Safe to learn and thrive

Ending violence in and through education

Education 2030

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Transforming education to end violence: A holistic imperative

Approximately one billion children experience some form of physical, sexual or psychological violence or neglect each year. Globally, one in three learners reports experiencing bullying in the previous month, and more than three learners were involved in physical fights between peers last year. From bullying and violent discipline to gendered violence, violence manifests in numerous forms, undermining the transformative power of education.

This publication explores the multifaceted nature of violence in educational settings, identifies its root causes, and underscores the urgent need for a holistic approach to create safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments.

Education systems must embed violence prevention and response into their core operations, addressing the intersecting drivers of violence such as gender inequality, harmful social norms, and inadequate policies. The publication calls for immediate, sustained action to transform schools into havens where every learner can thrive, free from fear and harm.

Ending violence in education is not just a moral and legal obligation – it is essential for building a peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Approximately
one billion
children across the world
experience some form
of violence each year

unesco

"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

Safe to learn and thrive

Ending violence in and through education

Foreword

Violence in and around schools represents an urgent challenge that demands our immediate and sustained attention. As we strive towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – particularly those centred on quality education, gender equality, and well-being – there is growing recognition that education must not only provide a pathway to knowledge, but also offer a safe haven where every learner can thrive, free from fear or harm.

This publication reinforces UNESCO's longstanding commitment to promoting safe and inclusive learning environments. It builds on vital instruments like the Learning without Fear resolution of 2015, as well as the new Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development, adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 2023.

The publication provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the multifaceted drivers of violence in educational settings. It draws on the latest evidence and programmatic experiences to generate actionable guidance for policy-makers, educators, and other stakeholders invested in creating safe and supportive educational environments for students.

Our work is closely aligned with the ongoing efforts of the Safe to Learn coalition, the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV WG) and the World Anti-Bullying Forum – three global initiatives that seek to end violence in schools through concerted action and collaboration. By emphasizing the need for holistic, intersectional approaches that address the root causes of violence, the publication advances this shared mission.

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of our partners, whose commitment on the ground and invaluable input to policy discussions have been instrumental in shaping the content and direction of this publication.

The evidence is clear: ending violence in and through education demands a sustained, systematic transformation of how we think about and approach education. This can only be achieved through collective action among governments, civil society, international organizations, and learning communities.

It is time to commit to reimagining education systems where every learner and member of the school community can thrive, free from violence, exclusion, and discrimination.

Stefania Giannini
Assistant Director-General for Education

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Acronyms

CSE	Comprehensive sexuality education
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECFM	Early, child and forced marriage
GBV	Gender-based violence
IPV	Intimate partner violence
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SEL	Socio-emotional learning
SOGIE	Sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression
SRGBV	School-related gender-based violence
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VACS	Violence Against Children Surveys
WHO	World Health Organization

Facing the shadows: The imperative to address violence in and through education

Education is not just one of the cornerstones of societal development; it holds the transformative power to change lives. For all children and adolescents, it provides strong foundations for a promising future. For those who face disadvantage and difficulty, education is particularly crucial – it can be the key that opens doors to opportunities, breaking cycles of poverty and marginalization, and offering a pathway to a better life. However, for far too many, learning is marred by the presence or fear of violence, which can manifest in forms ranging from, for example, physical assault to various forms of harassment, and in settings spanning from the schoolyard, to the journey to and from school, and to cyberspace. The gravity and breadth of violence in educational settings demand urgent, comprehensive responses to transform them into safe and inclusive spaces for learning, where children, adolescents and school communities can learn and thrive.

Violence in educational settings is prevalent and multifaceted. It includes physical violence like fighting, corporal punishment, psychological violence, verbal abuse, and sexual violence including coercive control in intimate relationships, and bullying. These forms of violence can occur across different settings and include specific types like bullying, which may be both physical (often seen in boys) or psychological, and emerging threats in digital spaces like cyberbullying. Additionally, children in schools can be affected by collective violence, including war, attacks on schools, or violence associated with gang culture, all of which are increasingly relevant in today's global context. Violence is almost always influenced by gender and other identities, disproportionately affecting girls, boys and children of diverse genders, due to power dynamics or perceptions of nonconformity to prevailing gender norms. Disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, mother-tongue language, sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE), and other factors that mark a learner as being 'different' from the norm, are also significant drivers of violence, discrimination and exclusions. According to recent global minimum estimates, one billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced some form of violence in the past year, a significant portion of which occurs within the educational sphere.[1]

> **Many secondary school teachers and students experience various forms of violence – verbal, physical, sexual, bullying, cyberbullying, and self-harm – as a regular part of their school experience.**
>
> *(Teacher, focus group participant, Thailand, 2019)[2]*

Violence has profound impacts on those affected, undermining their mental health, academic performance, physical well-being, and sense of belonging, as well as beyond individuals, impacting bystanders and the broader educational environment and, ultimately, society at large.[3] The economic cost is also significant, with violence in and around schools estimated to lead to around US$11 trillion in lost lifetime earnings globally.[4]

Addressing violence in and through education therefore is a critical imperative.

Violence in schools is not just a violation of educational rights but also a direct breach of children's fundamental human rights. The right to a safe, non-violent education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which nearly every country has ratified. This commitment binds governments to ensure that every child can access education free from fear, discrimination, and violence. The New Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development[5] reaffirms the global consensus that safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments are essential to realizing these rights. Upholding this right is not only a moral obligation but also a legal one, reinforcing the imperative to address violence in all its forms and protect children's well-being and potential.

Efforts to foster safe and inclusive learning environments have included the development and implementation of national legislations, school-based policies and regulations; violence prevention programmes; the promotion of gender equality and human rights within the curriculum; linkages to services including health, child protection, gender-based violence (GBV), and justice; and digital tools and platforms to monitor incidents of violence, educate on digital citizenship, and maintain open communication between learners, caregivers, and teachers.[6] Despite these efforts,

much remains to be done to prevent violence from happening, address it appropriately when it does happen, and promote inclusion, belonging and well-being in and through education. At the heart of this, a nuanced understanding of the drivers of this violence is crucial – many mirroring broader societal issues such as gender inequality, disempowered parents and teachers, lack of female leaderships and social and gender norms that tacitly condone, perpetuate, or permit harmful or aggressive behaviours. These individual and social pattens are often underpinned by adequate policy frameworks and further impacted by political contexts, particularly in societies experiencing conflict and polarization, as these conditions often intensify violence and undermine efforts to address it.

Building on UNESCO's longstanding efforts to address various forms of violence in schools, such as bullying and gender-based violence including violence based on SOGIE, this publication offers a new perspective by emphasizing a transformative, holistic approach to education systems. It goes beyond various forms of violence to integrate violence prevention and response into the core of education systems. By synthesizing evidence and programmatic insights from UNESCO's ongoing work and global partners, this publication serves as a "one-stop shop" for policy-makers and practitioners, showcasing concerted global endeavours and providing innovative, actionable guidance to create safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments for all learners.

The crisis unfolded: The many faces of violence in education

Understanding violence in education

Violence is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that manifests in various forms and settings, ranging from individual acts to systemic issues affecting entire communities. A broad definition of violence includes physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual actions, as well as emotional abuse and neglect and threats of such actions, that result in harm or suffering. This harm can be directed at individuals, groups or institutions, and can occur in various settings such as public spaces, homes, online platforms, and educational institutions.[7]

Within the education sector, **school violence** encompasses acts and threats that cause physical, psychological, emotional or sexual harm in and around schools, including on school grounds, during commutes, and in online interactions related to school activities.[8] School violence can impact learners and adults in the school community, including teachers and other school personnel. The definitions of school violence vary but commonly emphasize its far-reaching consequences on safety, health and wellbeing, academic achievement and belonging, and highlighting the need for secure and inclusive learning environments.

Beyond school violence, the broader concept of "violence in education" acknowledges that violent dynamics can also occur through systemic and institutional practices, particularly educational policies, processes and practices. These practices may include discriminatory policies, exclusionary educational curriculum content, and inequitable teaching methods that perpetuate violence and limit opportunities for certain groups. Violence in education not only affects individuals but also reinforces harmful attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and norms across education systems.

The influence of community and societal violence on education is significant. External factors such as gang violence and attacks on schools and child recruitment disrupt learning environments' ability to function as safe spaces and may have repercussions within schools. While they do not originate within schools, these forms of violence profoundly impact the educational experience and necessitate multi-pronged strategies for prevention and response, including curriculum adjustments and community engagement. In Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, for example, challenges like these are increasingly prevalent, underscoring the importance of understanding the context-dependent nature of attacks on education and the various ways they manifest, such as the targeting of schools by armed groups and the forced recruitment of children.[9]

Violence in education is a pervasive crisis that manifests in myriad forms, each affecting students, teachers, and the broader educational community in profound ways. The rest of this chapter will explore the prevalence of such violence, examine its drivers, and show how it hinders learners and educators' health, wellbeing and belonging, and education's transformative potential.

Violence in education is prevalent and multifaceted

Violence against children in education

Violence in education is largely and primarily experienced by learners, i.e. children or young people. Various sources help define the different types of violence that children may encounter during their education.[2,10,11,12] In particular, the 2023 International Classification of Violence against Children (ICVAC)[7] encompasses different types of violence against children occurring in various settings, including education settings, and serves as a helpful basis to categorize these different types of violence:

- **Physical violence against a child** – deliberate, unwanted act "that uses physical force against the body of a child and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering."[7] Related to education, this may include any form of physical aggression, such as physical attacks (with or without weapons), physical fights between learners, physical corporal punishment by school personnel, and physical bullying. This may include hitting, punching, stabbing, kicking, throwing objects at a person, amongst others.

