform to prevailing gender norms (UNESCO, 2015a; 2019a). In recent research with young people identifying as LGBTIQ+ in Viet Nam, 79% reported experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) in their lifetime, with schools cited as the most common setting for incidents (Lighthouse Social Enterprise, 2023). Data from the region shows gendered patterns in the experience of online violence, with girls and gender-diverse people more likely to experience sexualized hate and threats in many contexts (UN Women, 2020).

Gender inequitable attitudes among young people are still pervasive in some settings. For example, among 15–19-year-olds in South Asia 36% of girls and 39% of boys consider a husband to be justified in hitting or beating his wife in certain circumstances (UNICEF, 2023). The proportions are higher in some country contexts across the region. Such attitudes reflect deeply ingrained gender norms and notions of power within intimate relationships and influence patterns of violence in schools (UNICEF and Coram International, 2023).

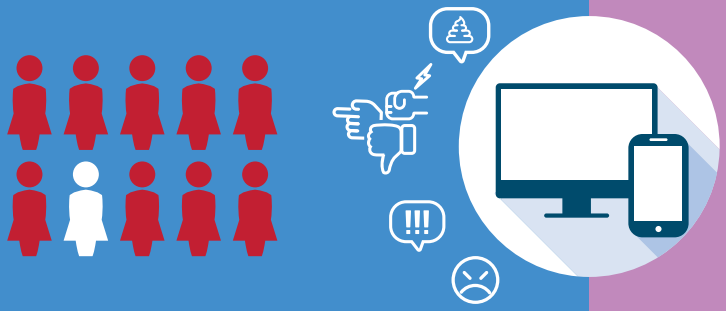
Young people themselves report that school violence is a significant issue and point to gendered patterns. During consultations with youth aged 16-30 from nine countries across the region, young men reported high levels of alcohol-related violence, and young women reported frequent sexual harassment, sometimes leading to school drop-out (ASPBAE, 2023). In the same consultations, youth representing the LGBTIQ+ community said that frequent bullying took a significant toll on their mental health. They said that despite their lived experience of SRGBV, they felt there was no safe platform or adequate data to bring attention to the issue.

All forms of school violence including SRGBV violate the rights of children and compromise their learning, health and well-being. The impacts are far-reaching. Beyond physical health consequences, school violence leads to anxiety, low self-esteem and depression, is associated with risky behaviours, and negatively impacts educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2019a; UNICEF 2014; Murshid, 2017). While data on the specific impacts of SRGBV is not systematically collected, there is strong evidence linking GBV in adolescence and adulthood to mental illness, with experience of sexual violence, in particular, having a profound long-term psychological impact on survivors (Ferrari et al., 2016; Rees, et al., 2011; FRA 2021).

The link between school violence and mental health problems is attracting growing concern, with research shedding light on the gendered nature of mental health impacts (UNICEF and Burnett Institute, 2022). Girls tend to internalize adverse experiences, resulting in depressive disorders, while boys tend to externalize them, leading to behavioural challenges and violence (UNICEF, 2022b). While there is limited analysis on school violence and mental health impacts for students identifying as LGBTIQ+ in the region, available evidence indicates that young people who do not conform to traditional norms around gender and sexuality are particularly at risk of depression, as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Kapungu and Petroni, 2017; UNESCO, 2016). One study in Thailand found that LGBTIQ+ youth had a significantly higher prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems than their non-LGBTIQ+ peers. This was considered likely related to their experiences of social stigma, exclusion and discrimination (Boonchooduang et al. 2019).

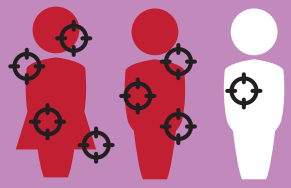
Figure 2: Data highlighting gendered patterns in experience of school violence in the Asia-Pacific region

Almost **9 in 10 women and girls experience online violence**, with adolescent girls disproportionately affected.



Source: UN Women (2020)

Compared to boys, **girls and gender-diverse people** are more likely to **experience sexualized hate and threats online**.



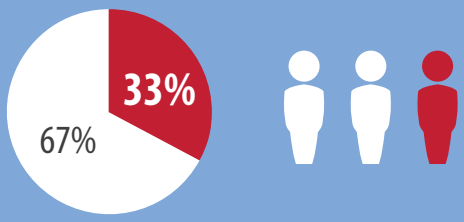
Source: UN Women (2020)

Students identifying as **LGBTIQ+** report **significantly higher rates of bullying** than their non-LGBTIQ+ peers. In some countries, as many as **4 out of 5** LGBTIQ+ learners are affected.



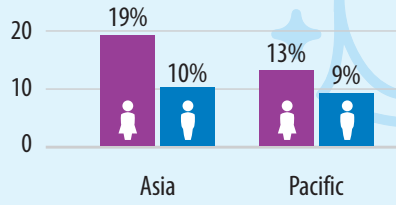
Source: UNESCO (2015a)

1 in 3 students aged 13-15 **experienced bullying** in the past 12 months.



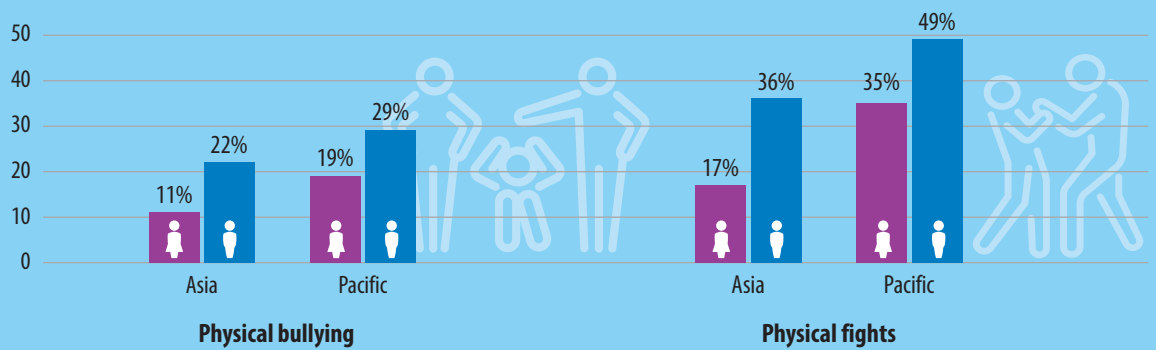
Source: UNESCO (2019a)

Girls are more likely to report bullying based on physical appearance.



