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POLICY BRIEF

An evidence review of violence prevention in South Africa

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This policy brief presents findings from an evidence review of interventions to prevent violence against women and against children, implemented in South Africa and documented between 1999 and 2021. It identifies and distils principles, approaches and activities that could effectively reduce violence experienced by women and children in South Africa.

Key findings

- Effective violence prevention interventions are culturally relevant and responsive to the context in which they are delivered. They address multiple risk factors through multilevel interventions, for example coupling gender transformative training and income support, parent/caregiver support with cash transfers, and community mobilisation and advocacy.
- Programmes achieving sustainable change mobilise community members and work with community value systems, while transforming settings that lead to violence. Thus taking a programme tested in one community to another may not always be effective.
- Vulnerability to violence is increased by spatial marginalisation, economic exclusion, hunger and a lack of economic opportunities. Interventions that combine economic empowerment with violence prevention show a positive effect on perpetration and victimisation.
- Violence prevention needs to be trauma-informed. This means providing services in ways that foster trust and safety, respect diversity and collaborate with communities.
- Findings show that in a country like South Africa, with a history of violence (state-sanctioned, community and interpersonal), effective violence prevention requires measures to holistically reduce harm caused by exposure to violence in childhood, in communities and in adult relationships.
- Interventions that are likely to be effective are those whose implementation is thought through, the implementing agency has the required capacity and the intervention is context-relevant. When intervention components are not fully implemented, or not implemented as intended, there is a reduced likelihood of achieving intended violence prevention outcomes.

Recommendations

- The Departments of Social Development, Basic Education, Higher Education, Health, Women, Justice and Constitutional Development, and the South African Police Service are central to efforts to reduce violence in South Africa. They should aim to establish enabling policy and service provision environments, and address policy fragmentation and structural determinants of violence.
- Violence prevention efforts at the community level require flexibility that government agencies are not able to achieve because of the restrictions within the public service management system. Government departments should work in collaboration with community-based organisations, based on trust, to support sustainable violence prevention.
- The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation should ensure that large government programmes such as the 16 Days of Activism, Child Protection Week, community dialogues etc. and policies are periodically evaluated.
- In addition to publishing positive results about which interventions work and how to achieve success, researchers need to publish negative results and challenges to implementation. More process evaluation work needs to be done to understand the resources needed and implementation context required to achieve success. This knowledge will advance the field.

Introduction

This policy brief presents findings from an evidence review of violence prevention interventions implemented in South Africa. The review draws on an evidence map published in 2019,[1] and additional papers since then. It includes evidence generated through qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The review summarises the available evidence, with an assessment of quality, and perhaps most importantly it highlights the contextual factors that impact success.

The review was guided by the question: 'How and in what context do interventions impact perpetration and victimisation; and how can violence prevention interventions be implemented at scale?'

The approach taken to answer this question is similar to a narrative review. The objective was not to aggregate results from the studies but to summarise the evidence. Narrative review typically involves the selection, chronicling and ordering of evidence to produce an account of the evidence. This allowed us to include both qualitative and quantitative studies, a range of interventions, and to be interpretive. The review was carried out in four phases (Chart 1).

Each paper or report was read in full and data extracted. In addition, an assessment of the quality of evidence presented in each paper or report was undertaken. A standardised tool rated each study on its conceptualisation, research question, sample size, context, control of confounding variable, etc.

Limitations

This review does not aggregate the results from interventions, but draws lessons from the evidence. The review does not include all violence prevention interventions being implemented in South Africa; only those where formal evaluations have been conducted.