Worldwide, more than one in three students has been involved in a physical fight with another student and almost one in three has been physically attacked at least once in the past year.[3]

- **Psychological violence against a child** – deliberate, unwanted act, "verbal and non-verbal, that harms or has a high likelihood of harming the development of a child, including long-term physiological harm and mental health consequences."[7] Related to education, this can be manifested by such actions as humiliation, intimidation, and threats, or isolating, rejecting, ignoring, excluding from a group, spreading rumours or name-calling – either by school peers or personnel.

Globally, 42% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth reported having been 'ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened at school' because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, primarily by their peers.[13]

- **Sexual violence against a child** – deliberate, unwanted sexual act, "either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering."[7] Related to education, this includes a range of acts and behaviours including nonconsensual completed or attempted sexual contact (i.e. unwanted touching, attempted unwanted sex, forced sex) perpetrated by school peers or personnel, non-consensual acts of a sexual nature not involving contact (sexual harassment, sexual comments, jokes and images) perpetrated by school peers or personnel, sexual bullying, sexual exploitation (e.g. sex for grades or fees) and any form of coercion.

Up to 25% of adolescents report experiencing sexual violence, with up to 40% of these incidents occurring in schools, where girls are particularly vulnerable to forced sex.[14]

"

Sexual violence occurs among students. Boys touch girls on private parts and demand sex by force. This happens very often. Unfortunately, this behaviour is so common that it is not considered as violence.

(Teacher, focus group participant, Tanzania, 2019)[2]

- **Neglect of a child** – deliberate, unwanted "failure to meet a child's physical or psychological needs, protect a child from danger, or obtain medical, educational or other services when those responsible for the child's care have the means, knowledge and access to services to do so."[7] Related to education, this includes educational neglect of a child, i.e. ongoing failure to secure a child's education through attendance at school or otherwise when those responsible for the child's care have the means, knowledge and access to services to do so.

Globally, approximately **one out of every six** children was found to be suffering from physical or emotional neglect.[15]

It is furthermore crucial to address forms of violence that transcend the distinct categories of physical, psychological, sexual violence and neglect outlined above:

- **Corporal punishment** and/or **violent discipline** involves use of physical force and is intended to cause pain or discomfort, as well as other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading.[16] It is often justified under the guise of discipline of learners by teachers or school personnel, reflecting widely held beliefs and attitudes that accept and normalize violent punishment of children as a legitimate form of behaviour management

793 million school-aged children live in countries where corporal punishment in school is not fully prohibited.[17]

"

I view fierce words or rigid characters as a technique for some teachers to try to motivate deviant students to work hard.

(Primary school teacher, focus group participant, Thailand, 2019)[2]

- **Bullying** is characterized by an imbalance of power or strengths driven by societal and institutional norms. Newer analysis of evidence suggests that bullying is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community.[18] Bullying can be physical, which includes repeated aggression such as being hit, hurt, kicked, pushed, shoved around or locked indoors, having things stolen, having personal belongings taken away or destroyed, or being forced to do things; psychological, which includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse and social exclusion and refers to being called mean names, being teased in an unpleasant way, being left out of activities on purpose, excluded or completely ignored, and being the subject of lies or nasty rumours; and sexual, which refers to being made fun of with sexual jokes, comments or gestures.

1 in 3 learners is bullied every month globally.[3]

"

By the time a child reaches out to an adult, the vast majority of kids have been dealing with the bullying and trying to ignore it for a long time.

(Rosalind Wiseman)[19]

- **Technology-facilitated violence** refers to diverse forms of violence that take place via information and communication technologies or digital platforms such as by SMS, messaging applications or online. **Cyberbullying** includes being bullied by online messages, for example sharing mean instant messages, posts or emails; by images, for example posting unflattering or inappropriate pictures of someone online without their permission; or via the phone, for example sending hurtful texts or making

hurtful calls.[3] **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence** includes acts or threads of acts of violence "committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media"[20] and based on gender. This can encompass behaviours like cyberbullying, online harassment, and online grooming, where perpetrators exploit digital platforms to manipulate and coerce victims, often with a focus on vulnerable groups. These forms of violence can occur in, around and through schools and education.

- **School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)**: SRGBV refers to acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools or through education systems, "perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by an unequal power dynamics."[21] This umbrella terms brings the spotlight on the continuum of gendered dimensions of violence in education, and includes a broad range of incident types, from technology-facilitated sexual harassment to dating violence amongst school peers, sexualized touching or comments, 'sex for grades' or bullying based on SOGIE.

Violence against education personnel

While a focus on violence against children in educational settings is important, it is crucial not to overlook the various forms of violence that teachers and school personnel endure, including physical assaults, verbal abuse, and psychological and sexual harassment. A survey by the American Psychological Association revealed that nearly 80% of teachers surveyed reported having experienced violence at school at least once in the current or past school year.[22] A study based on a Lithuanian sample revealed a significant portion of teachers have experienced violence in their workplace: 38.5% of teachers have been bullied by school staff, 33.9% have faced verbal victimization from students' parents, and victimization by students affected 65.8% of teachers, with verbal and social violence being the most common.[23]

Learner-on-educator violence was also reported a common phenomenon in South African schools, with most of the educators reporting having experienced violence at school.[24]

Violence against educators not only affects their well-being and job satisfaction, but also impedes their ability to foster a safe and conducive learning environment, and can lead to ripple effects of violence. Highlighting and addressing these forms of violence is essential for safeguarding educators' health and maintaining the quality of education, yet more comprehensive research, particularly from low and middle-income countries, is needed to fully understand the scope and develop effective interventions.

It is important to note that all these types of violence experienced by children throughout their education trajectories, as well as by education personnel, are influenced by gender and other intersecting identities, such as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status, etc.

Different forms of violence may co-occur and overlap, with one type frequently leading to or exacerbating others, creating a complex web of challenges that students and other members of the school community may face daily. Research indicates that poly-victimization is notably more prevalent in low- and lower-middle-income countries.[25]

Institutional violence in education

Beyond interpersonal violence, learners and education personnel can also face less-tangible forms of violence. Institutional violence refers to policies, processes and practices embedded within education systems, that systematically disadvantage, exclude or harm certain groups of learners. This can include discriminatory policies that exclude, or disadvantage students based on characteristics like race, gender, or socioeconomic status, such as school dress codes that discriminate against specific groups,[26] or unequal resource allocation and school zoning or catchment policies limiting access to quality education for learners from less privileged backgrounds.[27,28,29] Institutional violence can further include the perpetuation of stereotypes, stigma or discrimination through curriculum and teaching practices, the normalization of violence within school cultures, and the lack of support structures for learners with specific needs or vulnerabilities, hindering their academic and social development.

> **Institutional violence is also strongly influenced by gender and other intersecting identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status), with education systems mirroring social and gender norms that exist in broader society.**

Some forms of violence in education are less recognized

One of the most pervasive challenges with violence in education is its normalization, which often renders it invisible and, in some cases, seemingly justifiable. This normalization can make certain forms of violence difficult to recognize or easy to dismiss. For instance, sexual violence may go unreported or unnoticed due to its covert nature and the stigma associated with reporting it, or fear of retaliation. Psychological violence, such as verbal abuse and exclusion, may be accepted as a normal part of school life. Corporal punishment and other forms of violent discipline are often justified as necessary means of disciplining learners, and may be specifically provided for in law, and endorsed or normalized by education personnel and caregivers in the school community as well as parents. This broad acceptance and justification of violence within educational settings underscore the critical need for approaches that seek to shift the context-specific beliefs, perceptions and norms that contribute towards the normalization of violence in education, combined with school-level policies and mechanisms promoting a zero-tolerances violence in all its forms.

A global online survey on teachers' perceptions of violence in schools[30] found that:
- **About one in four teachers do not recognize various forms of school violence, especially more subtle forms of psychological and sexual violence between students or those perpetrated by teachers.**
- **Teachers tend to be less likely to identify the same behaviours as 'physical violence' when they are perpetrated by a teacher than when they are perpetrated by a student.**

"

When a teacher has a temper with students, I don't think the teacher is violent. I feel that the students are in the wrong.

(Teacher, focus group participant, Thailand, 2019)[2]

"

Even parents ask the teachers to punish their children if they make mistakes.

(Teacher, focus group discussion, Nepal, 2019)[2]

Unveiling the undercurrents: The multiple drivers and ripple effects of violence in education

Violence in education is influenced by intersecting drivers

Violence in education is not uniform and is experienced differently depending on a person's identity and the socio-economic category to which they belong. It is linked to a complex interplay of drivers, some of which originate within education and school ecosystems and others link to broader issues.[21]

- **Individual-level drivers**: These can include lack of awareness of individual and collective rights, personal history of or exposure to violence and abuse, psychological and emotional issues such depression, anxiety or trauma, and development challenges. Students who exhibit aggressive behaviours may also be replicating patterns of violence witnessed at home or in their communities. All these are compounded by individuals' tapestry of identities (e.g. age, gender, disability, nationality, race, socio-economic status, geographic location, etc.).

- **Interpersonal drivers**: These relate to relationships between individuals, whether peer, intimate, family or school (e.g. teacher-learner) relationships. For example, interpersonal conflict management and communication issues may enable or exacerbate the risk of violence. Lack of parental care and the absence of positive adult role models may also influence the use of violence.