Source: UNESCO (2019a)

Boys are more likely to experience physical bullying and physical fights.



Source: UNESCO (2019a)

It is important to recognize how gender norms, societal expectations and power imbalances contribute to patterns of school violence including SRGBV, because addressing these is central to preventing violence from happening in the first place. To prevent violence, efforts must move beyond responding to individual behaviour to challenge the structural and social determinants, or 'root causes' of violence. For example, when girls experience high rates of public sexual harassment on the way to school, as highlighted in regional youth consultations (ASPBAE, 2023), then schools should have a system in place to prevent and respond to these incidents, including supporting those who have been targeted. Addressing the root causes of sexual harassment requires a holistic approach, including integrating respectful relationships education into the curricula, training teachers in gender-transformative pedagogies, creating a school culture that promotes respect and equality, and engaging with families and the broader community to shift harmful gender norms.

A call for a holistic and gender-transformative approach to addressing school violence

Addressing all forms of school violence, including SRGBV, requires efforts to create a school environment that promotes and embodies rights-based principles (e.g., respect, gender equality and inclusion). However, such efforts must move beyond the delivery of individual, often discrete interventions towards a more cohesive approach. This has led to the adoption of the term 'whole-school approach' (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; UNGEI 2018). Recognition of the critical roles of environments and systems that extend beyond the school, including supportive government policy, has led to terms such as 'whole-education approach' or 'whole-system approach' (Cornu et al., 2022).

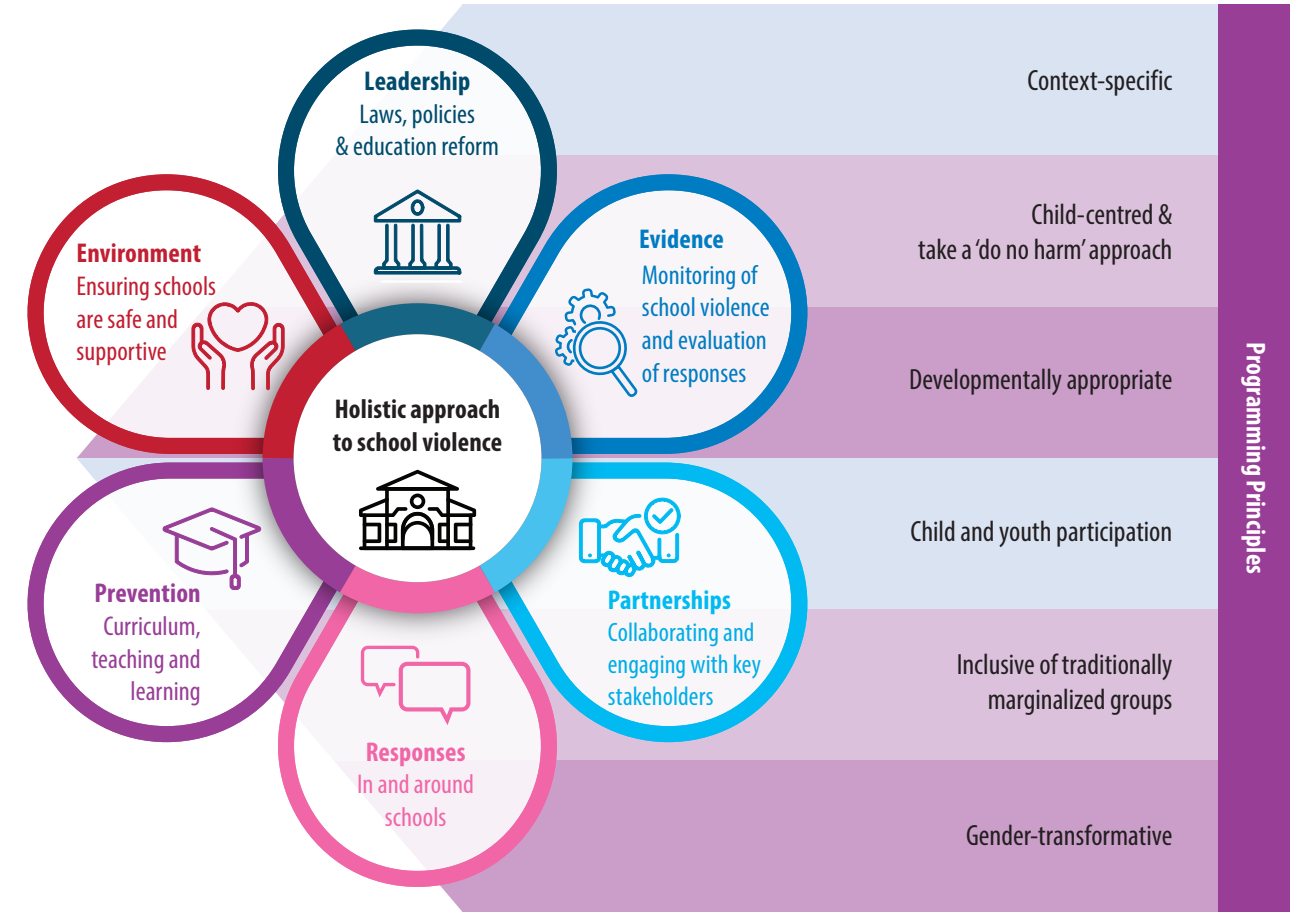
Regardless of the terminology used, the crucial message is that addressing school violence requires a holistic approach, with action across multiple domains. This includes gender-transformative actions at the levels of government, community, families, and, of course, the school. Integral elements of a holistic approach are summarized in Figure 3.

Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of whole-school or holistic approaches in reducing school violence (e.g. WHO, 2019; DeGue et al., 2020; Lester et al., 2017) and promoting student well-being (Cahill et al., 2015). Such multi-component approaches are also recognized as best practice for promoting learners' social-emotional skills and mental health (Goldberg et al., 2019), and for promoting their health and nutrition within education settings (UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023). In the Asia-Pacific region, various efforts to apply a holistic approach are underway. In the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia for instance, ChildFund International is working with Ministries of Education to promote 'a whole-school approach to protection and well-being' in selected schools. This includes a social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula, teacher training in positive discipline, parental education and connecting schools to community-based services (ChildFund International, 2023). However, few countries in the region are demonstrating widely implemented holistic approaches that filter down to action at a school level (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016).

Given the interconnected nature of school violence, mental health and student well-being, and the pressure on education systems in the region to address multiple priority areas, it may be strategic to address school violence, including SRGBV, within the context of broader approaches to promoting health and well-being in education settings. A recent UN report argues that given its profound impact on student well-being, school violence should be given more attention within the context of overarching school health and nutrition programmes (UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023).

Harmful gender norms are amongst root causes of school violence. Hence, efforts to address school violence require a gender-transformative approach (Fig. 4). This means that every element across the holistic approach – whether a policy to address school violence, a classroom-based prevention programme or provision of care and support services – should seek ways to challenge and change wider structural issues, norms, deep-rooted beliefs, behaviours and daily practices that shape gender and authority (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; Safe to Learn, 2021). Such an approach ideally starts from early childhood, when ideas about gender identity and expression begin forming. Despite the potential to apply a gender-transformative approach across all aspects of education, much education policy and practice remain gender-blind (UNESCO, 2022a). Education systems themselves, inadvertently or

Figure 3: Guiding strategies and programming principles for effective national action on school violence



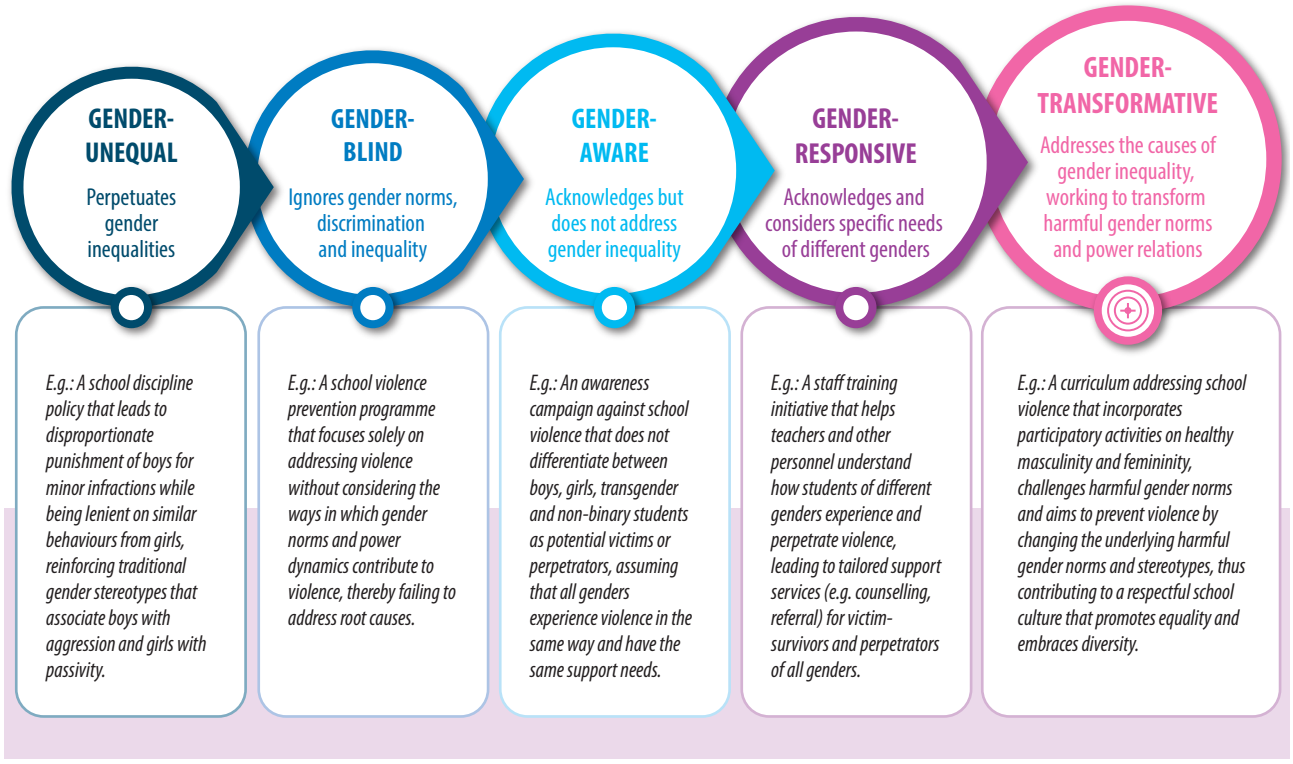
Source: Adapted from UNESCO and UN Women (2016)

otherwise, may even perpetuate harmful gender norms and power relations through their teaching practices, curricula and textbooks (Plan International et al., 2021). However, it is possible to integrate gender-transformative approaches through all aspects of how education is designed and delivered. For example, in Thailand, Save the Children has been advising the government on curriculum revisions to eliminate gender-binary norms. This work includes reviewing and revising educational materials, textbooks and teaching practices to promote inclusivity, challenge gender stereotypes, and foster an environment that respects and validates diverse gender identities and expressions (Coalition of CSOs and INGOs for Children's SOGIESC Rights, 2021). Some education systems are embracing gender-transformative pedagogy. This involves integrating gender awareness and critical analysis of power dynamics into teaching practices, curricula, and classroom interactions in an effort ensure that people of all gender identities and expressions are accepted and enjoy equal opportunities.