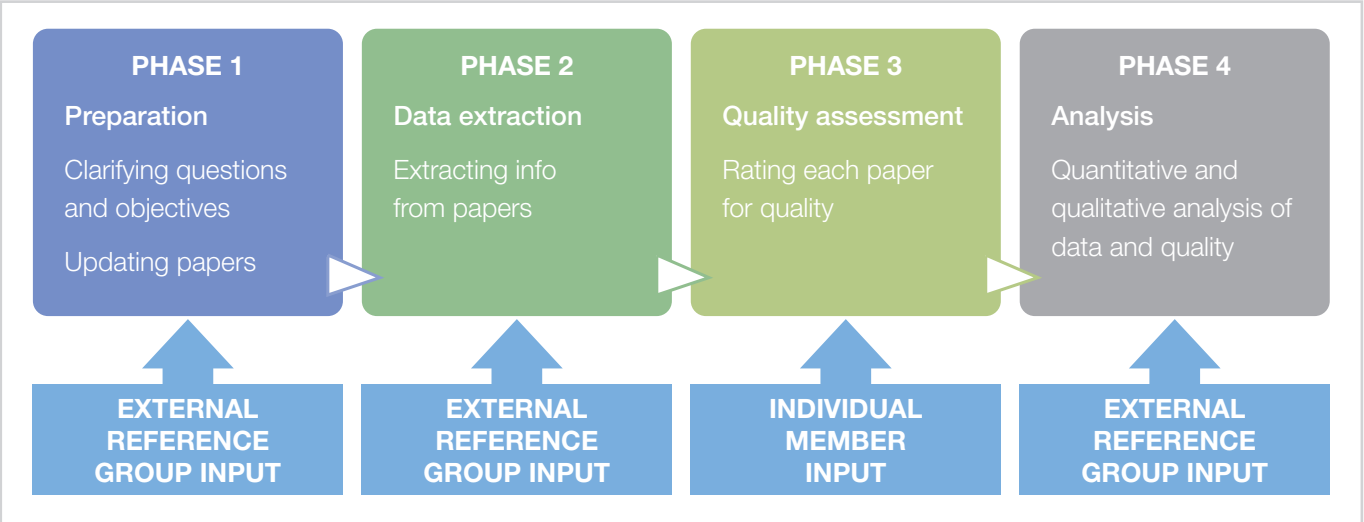
What is included in the review

This review focuses on interventions that were directed at addressing interpersonal violence within families, relationships and communities. It includes physical, sexual and psychological violence and neglect. To be included, the interventions must have intended to address violence experienced by women and children. Children are defined as covering ages 0–18, in line with South Africa's legal definition.

Interventions were defined broadly as a programme, policy, strategy, set of actions and activities, input, etc. that tangibly intervenes in social systems. The review focused on six categories of interventions:

- Norms and values
- Parent and caregiver support
- Response services
- Economic strengthening
- Schools as sites of intervention
- Laws and policies

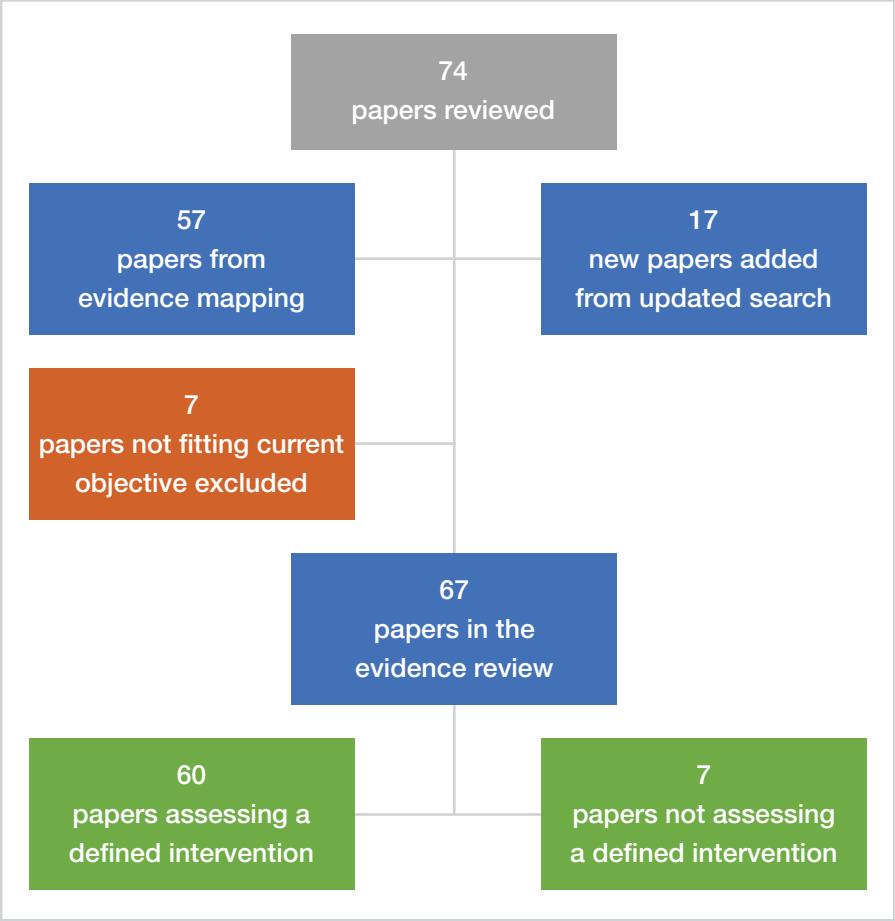
Chart 1: Research process



Studies were included if the intervention's primary outcome was to reduce the perpetration of violence or victimisation, or if the secondary outcomes were violence-related risk or protective factors.