- **Systems level drivers**: These refer to the different systems influencing violence in education, starting with education systems and schools themselves, which allow or perpetuate institutional violence. Factors like a negative school climate (which "encompasses all aspects related to how members of the school community perceive and experience the school"),[31] lack of training on positive discipline and gender-responsive pedagogy, and the absence of clear anti-violence school policies and regulations (or the lack of enforcement thereof) can foster an environment where violence can not only exist but thrive. Additionally, the lack of protocols to create safe spaces where children feel comfortable talking to teachers or other school personnel about the violence they are experiencing further contributes to this issue. Beyond education systems, lack of accessible, quality services for violence prevention and response – including health, child protection, and justice – and unclear referral pathways and roles and responsibilities also increase the risk of

experiencing violence and the likelihood of impunity, whilst impacting survivors' ability to seek help.

- **Community level drivers**: Normalization and acceptance of violence is often rooted in beliefs, attitudes, social and gender norms, and practices, and traditions that go extend beyond schools and education. Lack of community awareness, knowledge, understanding and, hence, and buy-in, strong internalization of harmful beliefs and perceptions, and lack of community mechanisms to prevent, report and response to violence all contribute to its reproduction across communities, and across generations.

Box 1: The intersection of violence within and outside of schools in LAC

With a homicide rate reaching 24 homicides per 100,000 population in 2015, LAC accounts for one-third of the world's homicides, despite representing only 8% of the global population. The homicide rate in LAC is five times higher than in North America and ten times higher than in Asia.[32]

This pervasive violence, driven by organized crime, gangs, and armed conflicts, deeply impacts all aspects of life, including education. In many LAC countries, between 20% and 45% of students experience bullying, including cyberbullying,[3] as external violence seeps into schools.

This overlap of external violence and school violence breeds fear, disrupts learning, and increases dropout rates. Schools, which should be safe spaces, risk becoming extensions of the surrounding conflicts.

Addressing these challenges requires strategies that extend beyond the classroom. Community engagement, policy reforms, and programs tailored to LAC's unique socio-political context are essential. These initiatives should aim to transform schools into safe, inclusive spaces that foster peace and resilience, breaking the cycle of violence.

- **Broader societal drivers**: Violence can be rooted in or enabled by macro dynamics such as socioeconomic inequalities, community instability or conflict, and climate change and environmental degradation. In many countries, the absence of robust legal frameworks to protect students from violence or the lack of implementation of existing laws, or existence of laws that specifically allow or perpetrate violence, further exacerbates the issue. Overarching policies and plans may not adequately address the intersections between education and protection. If there are existing policies or frameworks, students, teachers, administrators and community members may not be aware of them, or how to access the resources they offer.

- **Normative drivers**: At a structural level, social and gender norms influence many types of violence in education. In particular, gender norms play a critical role in influencing both the prevalence and acceptance of violence within schools. Social norms influencing adult-children relationships and perceptions of good behaviours and discipline underpin use and acceptance of corporal punishment and other forms of violent discipline.

Figure 1: Violence in education is influenced by intersecting drivers

Individual-level drivers
- Lack of awareness of individual and collective rights
- Personal history of or exposure to violence and abuse
- Psychological and emotional issues (depression, anxiety, trauma)
- Developmental challenges
- Replication of patterns of violence witnessed at home or in communities
- Individual identities, e.g. age, gender, disability, nationality, race

Interpersonal drivers
- Relationships (peer, intimate, family, teacher-learner)
- Conflict management and communication issues
- Lack of parental care
- Absence of positive adult role models

Systems-level drivers
- Negative school climate
- Lack of training on positive discipline and gender-responsive pedagogy
- Absence or non-enforcement of anti-violence policies
- Lack of child-friendly spaces for reporting violence
- Inaccessible quality services for prevention and response (health, child protection, justice)

Community-level drivers
- Normalization of violence due to social and gender norms
- Lack of community awareness, understanding, or buy-in
- Strong internalization of harmful beliefs
- Lack of community mechanisms for prevention, reporting, and response

Broader societal drivers
- Socio-economic inequalities
- Community instability and/or conflict
- Climate change and/or environmental degradation
- Absence of or weak legal frameworks
- Policies that fail to address the intersections between education and protection

Normative drivers
- Prevailing social and gender norms influence both the prevalence and acceptance of violence in education
- Social and gender norms also influence willingness or ability to disclose incidents of violence in education, seek help or use services

Unpacking the gendered and intersectional drivers of violence in education

The gendered nature of violence

Inequitable gender and social norms feature amongst the key drivers of many forms of violence in education. Around the world, prevailing gender norms – defined as collective societal beliefs about appropriate behaviours based on gender[33] – and power dynamics significantly shape violence within educational contexts.[11, 34, 35] The notion of SRGBV was coined to bring the spotlight on the gendered dimension of violence in education.

The gendered nature of violence is often evident.[34] For example, sexual harassment and dating violence disproportionately affects girls and learners perceived to have different gender identities, mirroring gender inequalities at play within intimate and sexual relationships. Recent estimates show that 24% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years who had ever been in a relationship had experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner.[36] This points to the likely high prevalence of intimate partner violence amongst school-going girls. Female teachers are also more exposed to sexual harassment and abuse including within teacher training institutions, as demonstrated by a Nigerian study.[37] However, the gendered nature of violence may at times be less explicit, and gender influences violence in varying, nuanced ways. Boys, influenced by norms valorizing toughness, disproportionately experience physical bullying and corporal punishment, while girls are more subject to psychological bullying and appearance-based harassment.[3] Similarly, the evidence suggests that male teachers are more likely to use corporal punishment, typically against boys, reflecting entrenched views of masculinity.[34]

The repercussions of such gendered violence are profound, affecting not only mental and physical health, wellbeing, and learning outcomes, but increasing future incidents of violence. The literature on childhood violence indicates that early experiences of sexual violence or trauma can be associated with experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) for women and use of IPV for men later in life, highlighting an intergenerational cycle of gendered violence.[38, 39] In addition, rape and unwanted early pregnancy lead to dropping out of school, as schools often cannot either not accommodate young mothers or their childcare needs, or social norms shun pregnant adolescent girls or young mothers from continuing their education.

The interaction between violence and gender inequality is complex and bidirectional. Gender inequalities not only drive various forms of violence but are also perpetuated by such incidents.[35] School violence, including bullying and homophobic and transphobic violence, serves to enforce traditional gender roles and punish deviations from these norms.[40] The education system can either inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate these harmful norms, for example through its curriculum and teaching practices, as a form of institutional violence.

The intersection between gender and other marginalized identities in violence

Gender intersects with other marginalized characteristics, with prevailing social norms underpinning negative beliefs or perceptions towards marginalized groups, thereby increasing their likelihood of experiencing violence and abuse.[33] For example, learners with diverse SOGIE are at increased risk of violence.[2, 41] In Thailand, a study revealed that 55% of LGBT students faced bullying due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.[42] Another survey across several European countries found that a significant percentage (60%) of LGBTI students experienced harassment within the past year.[43]

Violence in education also varies with age. Young children and adolescents face specific challenges and risks.[44, 45] Age often intersects with gender, with adolescent girls facing increased risks of GBV including violence by informal or dating partners, attempted forced sex, sexual coercion and technology-facilitated GBV, as they reach puberty.[34] The evidence shows that bullying can evolve over time: individuals who bully others based on SOGIE in middle school may later engage in sexual violence in high school.[40]

Disability and race are also key factors in significantly elevating the risk of children being subjected to violence. Data indicates that children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience violence as their non-disabled peers, particularly bullying and sexual violence.[46] In school settings, girls with disabilities were found two to four times more likely to experience sexual violence perpetrated by male learners than their peers without disabilities.[47] Race, nationality, and migrant status further influence experiences of violence in education. In the Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa regions, respectively 14.2% and 13.5% of learners reported being bullied based on their race, nationality or colour.[2] In the US, data shows that race is the leading factor driving bullying across school levels, with Black students significantly more likely to be bullied than their White peers.[48] Overall, immigrant learners tend to be more likely to be bullied.[49]

Addressing violence in education therefore requires a nuanced understanding of how gender, alongside other identities, shapes experiences and outcomes, and how social and gender norms intersect to determine who experiences what types of violence, where, and at the hands of whom.

Violence in education has ripple effects on learning and beyond

The impacts of violence in education are profound and far-reaching. Violence has ripple effects not only on the immediate health and well-being of individuals but also on broader educational outcomes and the school climate, with many of those consequences continuing into adulthood. These consequences manifest in direct and indirect ways, including diminished student performance, increased absenteeism, and psychological and emotional distress, highlighting the pressing need to guarantee a safe and conducive learning environment for each and everyone.

All forms of violence in education hinder learning

All forms of violence in education deteriorate the overall school climate and significantly impact academic achievements.[50] Substantial evidence shows that corporal punishment and violent discipline impair child development, including brain and cognitive development, worsen children's behaviour, increase aggression, reduce their ability to concentrate and is overall associated with reduced academic performance.[51] These practices also damage the quality of teacher–learner relationships, heightening stress among learners, which negatively impacts their cognitive development and learning capabilities.[49] Evidence from diverse regions, including Ethiopia, India, Jamaica, Pakistan, Peru and Vietnam, reveals that corporal punishment is associated with diminished literacy and numeracy skills.[9] In Sierra Leone, many school authorities, teachers, caregivers and children accept corporal punishment if it does not cause severe harm. Additionally, there is a perception that girls may actively seek transactional sexual relations with authority figures, which can further complicate attitudes towards violence and discipline in schools.[52]

Bullying also plays a major role in undermining educational outcomes, significantly weakening learners' sense of belonging. Frequently bullied learners are nearly three times more likely to feel alienated at school compared to their peers, leading to increased school absenteeism, with these learners being about twice as likely to skip school.[3] Frequent school changes among bullied learners further disrupt educational continuity, disproportionately affecting those most vulnerable to discrimination.[53] Studies from Quebec show that learners bullied based on SOGIE often miss school, change schools frequently, and have lower educational aspirations.[54] Research from Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa similarly indicates that bullied children generally achieve lower scores in literacy and numeracy.[9]

Data from Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) and insights from the World Bank and Safe to Learn investment case emphasize how physical and sexual violence – across settings – significantly disrupts educational attainment, leading to lower test scores, increased absenteeism, and higher dropout rates. For example, in Rwanda, 13% of young women and 23% of young men who experienced physical violence missed school, with about half among them eventually dropping out.[55] Similar trends are observed in Colombia.[56] In Botswana and Eswatini, a significant number of young women who experienced sexual violence reported

missing school days.[57, 58] In Malawi, boys affected by school-related sexual violence showed poorer reading outcomes, while girls experienced declines in numeracy.[59] In Uganda, among students who experienced physical violence by teachers, 27% of females and 23% of males missed school due to the violence.[60]

The investment case developed by World Bank and Safe to Learn underscores the widespread economic implications of violence in schools, as it directly affects learners' academic progress, contributing to long-term losses in human capital. Addressing violence in and through education is crucial not only for the well-being of learners but also for the broader social and economic outcomes associated with educational success.