Every element of a holistic approach to addressing school violence, including SRGBV, can and should seek to be gender-transformative. This is key to addressing school violence but also positions education settings as important and strategic environments in which to challenge and change harmful gender norms that impact so many aspects of society. In the same vein, it is paramount to ensure that the commonly agreed definition of 'gender-transformative education (GTE)' and associated concepts reflect the understanding, expertise and needs of those working on these issues.[1] This is because GTE may imply different meanings in different contexts, experiences and languages.

1 UNGEI is currently developing a Gender-Transformative Education Glossary (forthcoming in 2024) through a global consultation with a range of actors including civil society organizations, activists, and national, regional and international bodies. The Glossary will explore education in an expansive and inclusive way– education as all forms of teaching and learning.

Figure 4: Progression of approaches to addressing the gender dynamics of school violence, with examples



Source: Adapted from UNICEF & UNFPA (2020)

Accelerating progress in the Asia-Pacific region

Gender-transformative policy guiding long-term investment and change

Legal and policy reform is central to addressing school violence, including SRGBV, in the region. Beyond demonstrating commitment to ensure safe learning environments, legal and policy frameworks can set an expectation for schools to actively promote respect and embrace the transformative power of education to drive positive shifts towards gender equality.

There is evidence of political will to address school violence in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2022, over 25 countries from across the region committed to creating *'inclusive learning environments that promote safety, health, and gender equality so that all learners have the optimum conditions to learn and thrive'* (UNESCO, 2022b). Despite this, most countries have adopted legislative strategies and policy frameworks that address selected forms of school violence in isolation, rather than targeting all forms of violence and tackling their root causes, including those related to gender (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2014). For example, a policy may address corporal punishment, but ignore peer-to-peer violence and many policies fail to recognize or address online violence. Ideally, policy and law should address school violence in all its manifestations and provide the impetus for measures that not only respond to individual incidents, but also tackle the underlying causes.

Translating policy intent into action

Within the Asia-Pacific region, some countries are demonstrating intent to address school violence in national law and policy. Mongolia's 2016 Law on Child Protection prohibits all forms of violence against children, including in schools. A National Programme of Action on Child Protection and Development (2017–2021) outlined actions to prevent and respond to school violence. It encouraged schools to develop

and implement anti-violence policies, train teachers and staff, and raise awareness about the importance of non-violent education (Government of Mongolia, 2017). While a 2019 government review found that stopping violence in schools required 'attention and effort much greater than shown currently' (Tsogtsaikhan, 2019, p.8), recently adopted education laws committing to protect children show promise of further action. The General Education Law (revised and adopted in 2023) commits to providing safe, gender neutral and inclusive learning environments for all students (Government of Mongolia, 2023a). The Pre-primary and Secondary Education Law (also adopted in 2023) highlights the importance of learning in a friendly, safe and protective environment free from violence, bullying, harassment and discrimination (Government of Mongolia, 2023b).

Papua New Guinea has also taken steps to address violence in schools within various policies. Echoing previous iterations, the current National Education Plan (2020–29) commits to creating safe and inclusive learning environments (PNG Department of Education, 2020). The National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV 2016-25 calls on the national education sector to implement prevention programmes (Independent State of Papua New Guinea, 2016). Yet challenges persist in translating policy and plans into concrete actions at the school level due to factors such as limited resources, infrastructure, staffing and capacity (UNICEF, 2023).

Such examples are not uncommon. While regional commitments and national policies may signal strong intention to address school violence, the gap between policy intent and implementation continues to be widely reported. A regional policy analysis dating back to 2014 found limited translation of policy into funding and action in all countries (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2014). More recent studies have found that even in countries with strong policy, many schools are either unaware of them or lack the resources, knowledge and skills needed to provide holistic and evidence-based interventions (Cahill and Romei, 2020; UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; dos Reis and Hofmann, 2014).

Filling the gap between policy and implementation will require strategic action plans, sustainable funding commitments, human resourcing and monitoring mechanisms to assess progress, accompanied by more robust evidence generation (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; UNGEI, 2018).

Towards gender-transformative education policy

All education policies can and should seek to be gender-transformative. Policies can ensure that the gendered nature of violence is acknowledged, measured and targeted within broader efforts to address the issue. Despite this opportunity, there is a dire lack of attention to the gendered nature of school violence, including SRGBV, within existing policies across the region, and even fewer examples of policies that call for a gender-transformative approach. While recent research is limited, a regional analysis found that most policies were 'gender blind' (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2014). A review of policies in South Asia found a lack of LGBTIQ+-specific anti-bullying policies, despite recognition that such students were particularly vulnerable to this form of school violence (UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, 2016).

Gender-transformative policy not only recognizes the immediate needs and experiences of students of different genders, but also commits to efforts to challenge and transform the root causes of gender inequality and violence in educational settings. For example, it may mandate integration of age-appropriate content challenging harmful gender norms into all levels of education. In Taiwan, China, the government introduced a Gender Equity Education Act in 2004 with the aim of promoting gender equity in education. The legislation demonstrates a gender-transformative approach, aiming to redefine and transform gender and sexual norms in order to create a 'gender-friendly society'. While indicative of promising progress towards inclusion of gender equity education in curricula, the policy has not been met with substantive efforts to address GBV in schools. There is also a notable absence of efforts to ensure schools provide a safe and welcoming environment for students of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) (Kuo, 2015).

In Australia, recent government policy reform demonstrates commitment to a gender-transformative approach. Concerned about the national prevalence and impact of GBV, the government has recently developed a second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). This includes committing to efforts tackle GBV in schools by incorporating content on respectful relationships and consent in the Australian curriculum. The national plan sets out roles of different levels of government, schools and other stakeholders. With education policy and curriculum governed at the state/territory level, progress in implementing the plan varies across jurisdictions. The state of Victoria has been at the forefront of respectful relationships education in Australia, mandating the

teaching of specific gender transformative, respectful relationships education lessons for all primary and secondary school students and embedding this within a 'whole-of-school approach' (Victoria State Government, 2021). The success of the initiative to date is credited to the policy mandating the teaching and learning materials, as well as the state government allocating significant budget and appointing dedicated primary prevention and gender equality experts in the education department who provide ongoing training and support to schools (Our Watch, 2022).

Committing to long-term vision, approach and funding for gender equality transformation

Addressing and shifting harmful gender norms requires long-term, future-oriented investments. Evidence shows that gender-transformative approaches are possible, but take a long time, are often generational, and need sustained investments over time (UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women, 2020). A review of the Australian initiative presented above found that given the deeply entrenched nature of harmful gender norms, a long-term commitment was needed from government. This requires recognition of respectful relationships education as part of the core business of the education system, ongoing resourcing that flows from national, to state and local governments, continuous action planning, engagement and collaboration with key education stakeholders, schools, principals, teachers and the broader violence prevention sector (Kearney, Gleeson and Leung, 2016).

In short, schools cannot implement holistic approaches to school violence including SRGBV without sufficient systems support. Policy provisions must be followed up with actionable plans, long-term resourcing and support to implement efforts and ultimately lead to tangible and positive transformations within schools.

Gender-transformative prevention education

A key element of work to prevent school violence, including SRGBV, is explicit educational content and delivery mechanisms that aim to address violence and promote respectful relationships. In other words, schools can actively prevent violence and promote a culture of respect by focusing on *what* is taught and *how* it is taught (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016).

For example, when designed and delivered well, activities integrated into curricula can help students to identify, challenge and reframe harmful norms that lead to inequality, discrimination and violence, as well as build social and emotional skills to build and nurture respectful relationships (UNGEI, 2023). At the same time, teachers, school leaders and other school staff can actively promote and model respectful and equitable behaviours in their instructional methods and day-to-day interactions with students. For this to work, teachers and other staff need to be aware of, and actively practice gender equality.

Addressing gender inequality as a root cause of school violence in prevention education

Across the region, there are promising examples of classroom interventions that aim to explicitly address gender and violence. There is also an expanding evidence-base to inform the development of effective classroom interventions that lead to positive shifts in student (and teacher) knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Critically, classroom programmes are only effective at addressing gender inequality and GBV when they are gender-transformative. This means they include learning activities that help students examine and challenge gender roles and stereotypes and the ways in which certain gender norms limit opportunities or lead to harmful practices for girls, boys and non-binary students. They engage students in critical thinking around the negative effects of gender norms and stereotypes, including GBV, and develop the skills and capacities needed to resist participation in violence or acceptance of violence (Cahill and Romei, 2020).

Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) is a school-based programme for adolescents aged 12–14 years. Developed by ICRW, it includes classroom activities designed to promote equitable attitudes and norms related to gender and violence; strengthen skills to resolve conflicts without violence; and create a safe school culture that supports non-violent attitudes and behaviours. The programme, implemented over two academic years, demonstrates a holistic approach, providing classroom activities alongside staff training, school-based campaigns and parent and community outreach.

GEMs has been adapted and implemented in a range of countries in the region. Evaluation of implementation in Viet Nam, Bangladesh and India found a positive shift in attitudes related to gender and violence in Viet Nam and India, with no change in Bangladesh. Students who attended more sessions generally had more gender equitable attitudes. In all settings, the intervention resulted in enhanced communication about gender and violence among peers, and between students and teachers. There was no significant change in the experience of peer-based or teacher-perpetrated violence in any of the sites (Achyut et al., 2017; Ulziisuren, 2019). This is unsurprising given that attitudes and behaviours relating to deep-rooted gender norms take a long time to change (Achyut et al. 2017).

Evidence-informed interventions such as GEMs are often developed and supported by civil society organizations with promising results. In fact, several curriculum tools actively challenging gender norms have been developed in the region. But such content that helps learners actively identify and challenge harmful gender norms is rarely found in nationally-mandated school curricula. There are also widely reported challenges relating to teacher capacity and confidence to deliver such content effectively, meaning that even where content exists, it may be ignored or delivered poorly (Cahill and Dadvand, 2021; Cahill et al. 2022).

Strategic entry points to teach about gender, power and violence in the curriculum

Finding a place to deliver gender-transformative violence prevention content can be challenging among competing curriculum priorities. It may be strategic to look at how content identifying and challenging harmful gender norms, addressing SRGBV and promoting respectful relationships can be integrated into existing curriculum priority areas. For example, many countries in the region are making progress in integrating SEL into curricula (UNESCO, 2015b). This provides a logical entry-point for content addressing gender and violence.

Another potential 'home' for content on gender and violence is comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). International guidance on CSE calls for the inclusion of age-appropriate content that challenges gender norms and addresses GBV for all age groups (UNESCO et al., 2018). This reflects research findings that sexuality education that includes focus on gender and power is significantly more effective than those that do not (Haberland, 2015). Despite this, regional analysis finds that many countries do not include these topics in their sexuality education curricula and where they do, content is often poorly delivered (UNFPA, UNESCO and IPPF, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2021). A recent regional evidence review found that CSE is a potentially powerful intervention for the primary prevention of GBV but highlighted the need for further research to strengthen evidence about how to do this well (UNFPA, 2021).

Challenging harmful gender norms needs to start early

Children internalize gender norms and stereotypes from an early age, therefore, it makes sense for education systems to integrate violence prevention education early. There are increasing examples from around the world demonstrating how age-appropriate content and teaching methods can be integrated into early childhood and primary school settings, often with strategies to involve parents (e.g. Nugroho et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2022a; UNGEI, 2023).