Experiencing violence leads to significant psychological and mental distress

Violence has far-reaching consequences on learners' mental health and well-being, and can lead to life-altering harm, including serious injuries, disabilities and even death. There is ample evidence that violence – in general – impacts children's physiological, developmental, and psychological health over the long term, with many of these impacts continuing into adulthood.[61] Poor mental health outcomes, increased school violence, and deteriorated academic performance are often closely linked.[62] Different forms of violence in education, whether bullying, corporal punishment, sexual violence, or discrimination, correlate with poorer mental health outcomes including anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression.[63] Studies found that corporal punishment can lead to aggression and hostility, as well as internal struggles including anxiety, depression, and self-isolation. Retrospective adult studies primarily from the

Global North suggest that experiences of bullying are often precursors to depression.[64]

These ripple effects related to mental health and well-being further manifest differently across genders. Girls are more likely to internalize adverse experiences, potentially leading to depressive disorders, while boys may externalize, increasing the likelihood of behavioural issues and further violence.[65] Learners who do not conform to traditional gender and sexual norms are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, including depression and suicidal tendencies.[11] While specific data on SRGBV is limited, the broader evidence base links experience of GBV, especially sexual violence during adolescence with subsequent mental health issues, highlighting specific risks for adolescent girls.[11]

Sexual violence is associated with early and unplanned pregnancies

Sexual violence, including incidents that occur in and around schools, often leads to serious negative health outcomes including increased risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections as well as early and unplanned pregnancies, compounding educational setbacks particularly for girls. In South Africa, a significant proportion of adolescent girls who had experienced sexual violence reported unintended pregnancies. Similar findings are reported from Rwanda and Zambia.[52, 66] This

points at a direct pathway to increased dropout rates among female students,[67] as evidenced by a study in Colombia where a quarter of pregnant adolescents did not return to school.[53] In Zimbabwe, more girls than boys complete primary education, but more girls drop out by the fourth year of secondary school, mainly due to pregnancy, early, forced, child marriage or unions, SRGBV and parents' prioritization of boys' education.[68]

Violence also impacts teachers' well-being and effectiveness in teaching

Violence in education significantly impacts teacher well-being by increasing workplace stress, creating volatile, hostile, and negative working environments. Violence at the hands of other members of the school community – whether learners, parents or school personnel – can lead to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, physical symptoms of stress,[69] as well as professional disengagement. This disengagement can manifest as a lack of motivation,

reduced commitment to teaching, and impaired teacher-learner relationships, ultimately affecting the educational environment negatively.[70] The ability of teachers to cope with violence significantly affects their well-being. Teacher self-efficacy in handling violent events is critical and can be bolstered through appropriate training and support systems, which in turn, can improve their job satisfaction and mental health and well-being.[71]
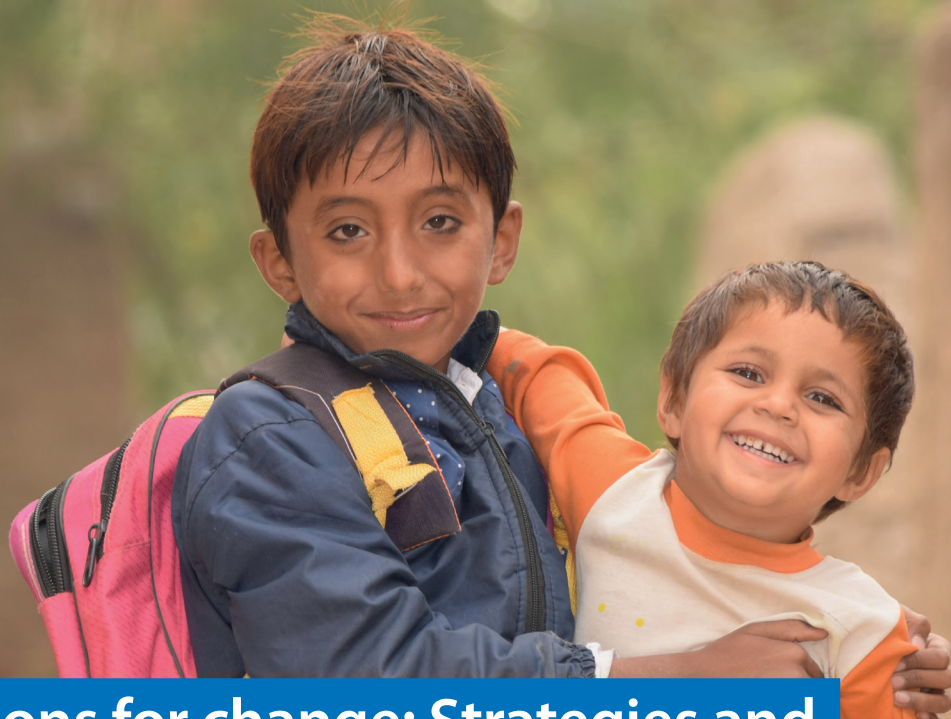
Foundations for change: Strategies and approaches to end violence in and through education

The transformative power of education

Education has an unparalleled potential to inspire, transform, and empower individuals and communities. It serves as a foundational tool for personal growth, societal progress, and the promotion of equality. However, this potential is often threatened and diminished by violence in educational settings, which disrupts the learning journey, health, well-being and agency of learners and the broader school community.

Conversely, education also holds the key to preventing violence from happening in schools and beyond, and can facilitate linkages to care and support when it does occur.

Education represents a protective shield against violence. Evidence consistently shows that access to basic education – measured through school enrolment, consistent attendance, and achievement – provides significant protection against the various forms of violence that children of all genders may face in different spaces of their lives.[72] Education holds particular power to protect and empower adolescent girls. Recent analysis from the World Health Organization found that countries where girls were most likely to be enrolled in secondary education had lower prevalence of intimate partner violence against adolescent girls.[35] Education also serves as an effective strategy to delay early, child and forced marriage (ECFM). Recent research reviews found that levels of ECFM would decrease by two-thirds if all girls had the opportunity to complete secondary school,[73] which would bring ripple effects on other forms of violence associated with ECFM including intimate partner and sexual violence.[74] Similarly, engaging boys in education is crucial for protecting them from violence and its root causes. Boys who disengage from school face higher risks of violence, including bullying and risky behaviours, and are more likely to become involved in criminal activities. Keeping boys in school not only improves academic outcomes but also serves as a protective factor against violence, reinforcing education's role in fostering safer, more equitable societies.[75]

Beyond basic educational access, school-based education programmes incorporating content and skills around preventing violence and staying safe, gender equality, healthy relationships and positive communication, are essential in addressing some of the root causes of violence. Content and skills related to preventing violence and staying safe may be delivered as part of

standalone school-based violence prevention education programmes, or infused in other curricula and learning approaches such as comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), life skills, and socio-emotional learning (SEL). Such programmes have shown results in preventing various types of violence including IPV, sexual violence,[76] and bullying.[77] As such, they are at the core of global violence prevention frameworks such as Safe to Learn,[78] INSPIRE[79] and RESPECT,[80] which aim at eliminating violence against women and children. Incorporating a gender perspective into these programmes further enhances their efficacy, notably decreasing incidents of sexual violence, dating violence and IPV.[77]

Education promotes broader societal safety and inclusivity. The role of education in combating violence transcends the confines of school settings, influencing broader societal outcomes across various environments and throughout individuals' lives. Education tackles the complex web of factors that foster violence, promoting long-term societal change. While primarily focused on preventing violence within educational environments, the education sector is also pivotal in broader initiatives to foster safe, inclusive, and peaceful communities.

Harnessing the transformative power of education through a holistic approach

Given the complex, interrelated causes and impacts of violence, effectively addressing violence in and through education necessitates a holistic approach, through strategies that operate on multiple levels and incorporate diverse expertise and stakeholders.[81] Holistic approaches help shift the focus from isolated interventions towards system-level and structural changes.[11] Research demonstrates that such approaches are effective in preventing and addressing violence in education, and in improving the well-being of learners and school communities, including mental health.[11]

Various models have been used to refer to holistic approaches, including the "whole-school approach" which is widely recognized as one of the most effective approaches to end violence in schools and included in the Safe to Learn strategy;[82] "whole school, whole community, whole child approach",[83] "whole education approach",[84] and others.