In Viet Nam, VVOB has supported early childhood educators to challenge gender stereotypes and transform their classrooms into gender-responsive learning environments. The intervention helped teachers to become aware of their own conscious and unconscious gender biases. In addition, teachers received training in gender-responsive teaching, and to deliver activities that specifically challenged gender stereotypes. Other elements of the initiative included working with school leaders to foster a gender-equal school culture and education for parents and caregivers (VVOB, 2020).

Despite clear evidence for starting early, and guidance for providing age-appropriate violence prevention and respectful relationships education, there are few examples of violence prevention interventions in early childhood or primary school settings in the Asia-Pacific region. In seeking to integrate gender-transformative content and teaching methods into curricula, governments should look at opportunities for integrating age-appropriate gender and violence content from an early age.

Learners and young people value interventions for violence prevention and gender equality

The high value that learners themselves place on gender-transformative education makes a compelling case for investment in this area. Feedback collected from more than 9,000 students across five countries in the eastern and southern Africa and Asia-Pacific regions who participated in *Connect with Respect*, a lower-secondary, evidence-informed classroom programme designed to prevent SRGBV, found that over 90% believed that all schools should teach about the

prevention of GBV. Over three quarters of these same students stated that doing the *Connect with Respect* lessons improved their relationship skills (Cahill et al., 2022). In focus groups, students said that gender norms were causing significant harm, contributing to inequality and GBV both in schools and the broader community.

Across the region, young people are stepping up to educate their peers, often in response to concerns that schools are falling short in this area. In Viet Nam, the youth-led feminist organization, Mirror Mirror, has established a library of educational content, an online discussion group and *Equali-tea* – a simple board game designed to teach young people about GBV. They are using the resources to create open, inclusive, empathic and safe discussion spaces on gender issues, both in and out of school. In Indonesia, the Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality has developed digital resources promoting tolerance, gender equality, inclusivity and peace. The content is targeted at high school students across Indonesia, aiming to expose them to a diversity of individuals (including gender diverse individuals) in an effort to foster inclusive attitudes, fight discrimination, build mutual trust and celebrate diversity (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023a).

While it is positive that young people are innovating to fill a gap in school curricula, for all young people to benefit from gender-transformative education, education systems must take responsibility and lead the way. Experience shows that young people can be valuable allies and partners both in the design and evaluation of interventions, providing nuanced accounts of their needs, priorities, and relational concerns and ensuring that programmes are responsive to evolving needs (Safe to Learn, 2023; UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023a).



Working with teachers to drive gender-transformative work in schools

Supporting teachers to ensure effective delivery of classroom interventions

Committed and well-trained teachers who feel supported by schools and education systems are critical to all aspects of addressing school violence, including SRGBV (Cahill and Romei, 2020). Recent research found that many teachers in the region did not recognize some forms of school violence (particularly teacher-perpetrated violence), and some disagreed that it was their responsibility to keep students safe. This highlights a critical need for teacher capacity-building (UNESCO et al., 2022).

When it comes to classroom interventions, teachers need training and support, as quality and fidelity of delivery are a commonly reported barrier to success (Our Watch, 2022). Even the most well-designed classroom intervention will be ineffective if it is not delivered with quality and fidelity. Classroom programmes covering gender and violence prevention are typically delivered by teachers who are approaching these topics as learners themselves, as the content is new to them (UNESCO et al., 2022). Examples from the region highlight both factors that enable and constrain teachers to deliver gender-transformative school violence prevention programmes. Teachers involved in delivering *Connect with Respect* said that their ability to deliver activities relied on adequate training, dedicated time in the timetable, and collegial support. Teacher willingness and commitment were also key to enabling implementation. Common constraining factors were limited teaching time, lack of confidence in facilitating participatory activities, behaviour management concerns, large class sizes, and cultural beliefs (Cahill et al., 2022).

Similar findings are reported by teachers delivering many forms of transformative education in the Asia-Pacific region, who confirm the need to invest in strong teacher training and support models (UNESCO, 2022c).

Teachers need help to challenge their own gendered beliefs and biases

Teachers are not immune to the influence of gender norms and power dynamics around them. Their attitudes, knowledge and skills are shaped by social and gender norms, their own education and training, experiences in their personal lives and the institutional structures within which they work (UNESCO et al., 2022; Achyut et al., 2017). In this context, gender-transformative training is recommended for all teachers, enabling them to critically examine their own biases and to challenge and deconstruct traditional gender norms and stereotypes (UNESCO, 2022a). Given that the topics of gender and power can be potentially sensitive, misunderstood and lead to community opposition, teachers also need to feel supported by school leadership. An Australian study examining the challenges facing primary school

teachers in delivering content relating to gender, found that school leaders were important in helping teachers accept the uncomfortable emotions that may arise when the messages of gender equality that underpin violence prevention sit in tension with their personal beliefs or led to fear about parental backlash (Dadvand and Cahill, 2021). School leadership support can in turn enable teachers to engage students to reflect on their own views about gender and violence. It also helps teachers engage with parents to address their concerns.

In a holistic approach to school violence, including SRGBV, teachers carry responsibility at multiple levels (UNESCO et al. 2022). If we are to expect teachers to be at the nexus of a comprehensive approach to school violence, including delivering gender-transformative classroom programmes, they require adequate training to build their knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as ongoing support from both professional peers and school leadership.



Gender-transformative psychosocial support for students affected by violence

When school violence, including SRGBV, does occur, there should be clear, safe, age-appropriate and accessible procedures and mechanisms in place at school for supporting those affected, reporting incidents, and referring cases to relevant external services that are provided beyond the school where required (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). UN Global guidance on SRGBV calls for 'easily accessible, child-sensitive and confidential reporting mechanisms; counselling and support; and referral to law enforcement and healthcare services' (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016, p.14).