Each model, regardless of preferred terminology, builds on existing evidence, aligns with existing national policy frameworks, and integrates various components, including:[21]

- **Curriculum, teaching and learning**: This involves gender-transformative pedagogy, school-based education programmes, extracurricular activities, and comprehensive teacher training on various aspects related to preventing violence and staying safe including mental health;
- **School environment**: Implementation of codes of conduct, school policies, regulations and protocols backed by strong leadership and accountability, development of safe and inclusive physical spaces, and fostering a positive school climate;

- **Reporting and response**: Establishing child-friendly reporting systems within schools, providing in-school services, and enhancing teacher and staff capabilities to respond or refer for further support, in alignment with national education and child protection systems.
- **Education policy, laws and systems**: Examples include incorporating violence prevention in education plans, developing and implementing child protection and GBV laws, and linking education and child protection systems.
- **Partnerships and mobilization**: Collaboration with various governmental and non-governmental organizations, including teachers' unions, youth-led and survivor-led groups, parents and civil society organizations to ensure active participation and support.
- **Data and evidence**: Conducting formative research, routine data collection and analysis, and comprehensive evaluations to inform policy and programmes.

At school level, the holistic approach involves all levels of the school community – from headmasters, teachers, and learners as well as other school personnel and governance boards - working together to develop and implement a shared vision for a safe and nurturing learning environment. This approach is most effective when it prioritizes inclusion, ensuring that every learner feels valued and supported. Additionally, it incorporates active engagement with families and the broader community, fostering collaboration that strengthens the school's efforts to create a positive and supportive environment for all learners.[79]

Figure 2: Components of a holistic approach to end violence in and through education

Curriculum, teaching and learning

- Gender-transformative pedagogy
- School-based education programmes
- Extracurricular activities
- Comprehensive teacher training

School environment

- Codes of conduct
- Policies, regulations and protocols backed by leadership and accountability
- Safe, inclusive physical spaces
- Positive school climate

Reporting and response

- Child-friendly reporting systems within schools
- In-school services
- Training for teachers and staff to respond and refer appropriately

Education policy, laws and systems

- Violence prevention in education plans
- Child protection and gender-based violence laws
- Linking education and child protection systems

Partnerships and mobilization

- Collaborations with governmental, non-governmental organizations, teachers' unions, youth, and civil society

Data and evidence

- Research, routine data collection, and analysis
- Comprehensive evaluations to inform policy and programmes

The holistic approach requires strategies more broadly at education systems level beyond the school level, engaging education policy-makers and including partnerships with communities and other sectors to address the societal values, norms, and dynamics that influence violence and to facilitate access to support services should violence occur.[81] This is in recognition that the roots and repercussions of violence often lie outside the realm of education, and that many forms of violence – such as technology-facilitated violence including cyberbullying as well as IPV and child maltreatment perpetrated by caregivers – transcend school boundaries.[81] Centring education whilst building bridges with other actors and sectors is therefore essential for harnessing education's contribution to the prevention of and response to violence, including SRGBV, in, around and beyond schools.

Launched in 2019, Safe to Learn is a global initiative bringing together governments, international organizations, and civil society to prioritize safety in educational settings. The initiative calls for five key collective actions to end violence against children in, around and through schools:[85]

1. **Implement policy and legislation**
2. **Strengthen prevention, risk mitigation and response in education systems and schools**
3. **Shift social and gender norms and promote behaviour change**
4. **Invest resources effectively**
5. **Generate and use evidence**

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From vision to reality: Translating the holistic approach into practice

The different components of the holistic approach outlined above have the potential to contribute towards ending violence in education and beyond, through diverse pathways.

Curriculum, teaching and learning

School-based, curriculum-based programmes – such as life skills, health or comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), SEL or dedicated violence prevention curricula (see box below) and gender-responsive curricula – are instrumental in addressing some of the key drivers of violence and preventing violence, and gender-based violence, in education and beyond. They can do so through:

- **Incorporating specific content on preventing violence and staying safe**. School-based, curriculum-based programmes incorporate comprehensive content on identifying various forms of violence, understanding risk factors, and taking appropriate action if experiencing or witnessing violence. For example, CSE often includes content linking to violence prevention, such as "violence and staying safe", gender dynamics and healthy relationships.[86] Dedicated violence prevention curricula specifically center content, skills and competencies that help learners protect themselves, advocate for others, and play their role in fostering a safe and inclusive school climate.

- **Instilling gender equitable attitudes and beliefs**. The most effective curricula challenge and transform harmful gendered beliefs, attitudes and norms as well as power imbalances that so often underlie violence. For instance, evidence suggests that CSE that includes discussions on gender and power is successful at preventing GBV by promoting gender-equitable beliefs.[87]

- **Strengthening socio-emotional skills**. Integrating SEL into curricula enhances emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and positive communication skills, which are essential for violence prevention. Research indicates that programmes encompassing SEL alongside health and well-being education are notably effective in reducing bullying and enhancing interpersonal dynamics.[84] Curricula with a focus on positive social and emotional competencies alongside sexuality education content helps reduce incidents of homophobic bullying, intimate partner violence, and childhood sexual abuse.[88]

- **Applying inclusive and effective teaching and pedagogical approaches**. Educators play a pivotal role in modeling and teaching positive behaviours.[89] Effective classroom management, modeling SEL during daily interactions with learners,[90] and the active teaching of SEL and violence prevention

strategies contribute to safe and inclusive learning environments. As behavioural barriers often prevent educators from adopting new practices, ongoing support, including peer influence and timely feedback, is essential for sustaining changes in classroom management practices.[91]

Box 2: Illustrative good practices

- **Good Schools Toolkit in Uganda:** Good Schools Toolkit is a multi-component intervention involving teachers, learners and the broader school community, aiming at shifting the school culture and improving relationships within schools and between schools and families and communities. It was primarily developed for use at primary school level and then adapted for secondary schools. The toolkit includes a range of learning materials and activities geared towards transforming the school culture, such as dialogues, school assemblies, posters, booklets or suggestion boxes. Results for the primary school intervention were rigorously documented through a range of studies including the first cluster-randomized controlled trials of an intervention aimed at reducing educator-to-learner violence and qualitative research. The intervention was found to lead to a 42% reduction in physical violence by school staff and a 20% decrease in peer violence.[92]

- **Connect with Respect (CwR):** CwR is a curriculum tool designed to assist teachers in addressing violence prevention and promoting gender equity in schools. It includes a series of activities that teachers can use within various subjects—such as literacy, social studies, civics, health, life skills, and sexuality education – to foster learners' knowledge, positive attitudes, and skills. Originally created for the Asia-Pacific region, it has been adapted for use in the East and Southern Africa regions, targeting lower secondary school learners. Surveyed in six countries – Eswatini, Zambia, Tanzania, Vietnam, Timor Leste, Thailand – the CwR pilot (2019–2020) demonstrated notable improvements: 90% of learners support GBV education in all schools; knowledge of where to seek help rose from 44% to 65%; and intent to seek help if affected by GBV increased from 73% to 82%.[93]

- **CSE:** A CSE curriculum was introduced in 2006 in the Province of Buenos Aires of Argentina, aimed to equip students with knowledge and skills for healthy relationships. Recent evidence shows that the programme fosters respectful and supportive peer interactions, reduces gender-based violence, and promotes gender equality among students, leading to healthier and more positive relationships.[94] Documentation of good practices indicates positive outcomes in these areas, supported by a curriculum that covers human rights protection, gender and sexuality construction, family diversity, and SOGIE across all education levels and teacher training, ensuring its SOGIE-transformative impact.[95]

- **KiVa programme:** KiVa originated in Finland and has been adapted in many countries across different regions. It includes a comprehensive curriculum that targets learners, teachers and parents to foster a school environment where bullying is less likely to happen. Research and impact data from Finland and other implementing countries (e.g. the Netherlands, parts of the United Kingdom and Estonia, have shown significant reductions in bullying incidents and improvements in students' well-being and social relationships.[96]

- **Stepping Stones.** The curriculum focuses on gender transformative content led to a decrease in men's reports of use of IPV, rape and attempted rape in South Africa.[97]

- In **Sierra Leone**, from April 2023 to March 2024, a life skills curriculum focusing on SRGBV was piloted in six schools as part of a broader initative by UNGEI, UNICEF Sierra Leone, and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. The intervention aimed to reduce high rates of sexual violence and improve student safety. Through age-appropriate lessons, students were educated on SRGBV, human rights, and healthy relationships, while schools implemented reporting mechanisms and safe spaces for those affected. The program led to a significant reduction in reported sexual violence incidents, from 85% to 52%, and fostered positive changes in gender equality attitudes and students' willingness to report violence.[98]

Box 3: Possible entry points for delivering violence prevention through education[99]

- **Education for health and well-being.** This is an umbrella term encompassing various education programmes aimed at promoting holistic health and wellbeing, including the below.[100] Foundational education for health and wellbeing (FEHW) targets younger learners to help them navigate health and wellbeing challenges in an age-appropriate way.[101]

- **Dedicated violence prevention education.** This type of curriculum specifically teaches learners about safe behaviour and how to protect themselves from bullying and other forms and types of violence and abuse. It aims at equipping learners with the necessary skills to recognize, prevent, and respond to various forms of violence including bullying and cyberbullying, actively challenging the norms that perpetuate such behaviours.[102]

- **Socio-emotional learning (SEL).** SEL is the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations effectively. It is a holistic process of learning that links the cognitive with the social and emotional aspects of learning towards supporting student well-being, academic attainment, active global citizenship and peacebuilding.[103]

- **Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)**. CSE is a "curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality".[83] The United Nations International technical guidance on sexuality education lists eight key concepts to guide the development of locally-adapted CSE curricula, seven of which directly or indirectly relate to violence prevention and staying safe. Depending on the country, CSE may be called other names, such as family life education, reproductive health education, healthy lifestyles education or HIV education.