School-based mental health and psychosocial support

Concern about the prevalence of child and adolescent mental health issues, alongside recognition of the link between school violence and mental health outcomes, has brought renewed attention to the important role of psychosocial care within schools in the Asia-Pacific region. Offering confidential counselling and psychosocial support to students experiencing school violence is a good practice in this respect and can take different forms depending on contexts and systems maturity. UN Global Guidance on SRGBV recommends supporting learners who experience violence as well as witnesses and perpetrators, especially students who require assistance to overcome potential psychological problems that trigger violent behaviour (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). This is part of a broader imperative for schools to promote and protect students' mental health and psychosocial well-being, linking them to external support services where needed (UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific, 2022; WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2022b).

In some countries in the region there are examples of counselling, welfare or other forms of psychosocial support provision within schools. In Bhutan, the Ministry of Education and Skills has worked towards institutionalizing guidance and counselling programmes in all secondary schools. This has involved recruitment, training and placement of full-time School Counsellors who provide counselling, oversee prevention programmes, and deliver parental education (Dem and Busch, 2018). They are responsible for responding to critical incidents, including serious incidents of school violence, and referring to external services as required. The government has plans in place to provide gender-sensitive counselling training to counsellors across the country.

In Viet Nam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) have a range of policies addressing child and adolescent mental health. These include policies committing to establishing school counselling services. However, as is often the case, there are reports of poor implementation to date. There is a lack of designated counselling spaces in schools, counselling responsibilities are often assigned to teachers with little training, and a lack of mental health knowledge among teachers, parents and the broader community leads to missed opportunities for early identification of student mental health problems. There are also noted gaps in mental health support and care for LGBTIQ+ students, despite their elevated vulnerability to violence and its mental health impacts (UNICEF Viet Nam, 2022). Addressing school violence and mental health, the effects of which interact and have detrimental effects on students' learning and well-being, therefore requires greater investment in comprehensive school health programming that includes school-based or school-linked services, as appropriate and where feasible.

Towards gender-transformative response mechanisms

To respond to the gendered nature of school violence, including SRGBV, mental health outcomes and help-seeking behaviour, school-based support services need to be gender-transformative. This means recognizing how gender norms may influence patterns of violence, mental health outcomes and help-seeking behaviours, and making sure that that services are equally accessible and effective for all students, regardless of gender or other markers of diversity. For example, noting that boys who experience bullying are less likely to come forward to seek help, efforts would be made to encourage them and reassure them of the confidential nature of support. Acknowledging that students of diverse SOGIESC are experiencing frequent discrimination and bullying, efforts would be made to ensure that school counselling staff, where such personnel are in place, are comfortable to provide appropriate support services or referrals to students in all their diversity.

Guidance on gender-transformative adolescent mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming recommends creating opportunities for girls, boys, and adolescents with diverse SOGIESC to be heard and involved in the design of initiatives (UNICEF, 2022b). Such guidance also calls for training of service providers (e.g. school counsellors) to improve their capacity to provide gender-transformative services, and ensure that response efforts within the school are complimented by other efforts to both dismantle harmful gender norms and destigmatize mental health problems.

As part of holistic prevention and response initiatives addressing school violence, every school should have a system in place to ensure that students are able to access the psychosocial support they may need. The prevalence of mental health problems among children and adolescents and the link between school violence and mental health provide a compelling argument for this. In fact, schools function as an important safety net, identifying and intervening in the early stages of mental health issues, before they become more serious.

As the role of schools in providing psychosocial support is better recognized and resourced, staff need to be well trained to be non-discriminatory and recognize the link between violence, gender and mental health. Efforts must also be strengthened to remove barriers that prevent students coming forward to seek help. For example, alongside training school counsellors to provide appropriate and non-judgmental services to students of diverse SOGIESC, there is potential to integrate content in the curricula that helps students identify and challenge potential gender-based barriers to help-seeking, as well as actively develop help-seeking skills. This example demonstrates how efforts across the different elements of the holistic response can complement and reinforce each other.



Strengthening evidence on the gendered nature of school violence

Data and evidence are essential for understanding and addressing school violence, including SRGBV. Policies and programmes can only be effective when they are built on reliable information. This includes data on the scope and impact of the problem, characteristics of those experiencing or using violence (such as gender), location of violence and information about new forms of violence. In addition, there is a need for evidence of what works in preventing and responding to school violence, including SRGBV. This will lead to more strategic allocation of resources to interventions that show promising results. When it comes to SRGBV specifically, there is a need for both an improved understanding of the problem and for evidence of what works to be strengthened, consolidated and reflected in policy reform, strategic resourcing and scaling-up of good practices.

Applying a gendered lens to the study of school violence

Despite the strong argument for the influence of gender on school violence, current systematic data collection on violence against children (e.g. the Global School-Based Student Health Survey [GSHS], Violence Against Children Survey [VACS] and Demographic Health Surveys [DHS]) in the region, and beyond, do not provide adequate information on gendered dimension of school violence or SRGBV specifically. In some cases, data on the experience of school violence is not gender-disaggregated, data on gender of perpetrator is almost never collected and there are limited efforts to ask about the location of violence – i.e. to gauge whether violence is experienced in and around schools. This impedes the ability of experts and policy makers to adequately understand and address the issue (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023b).

Recognizing this challenge, an expert group established by the Global Working Group to End SRGBV has recommended ways in which the evidence base could be strengthened to provide a more accurate picture of the role that gender norms and power imbalances play in manifestations of school violence. These include gathering more information about the circumstances of an act of violence, filling in gaps in our knowledge of sexual violence, harmonizing data parameters and complementing quantitative evidence with qualitative studies that provide more explanatory power (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023b).