- **Life skills programme.** Life skills education supports learners to develop skills, such as communication, assertiveness, self-awareness, decision-making, problem-solving and critical and creative thinking, while also equipping learners with appropriate knowledge about risks and protective factors.[104] Life skills education supports learners to make healthy life choices and helps protect them from risky situations and behaviours.

School environment

The school environment – which includes physical, socio-emotional and institutional dimensions – significantly influences the safety and wellbeing of learners, in addition to their access. It can shape the conditions that foster or deter violence, inclusion and belonging through:

- **Providing safe and healthy spaces**. Effective design and maintenance of school facilities are critical in providing a secure space that is conducive to learning and working. This includes ensuring clean water supply, adequate sanitation facilities sensitive to menstrual health needs (lockable and sex-separate latrines), nutritious school meals, and secure, well-lit spaces for both study and recreation.[105] Conversely, poorly designed or maintained infrastructure as well as physical isolation or inadequate supervision of facilities may create or exacerbate risk factors.[21]

Well-lit pathways to school are also critical to support safe access to school. Beyond this, school infrastructure also plays an important role in fostering a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere.[21] In this respect, attention should be paid to gender, abilities and diverse needs for safety and wellbeing in the design and maintenance of facilities.

- **Nurturing a positive socio-emotional climate**. The socio-emotional environment of a school, as influenced by interpersonal relationships and shared community values, plays a pivotal role in shaping a non-violent school culture. A supportive school social-emotional climate can deter violence including bullying by promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion through various strategies and activities, such as recreational and social activities,

events, and co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. These efforts are also vital for students who may face violence outside school, providing them with a stable and supportive environment.

- **Adopting positive discipline[106] and inclusive classroom management practices**. This is an essential part of a positive school social-emotional environment that demonstrates the school's commitment to non-violent values in practice.[107] Equipping teachers and education personnel with the ability and skills to manage classrooms in a non-violent, caring, equitable manner is crucial for safe and inclusive learning environments. This approach offers an alternative to the normalization and use of violent discipline. Effective implementation requires continuous support for staff, ongoing training, and accountability measures, ensuring teachers are well-equipped and supported in developing non-violent approaches. Training should include reflection on social norms and values, as many teachers operate in environments where corporal punishment is normalized. Given the challenging conditions some teachers face, interventions must be supported by education ministries and agencies, recognizing that teachers cannot bear the burden alone. Listening to teachers' concerns and involving them in developing strategies is key to long-term success.

- **Promoting an enabling institutional environment**. Effective school governance and clear policies, rules and regulations, are essential for cultivating an environment that actively discourages violence.[21] Codes of conduct and other school-level mechanisms and procedures should explicitly prohibit violence and provide mechanisms for reporting and responding to such incidents.[21] These policy instruments must be well communicated and reinforced through training programs that empower educators to uphold these standards and intervene appropriately.

Box 4: Good practices for a safe and inclusive school environment

- **Identifying hotspot areas of violence in schools.** A mapping exercise was used with girls and boys in 54 schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as part of the EAGLE (Empowering adolescent Girls to Lead Through Education) project. In groups, students drew school maps showing shared spaces and routes to school. They highlighted areas where they felt safe (using green dots) and unsafe (using red dots) and discussed why. The most common areas that students felt unsafe were certain streets and areas to and from school, the classroom, playground and school toilets.[108] This student-led data can help guide future school-based responses.

- **The Good Behaviour Game.** The Good Behaviour Game encourages children to obey classroom rules and to share and cooperate. Children are divided into teams and play a game in which they must follow four rules; work quietly, be polite to others, don't leave their seats without permission, and follow directions. Teams are rewarded if they stick to the rules and cooperate with each other. In the USA, the game has continued to reduce both aggressive and antisocial behaviour 14 years after its introduction.[109]

- **The code of conduct on prevention of SRGBV in Ethiopia.** Introduced in 2014, this national policy was designed to set professional standards and hold staff and students accountable for preventing SRGBV and other forms of misconduct in schools. It has been implemented across all regions of the country. In 2017, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNICEF Ethiopia, conducted an in-depth study on how the code was understood and applied at various levels, including national, regional, and district levels, with a particular focus on schools. Initial findings showed growing awareness that enabled students to speak out about SRGBV, and acted as a deterrent for perpetrators, thus improving the safety of the school environment.[110]

- **USAID's Safe Schools Programme in Jamaica.** In Jamaica, USAID's Safe Schools Programme has successfully created safer school environments by training educators in non-violent classroom management, engaging the community and upgrading school infrastructure to improve physical security. These efforts have led to a significant reduction in school violence, demonstrating the effectiveness of the programme in promoting a safe and supportive educational environment for all learners.[111]

> ■ **Scaling up positive discipline in Cambodia.** In Cambodia, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport implemented a nationwide positive discipline training program. Initially piloted in 12 schools, the initiative led to a 30% reduction in corporal punishment. Between 2015 and 2020, it reached 12,000 teachers and school principals across 1,400 primary schools, benefiting 420,000 students. Success factors include integrating the training into national policy, establishing reporting mechanisms, engaging communities, and embedding gender perspectives. The approach is now embedded in Cambodia's Child Protection in Schools Policy Action Plan (2019-2023).[112]

Reporting and response mechanisms

Schools, and more broadly education systems, have a role to play in linking learners and other school community members who experience violence to the support that they need, within the confines of their mandates and competencies. This can be achieved through:

- **Empowering teachers to intervene**. Teachers are well placed to support learners in the face of violence or abuse.[113] They are strategically positioned to identify early signs of distress, such as unusual struggles with academic work, frequent absences, or manifestations of anxiety, if they receive the right training. Teachers require clear guidance, ongoing training and support on recognizing the signs of violence, and understanding the nuances of gender and identity and their impact on experience of violence. They also need to be trained and supported to handle some incidents internally when those fall within their competency, escalate cases whenever needed, and handle sensitive information and disclosures appropriately.[114] Their role needs to be clearly delineated so as to avoid causing harm or getting overloaded. Gender-responsive pedagogies strive to empower teachers as both support persons, intervenors, and leaders to prevent and respond to SRGBV.

- **Empowering bystanders to act**. Bystanders – whether fellow students, school staff, or community members – are essential to preventing and responding to violence.[115] Empowering bystanders involves training them to recognize violence, safely intervene, and report incidents. Programmes that promote positive bystander intervention, such as teaching learners how to safely interrupt harmful behaviours or provide support to those experiencing violence, are well-recognized in reducing instances of bullying and abuse. Schools should foster a culture of collective responsibility, where every member of the community feels confident in standing up against violence.

- Setting up school-based reporting mechanisms. Those may include telephone helplines, online channels, child-friendly complaint boxes, and designated school focal points.[21] They must be confidential, accessible, and tailored to meet the needs of learners in all their diversity, as well as linking to appropriate support and accountability measures whenever reports are made.[116] Schools should integrate these mechanisms with broader child protection services and GBV reporting channels whenever relevant and possible. Continuous evaluation, coupled with regular training and awareness campaigns, is necessary to adapt and improve mechanisms, ensuring that they remain effective and that the school community is empowered to use them safely.

- **Providing in-school services and referring to services in the community**. Embedding health personnel, social workers and/or counsellors into schools can enhance direct support to those experiencing violence in schools or elsewhere.[117] School-based services should consider the needs of diverse learners, including girls, boys, and learners with diverse SOGIE and sexual characteristics, recognizing the gendered drivers and impacts of violence.[118] For cases requiring specialized support, schools can serve as referral points to community-based services and into broader child protection and GBV case management systems whenever those are in place.[119] As a preliminary step, services should be mapped and known to the school community, with clear roles, responsibilities and guidance on how to provide referrals.

Box 5: Good practices in building effective reporting and response mechanisms

- 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 fulltime School Counsellors who provide counselling, oversee prevention programmes, and deliver parental education.[120] 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.[11]

- The **Ending Rainbow-Focused Bullying and Discrimination resource** from *Inside OUT Kōaro,* supported by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, not only equips schools with strategies to prevent and address bullying, but also improves reporting and response mechanisms. By providing clear guidelines and frameworks, including the identification of sexual orientation gender identity and/or expression-based bullying, (defined as 'rainbow bullying') and its impact, the resource empowers school staff to identify and respond to incidents promptly. In addition, its emphasis on whole-school efforts promotes a culture of accountability and inclusivity, ensuring that reporting mechanisms are used effectively, and responses are swift and appropriate. This comprehensive approach facilitates a proactive stance against bullying and discrimination, promoting a safer, more inclusive and more supportive environment for all learners, in all their diversity.[121]

- **The eSafety Commissioner's Office in Australia**. The eSafety Commissioner's Office plays a key role in improving reporting and response mechanisms in schools across Australia. Through its comprehensive resources and support for educators, including cyberbullying advice tailored for schools, teachers and other staff, the eSafety Commissioner facilitates proactive action to tackle online abuse. By encouraging open discussion, providing online safety lessons and empowering students to be upstanders, the Commissioner enables schools to create safer online environments and respond effectively to cyberbullying incidents.[122]

Education policy, laws and systems

A supportive legal and policy environment conveys a clear message that all forms of violence are unacceptable. It also provides the foundation for planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation the contribution of the education sector towards ending violence, and gender-based violence, in schools by:

- **Setting standards and expectations**. Legal and policy frameworks set explicit standards and expectations for behaviour in and around schools, creating the foundation for a zero-tolerance approach towards violence. They provide a baseline for both preventive measures and response to all forms of violence, from bullying to sexual violence in education. It is important that they evolve and adapt to new forms of violence such as technology-facilitated violence including cyberbullying.[81]

- **Providing legal recourse and protection**. Laws ensure that there are formal avenues for recourse and reparation for everyone who experiences or witnesses violence, making sure that justice is a reality for everyone, regardless of ability, socio-economic or legal status, SOGIE and other identities. They offer protection from retaliation, thereby fostering an environment where learners and other members of the school community feel safe to report incidents.

- **Ensuring accountability**. Laws and policies establish individual and collective rights and duties, as well as governments' mandate and obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of citizens in all their diversity.[21] By instituting policies with legal backing, schools and educational authorities and other relevant sectors are held accountable for implementing measures to prevent and address violence.

- **Catalysing real changes on the ground**. An enabling national policy and legal environment provides a framework for transformative policies, regulations and mechanisms – all the way to daily practices – at school level. For example, national policies and laws promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and non-discrimination including in education should translate into policies and mechanisms to promote inclusion at school level. National legislation banning corporal punishment is a critical prerequisite to shift from a culture of normalized violence to a positive, nurturing school and classroom culture.

- **Undertaking diagnostics to identify strengths and weaknesses in the system and determine where to invest is essential for effective implementation**. Tools such as the Safe to Learn Diagnostic Tool[123] are available to guide this process. These technical tools help assess the existing policy landscape, identify gaps, and set targeted priorities for investment and improvement.

Box 6: Good practices in education policy, laws and systems for safe and inclusive schools

- **The Radical Inclusion policy in Sierra Leone.** In 2021, the government of Sierra Leone enacted its Radical Inclusion policy, setting a precedent in the country as well as in the region. Radical inclusion is defined as "the intentional [process of] inclusion of those excluded from education due to the actions of individuals, institutions, or society".[124] This policy aims at guaranteeing that all children regardless of their background, life experiences or identities can stay in or go back to school, and feel safe and valued. This policy prioritizes the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments for everyone, as well as addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of adolescent girls and learners with disabilities. It provides an explicit, justice-based framework for changes at school and community levels.

- **Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying in Ireland** exemplifies how carefully crafted policies can prevent school violence, integrating evidence-based strategies with an inclusive, whole-education methodology. Developed in 2022 through extensive stakeholder engagement, including feedback from extensive public consultations involving children and young people including those with special education needs, the plan emphasizes prevention and responsive measures, supports proactive leadership, and fosters school accountability. It employs a Whole Education Approach, ensuring a sustainable, community-driven framework that enhances student wellbeing and actively involves the entire school community in creating a respectful, inclusive environment. Continuous adaptation and specific success metrics ensure the policy remains effective and responsive to the evolving educational landscape, setting a high standard for comprehensive anti-bullying efforts globally.[125]

- **Prohibiting violent discipline in Peru.** In 2015, Peru enacted the Law N° 30403, which bans violent discipline across settings including in education. The success was driven by collaborative efforts from the government, civil society and academia. Government bodies actively drafted legal proposals and facilitated multi-stakeholder discussions, while civil society groups and children's organizations lobbied through advocacy and public engagements. Post-enactment, the Ministry of Education played a pivotal role in ensuring the implementation of the law by issuing guidelines for the management of school coexistence, and the prevention and attention to violence against girls, boys and adolescents. These guidelines serve not only to implement the law but also to educate school administrators, teachers, and students about the new standards. In 2018, Peru adopted legislation to support the implementation of its legal ban on corporal punishment, with new provisions including mandatory reporting by teachers and other professionals caring for children.[126]

Partnerships and mobilization

Violence is rooted in complex, intersecting factors including social and gender norms and lack of access to quality prevention and response services. Echoing these multiple drivers, addressing violence in and through education requires a multi-sectoral response, through strategic partnerships at all levels:[21]

- **Building on diverse sectors' comparative advantage**. Education cannot stand alone in ending violence. Coordination with other sectors and systems – such as health, gender or women's affairs, family, child protection, social services, justice, law enforcement and security, youth and sports, transportation and urban planning – is paramount, leveraging their mandates and expertise. Integrated approaches bringing together child protection, GBV prevention, health and education actors is critical to make sure that incidents identified in and through schools can be appropriately and holistically addressed. Collaboration with mental health providers, as well as social and behaviour change experts, can provide the necessary support for affected individuals and help develop preventive programmes that address selected root causes of violence.

- **Leveraging partnerships with teachers' unions**. Teachers' unions represent the collective power of teachers and employees, and significantly influence and shape education policies and practices. They can advocate for violence prevention integration in national curricula, provide training and support for teachers, and lead campaigns to shift norms and practices in and around schools. They can also secure increased resources and support systems, undertake research, and disseminate best practices to enhance safety and respect in education settings. Lastly, they can play a crucial role in enhancing teachers' wellbeing by advocating for better working conditions, adequate support and professional

development, thereby contributing to safer and more positive learning environments for everyone.

- **Mobilising communities and community-based organizations**. Engaging communities and community-based organizations including youth-led, and girl-led, groups can start with initiating discussions around the multiple forms of violence in and around schools. Engaging a wide range of influential community members – including educators, local and traditional leaders, service providers, community volunteers, women's organizations – can help ensure that diverse perspectives and needs are addressed, and that ending violence is recognized as a collective priority. Leveraging existing community structures, local networks and community-based mechanisms can enhance the reach and acceptance of anti-violence initiatives, ensuring they are culturally appropriate. Grassroots-, community-led advocacy is furthermore key to catalyse systemic and policy changes in support of safe and inclusive learning environments.

- **Working with parents, families and caregivers**. Families, parents and caregivers represent a key stakeholder group in collective efforts to end violence including in education. They are also well placed to identify signs that their child may be experiencing violence at school, and to support them. In addition, their support is critical to positively reinforce content and skills on preventing violence and staying safe. This includes efforts to promote positive parenting and positive discipline and communication in the home, and gender transformative parenting practices, so as to model non-violent, caring values and behaviours, in addition to provide homes that promote gender equality and that align with what is taught at school.

Box 7: Good practices in effective partnerships and mobilization for safe learning environments

- **Inter-ministerial coordination in Bahamas**. In 2013, the Government of the Bahamas appointed a National Task Force for Ending GBV. The task force involved a coordinated approach between different ministries, including ministries of Ministry of Education and Child Protection amongst others, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A Ministerial Committee was appointed to have oversight of the National Task Force, including the Minister of Education, Science and Technology. The high-level task force is responsible for sharing information; making recommendations about practices, policies and protocols; developing a comprehensive and coordinated national response including in terms of integrated case management; and facilitating networking between ministries, departments and NGOs working on GBV.[21]

- **Parents and community members as protective escorts to and from school in Iraq**. 'Walking buses' are used in Iraq to ensure girls are safe on their way to and from school. Children are supervised and escorted on an approved route to school, with at least two trained adults acting as 'driver' and conductor'. The adults are parents, family members or community volunteers who are trusted by parents. There is some evidence that these walking buses have had a positive correlation with girls' attendance rates.[21]

- **Partnership with tech companies enables schools** to better monitor, identify and prevent threats of violence and facilitate support in cases of bullying, depression, substance abuse and more. The partnership between Gaggle, a student safety company, and iboss, a cybersecurity provider, focuses on enhancing student safety in K-12 schools in the USA, by increasing visibility into online activities on school-issued devices. Their collaboration integrates iboss' detailed cybersecurity reporting with Gaggle's monitoring platform, enabling real-time identification and intervention for issues such as cyberbullying and depression. Serving over 5.7 million students across 1,500 U.S. districts, this initiative combines technology and human oversight to ensure comprehensive protection, complying with privacy standards like HIPAA and FERPA, and emphasizing proactive safety measures to prevent harmful incidents and support well-being.[127]

Data and evidence

Fit-for-purpose, actionable, and disaggregated data and evidence are a cross-cutting priority, and underpin efforts to develop, operationalize and scale up holistic approaches to ending violence in and through education, through:

- **Understanding the scope and nature of violence**. To address violence in education effectively, it is first essential to understand its scope and nature. Quantitative and qualitative data collection – through Education Information and Management Systems as well as through specific surveys and research – helps mapping the prevalence, forms, and differentiated patterns of violence including based on gender and other identities.[3] For example, data can reveal higher incidences of bullying in younger age groups[3] or the heightened vulnerability to sexual violence in adolescent girls and learners with diverse SOGIE.[128] In

many contexts, data on prevalence and experience of violence in education is lacking, including due to the often-invisible nature of violence, its normalization, and barriers to reporting. Data must be disaggregated by gender, age, ability, geographic location, and so forth, to support uncovering the associated barriers across overlapping deprivations.

- **Informing interventions**. Understanding the types of violence in education, who experiences them, and what their drivers are, is key to inform the design and implementation of context-appropriate interventions. For instance, if evidence suggests that violence spikes during unsupervised times, schools can ensure structured activities during breaks and adequate adult supervision. Beyond evidence on prevalence, experience and drivers, research can also focus on programme effectiveness, generating

insights into what works, as well as on programme implementation and adaptation.

- **Monitoring, evaluation and learning**. Routine data collection and analysis are vital for monitoring the effectiveness of interventions. By setting benchmarks and tracking progress over time, education stakeholders can assess what is working and what may need adjustments. Administrative data systems, alongside post-intervention collection and analysis, can provide insights into changes in the rates of violence and the overall safety of the school environment. Continuous evaluation helps refine approaches and scale up successful strategies, while also identifying data gaps, such as the lack of disaggregated data.

- **Advocacy and policy making**. Data and evidence also serve as powerful tools for advocacy. They provide evidence to back advocacy asks, for example regarding policy and legal changes or increasing funding allocated to ending violence in and through education. It is critical to have strong data analysis, particularly gender data analysis available, to support building an evidence base. Well-documented findings and analysis can influence public opinion and priorities, thereby catalysing and supporting movement-building in favour of safe and inclusive learning environments for all.