In the absence of systematic data about SRGBV, some young people are taking initiative to assess the scope of the issue within their own contexts. This is often part of broader efforts to advocate to government leaders to do more to address the issue. Girl Congress, a leadership platform for girls aged 15–17 in the Philippines, has recently undertaken research investigating SRGBV in Dumaguete City. Data collected from girls in Grades 11 to 12 found that 75% experienced sexual violence at least once, with less than one third feeling like they could report this. 'Cat-calling' and online violence were also frequently reported (Girl Congress and Transform Education, 2023). The research has been used to advocate to school authorities and the city council for action on the issue.

Such initiatives demonstrate the passion and leadership of young people to address SRGBV. If measurement of the gendered nature of violence was mainstreamed in systematic data collection on school violence, this would provide a powerful tool for advocacy, as well as better informed policy and programming efforts throughout the region.

Translating evidence to action

Research into the relevance and effectiveness of different interventions to address school violence, including SRGBV, is important for education systems as they seek guidance about programme suitability and sustainability (Cahill et al., 2023). Across the region, there have been efforts to monitor, evaluate and research interventions to address school violence, including SRGBV. Breakthrough India measured the impact of a two-and-a-half-year gender-transformative intervention in secondary schools centered around a programme engaging adolescent girls and boys in classroom discussions about gender equality and targeting societal norms that restrict women's and girls' opportunities. A randomized controlled trial found that the intervention led to more gender equal attitudes and self-reported gender-equal behaviour (Dhar, Jian and Jayachandran, 2022). Students will continue to be surveyed to assess long-term impact.

VVOB evaluated a teacher professional development project tackling teacher-perpetrated SRGBV in primary and lower-secondary schools in Cambodia. The project primarily involved training teachers to understand the negative impacts of corporal punishment and gendered patterns in teacher-perpetrated violence, and to develop skills in positive behaviour management. The evaluation investigated changes in teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices toward gender equality and SRGBV. It found that teacher training and coaching led to increased knowledge and skills both in primary and lower-secondary schools and small-to-moderate shifts in attitudes and beliefs regarding SRGBV. Primary and secondary teachers involved perpetrated less emotional abuse, and primary teachers perpetrated less physical violence (Cabus et al. 2023).

Initiatives such as these provide valuable and much-needed information about what works, while also identifying less effective or potentially negative impacts of interventions. Accompanying new interventions with strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks is critical to identify what is working well and what needs adjustment. This iterative process of assessment equips policymakers and educators with the knowledge to make informed decisions and allocate resources wisely. Given that current efforts in the region to address SRGBV remain limited and fragmented, questions remain as to whether the results being disseminated are heard by those in the position to systematize good practice. This highlights a need to consolidate the current evidence and ensure that it reaches policymakers so that this evidence can be translated back into action.

Partnering with young people to strengthen evidence

In both understanding the scope of school violence, including SRGBV, and assessing the quality and impact of interventions, student voice is invaluable, and young people should be involved as both key informants and co-researchers. Engaging adolescents and young people in research concerning their experiences is necessary to reflect their lived realities. As well as facilitating unique insights into young people's lives, social contexts, choices and negotiations, this provides young people with an opportunity to exercise their right to participation and reflects best-practice guidance on child and youth-focused research (Page, Cense and van Reeuwijk, 2023; UNESCO, 2019b).

Young people can be involved in the design of research, providing unique insights that may otherwise be overlooked by adult-centric approaches. They can also usefully assist with data collection, with potential benefits of peer-to-peer information gathering. ASPBAE is demonstrating leadership in this area with its Youth-led Action Research initiative. Young people representing marginalized groups receive training in action research methods and then design and carry out research with their peers. It is young people representing these communities who are best positioned to provide guidance on how to collect data from their peers in a safe and supportive way.

Young people can also provide valuable feedback about the relevance and impact of interventions. In the evaluation of *Connect with Respect*, in addition to assessing changes in student knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, the research team asked students the extent to which they valued and recommended such programmes (Cahill et al., 2023). This provides an indication about the contribution an intervention is making to students' lives – valuable information but rarely collected and often-missed opportunity.

Various youth-led movements in the region demonstrate young people's passion and leadership to address school violence and achieve gender equality. Those seeking to better understand and address SRGBV in the region would do well to develop strong intergenerational youth-adult partnerships and ensure genuine engagement with young people in both the design and implementation of research and evaluation.

Conclusion

There is a call to the global education community to urgently transform education to address a current learning crisis and prepare learners to face the challenges of the future. Yet children cannot learn when schools are a place of fear, violence and inequity. A critical foundation for transforming education is the creation of safe, inclusive, equitable and healthy schools (UNESCO, 2022c).

As demonstrated by this brief, in the Asia-Pacific region, there is a lack of data on the prevalence and impact of SRGBV, and on the efficacy of programmes and policies designed to address it. Limited research cannot be an excuse for limited action. It is high time that the education actors in the Asia- Pacific region move from commitment to action to prevent and respond to violence in and around schools, including SRGBV. This requires efforts at multiple levels – policies and laws that are implemented and resourced; evidence-informed prevention education in classrooms from early childhood through to secondary and higher education levels; training and support for teachers; access to school-based and school-linked psychosocial care and support services; and stronger evidence on the scope and impact of the issue. As the examples in this brief demonstrate, all of these elements of a holistic approach to addressing school violence can and must be gender-transformative. This means that they are built on an understanding of the existence and impact of unequal and harmful gender norms on manifestations of school violence and that they recognize the widespread issue of SRGBV. It especially means that all elements must seek to dismantle and transform such norms in the way that they are designed and implemented.

Comprehensively addressing school violence, including SRGBV will inevitably yield huge pay-offs, not only in a reduction of violence in education settings but in students' enhanced learning outcomes and their well-being, together with more gender-equitable inter-personal relationships. In applying a gender-transformative approach, we are recognizing the power of schools as a catalyst for positive generational change and the true transformative power of education that contributes to more gender-just and sustainable societies.

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