- **Building a culture of transparency and trust**. A data-informed approach promotes transparency and accountability within schools and education systems. When schools regularly assess violence and disclose findings to the community, trust is built and sustained among students, parents, and staff. This openness encourages a collaborative environment where all stakeholders are motivated to find collective solutions and work together in this respect.

Box 8: Good practices in data collection and evidence-informed decision making

- **Ma'An's student online survey in Jordan**. The monthly survey system – launched by the Ministry of Education in 2009, digitalized in 2012 and upgraded in 2019 – represents a significant leap in monitoring and responding to violence occurring in schools, homes and online. Some 70% of learners across all educational settings are engaged monthly to report their experiences with violence, enabling real-time data collection and dynamic response mechanisms. Incidence of reported verbal violence dropped from 44.8% in 2009 to 15% by the 2018–2019 academic year, and physical violence decreased from 40.3% to 8% in the same period. The online survey system not only empowers students by giving them a voice but also equips school counsellors and administrators with the tools to implement preventive and responsive measures effectively.[106]

- **Tracking progress on violence in education using the Safe to Learn Diagnostic Tool**. Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan, South Sudan and Uganda used the Safe to Learn diagnostic tool to evaluate their progress and align national policies with global benchmarks for safer school environments. This initiative, led by the national educational sectors, involved a thorough assessment of existing policies, stakeholder interviews, and school surveys, aiming to establish baselines, identify best practices, and pinpoint areas for urgent action. The assessments led to notable achievements, including implementation of a monthly online survey for students to report violence in Jordan, establishment of gender-focused response mechanisms in schools in Nepal, advanced tracking and response systems in Uganda. These diagnostics have laid the groundwork for sustainable progress in reducing school violence, showcasing a scalable model for global application.[122]

- **Strengthening administrative data on violence against children in Morocco**. The Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training improved data collection on school violence through its administrative systems at various levels. Schools utilize listening cells for initial reports, while regional observatories and the national director of school life aggregate and analyse this data. To address limitations in paper-based registries, the ministry introduced the online portal MARSAD in 2014. MARSAD enables detailed daily logging of incidents by type, location, and resolution status, while ensuring anonymity. Although its current pilot status restricts reliability, it marks a significant step toward comprehensive digital data collection. Additionally, regular surveys from observatories compile extensive data, processed into reports that inform regional and national strategies.[129]

Box 9: Crosscutting principles for a holistic approach to ending violence in and through education[11, 21]

- **Learner-centered and take a 'do no harm' approach.** Holistic interventions must prioritize the safety and protection of learners and the entire school community first. For instance, school-based reporting mechanisms need to ensure anonymity and confidentiality to protect those reporting violence from potential retaliation. Furthermore, promoting awareness of violence-related services must consider the availability and quality of these services to maintain trust and effectiveness.

- **Trauma-informed.** Addressing violence requires sensitive handling, especially since both learners and teachers might have personal experiences with violence. It is essential to adopt trauma-informed methods that prevent re-traumatization and avoid judgment or blame.[130] These approaches should be incorporated not only in teaching about violence but also in identifying and assisting those at risk.

- **Age and development appropriate.** Interventions must be tailored to the age and developmental stage of the learners. For example, introducing school-based violence prevention curricula from an early age can counteract the internalization of harmful social and gender norms. Similarly, reporting mechanisms and support services must be accessible and appropriate for various age groups.

- **Gender transformative and intersectional.** Interventions must be gender transformative and consider other intersecting identities such as disability, ethnicity, race, and class. This approach recognizes how these factors affect experiences and outcomes related to violence and aims to challenge and change the structural drivers of violence including harmful social and gender norms.

- **Participatory in a meaningful way.** A holistic approach should leverage the insights and experiences of all stakeholders involved in education, particularly learners and the broader school community. Efforts to involve children and adolescents in prevention and response should be genuine, acknowledging their capacity to contribute meaningfully while ensuring their safety and well-being.

- **Context specific.** Recognizing that violence and its drivers vary by context, interventions should be rooted in local realities. This includes integrating violence prevention into the national curriculum, supporting teacher training, and ensuring that response mechanisms are linked to available services. Collaboration with other sectors also helps address the unique challenges each context presents.

Ending violence is education's business too:
Perspectives on sustaining transformative change

Understanding persistent challenges

There has been significant progress in shedding light on the imperative to address violence in and through education, and in designing and delivering promising policies, programmes and practices in this respect. Despite this, efforts have however remained fragmented and localized, and lacking the scale necessary to effect structural changes. Barriers such as limited resources, capacity constraints, and entrenched social norms hinder transformative change towards safe and inclusive learning environments.

For instance, the delivery of curriculum and teaching interventions is often constrained by significant time constraints, limited curriculum space, lack of teacher capacity, and teachers' own biases. These challenges are partially due to, and exacerbated by, the perception that creating safe and supportive learning environments is an added-on responsibility rather than a core component of education, overlooking the fact that safe and supportive learning environments are fundamental in creating positive learning outcomes. Additionally, the broader social context heavily influences the effectiveness of these interventions, as prevailing social norms may contradict messages conveyed in schools and as learners often navigate other spaces where violence may be prevalent.

Embedding protection from all forms of violence in education systems

To institutionalize and sustain transformative change, thereby making sure that all learners and members of the school community feel safe and included, it will be important to:

- **Shift the needle towards transforming education systems**. Moving from a mindset that views safe and inclusive learning environments as an added responsibility to recognizing that it is a core component of education and essential for system-wide, structural change and for achieving education goals. This means embedding violence prevention and response at all levels of education systems, and ensuring that they receive adequate attention and resources as much as other education priorities. Tools like the Safe to Learn benchmarking and

diagnostic tools,[78, 123] and Whole-School Approach Monitoring Framework,[131] can guide this process, emphasizing the integration of violence prevention and response into the foundational fabric of education systems.

- **Tailor approaches to context**. Efforts to embed violence prevention and response in education systems should be mindful of the specific needs and capacities of each context. Holistic approaches may look differently in different contexts, depending on a range of context-specific factors such as: teacher capacity and training, availability and quality of other support services (e.g. mental health, child protection), or broader community level risk factors (e.g. conflict, gang violence, displacement).

- **Find space for content on violence prevention and staying safe, socio-emotional learning and promoting gender equality in schools**. Rather than viewing violence prevention, SEL and gender equality as additional topics to be taught, it is important to reframe them as integral to or woven into the broader curriculum. Efforts should focus on finding strategic entry points within existing curricula, ensuring that content related to "violence prevention and staying safe" is given due priority as much as other subjects or

integrated into the latter, and also included in teacher training and via gender-responsive pedagogy.

- **Prioritize teacher support and development**. Motivated, and empowered, teachers play a central role in creating safe and inclusive learning environments.[132] Providing them with the necessary training, support, tools, and resources is crucial for them to play this role whilst protecting themselves and their own wellbeing. It is also critical to make sure that this role is clearly delineated, so that teachers do not take on work that falls beyond their competencies and know when and how to seek additional support.

- **Scaling up as social change**. Engaging with communities, including parents, to shift social and gender norms and advocate for ending violence is essential to generate broader support for safe and inclusive learning environments and to address root causes of violence, as many harmful norms or violent practices are learnt through social norms or replicated through what's seen or heard in the home. This is even more important since violence in education often shares patterns, root causes and consequences with violence taking place in other spaces, and since education contributes towards ending violence in other spaces too.

Conclusion

This publication consolidates existing evidence and knowledge documented by UNESCO and other global actors dedicated to ending violence in and through education. It presents a comprehensive picture that:

- **Violence in education is pervasive**, taking multiple forms, some more visible than others, and affects learners, school personnels and members of the school community in diverse ways. It takes roots in various, intersecting drivers, from harmful social and gender norms to inadequate laws and policies, from broader social and environmental dynamics to factors related to education systems themselves.

- **Violence in and around schools is deeply shaped by gender and other identities and experiences**, including socio-economic status, race and nationality, disability, or SOGIE. Some learners and members of school communities are more at risk of experiencing or witnessing violence or abuse, and have specific needs in this respect.

- **The need for action is urgent**. Every day that passes without due attention to safety and protection in education, is another day that exposes learners to potential harm, with long-lasting effects on their mental health and wellbeing, learning outcomes, academic success, and sense of belonging. The price of inaction is too significant to ignore, and the potential for transformative change too substantial to delay.

- **A holistic, collective approach is essential** to prevent and respond to violence in and through education. Schools and education systems do not exist in a vacuum, and tackling violence requires collaboration across sectors and levels of society.

While the holistic approach – often known as the whole-school approach – has been widely recognized, comprehensive and sustained responses at scale remain rare. Building on existing evidence and global commitments, including the *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development*[5] adopted by all UNESCO Member States in 2023, which emphasizes that safe, inclusive learning environments are integral to transformative education that foster values such as equality, justice, and respect for diversity, this publication calls for a fundamental shift in mindset: from treating violence prevention and response as separate issues to embedding them into the core operations, policies, curricula and practices of education systems. Only through such integration can we achieve the sustained and transformative change needed.

The vision is clear: education systems where every learner can learn and thrive, and every member of the school community is free from violence, exclusion and discrimination. Achieving this vision requires unwavering commitment - not only to immediate actions but to the sustained and systematic transformation of how we approach education. This is not only an educational imperative but a societal one, essential for the well-being and development of both current and future generations.

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Safe to learn and thrive

Ending violence in and through education

Approximately one billion children experience violence each year, with schools and online learning spaces often falling short as safe havens. This publication draws on extensive global evidence and insights into the multifaceted nature and root causes of violence in education. It offers practical, actionable strategies to create safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments, ensuring that every learner can thrive, free from harm.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

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