A total of 74 papers were reviewed – 57 from the 2019 mapping exercise and 17 identified in the updated search. Of these, seven papers that did not fit the objective of the synthesis and seven that did not assess a defined intervention were removed, leaving a total of 60 papers in the review (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Studies in the review



EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS ARE CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT

The findings of each study were summarised to take into consideration the effectiveness of the intervention and the quality of the study. Effectiveness is defined as the reported impact on violence-related outcomes. For the purposes of this evidence review, three levels were used to rank effectiveness and quality (Chart 3).

The findings are categorised into those interventions that addressed violence against women and violence against children. In each category of intervention, a figure shows the number of studies, the assessment of effectiveness (E) and the quality rating (Q). Some interventions are mentioned in findings as examples to highlight a point. It should not be read as an indication that the intervention is more effective than others.

Chart 3: Effectiveness and quality scales

Effectiveness		Quality	
Positive	A positive change in the direction of measured violence-related outcomes	Strong	The study may include some gaps but the overall assessment is the design and findings are robust
Mixed	Some positive change in the direction of measured violence-related outcomes but no change in others	Moderate	The study has a number of strengths with some weaknesses but overall can be relied on with some caution
Negative	A negative change in the direction of measured violence-related outcomes indicating the intervention was counterproductive	Weak	The study falls short in substantial areas warranting caution when utilising findings

Preventing violence against women

Norms and values

13 studies
3 POSITIVE
9 MIXED
1 NEGATIVE
E
5 STRONG
6 MODERATE
2 WEAK
Q

Dialogue, critical engagement and community mobilisation to challenge gender inequality were found to shift norms that support violent behaviour.

In interventions such as CHANGE,[2] advocacy for external stakeholders (mostly provincial or city-level governments) to intervene in communities to eradicate risks and threats of violence have had less impact. This is partly because advocacy intervention components have not been well developed or implemented, and where implemented, they have not been sustained.

Findings suggest that interventions addressing gender inequitable norms can address the risk factors associated with violence but need to be context-relevant, culturally appropriate, and involve both men and women. However, shifting norms alone is not enough to stop men being violent or women experiencing violence.

Economic strengthening

Interventions such as IMAGE[3] and Stepping Stones and Creating Futures[4] that couple economic strengthening with gender transformative training can impact physical intimate partner violence perpetration and victimisation, though not for everyone.

12 studies
6 POSITIVE
6 MIXED
0 NEGATIVE
E
12 STRONG
0 MODERATE
0 WEAK
Q

The interventions changed norms that supported violence in intimate relationships and strengthened women's status in the relationship and community.

However, while these interventions might increase earnings or shift women's control over resources in their homes, they are not able to transform South Africa's highly skewed resource and power distribution.

Laws and policies

2 studies
0 POSITIVE
1 MIXED
1 NEGATIVE
E
0 STRONG
2 MODERATE
0 WEAK
Q

One study explored how Rhodes, Witwatersrand and Cape Town universities' policies impacted sexual violence on campus[5] and another assessed the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998.[6]

While the Act was associated with an increase in women's access to and use of protection orders, university policies were considered inadequate at both preventing sexual violence and protecting victims.

Both studies show that policies and laws are important building blocks for violence prevention. However,

policies need to be sensitive to the needs of victims in order to be effective; and they also need to be effectively implemented. When effectively implemented, they can afford women the required protection from imminent threats to violence and ensure accountability of perpetrators.

Response services

Two evaluations of access to shelters for women experiencing intimate partner violence[7, 8] found that shelters provided women with resources to leave abusive relationships, removing imminent threats. The extent to which decisions to escape abusive relationships were permanent, and led to the avoidance of future abusive relationships, was unclear.

7 studies	
3 POSITIVE 4 MIXED 0 NEGATIVE	E
2 STRONG 4 MODERATE 1 WEAK	Q

Accessing post-rape services for support was associated with reduced risk for future sexual violence and post-traumatic growth. However, service provision is uneven and referrals do not function well.[9]

Preventing violence against children

Norms and values

Different types of interventions have been tested for impact on norms and values. Participants in the evaluation of the Let us Protect our Future intervention reported reduced experiences of forced sexual violence.[10]

6 studies	
5 POSITIVE 1 MIXED 0 NEGATIVE	E
3 STRONG 2 MODERATE 1 WEAK	Q

A study assessing the PREPARE HIV-based intimate partner violence prevention programme found significant positive effects on the perpetration of sexual coercion and violence in adolescents' intimate relationships.[11]

One study exploring the use of film as an intervention addressing gender violence found films to be effective at challenging prevailing norms and beliefs about violence.[12] Studies in this category found that intervening with children and their caregivers early to challenge norms and beliefs that support violence both in intimate relationships and with acquaintances has a greater likelihood of reducing violence perpetration and victimisation.

Parent and caregiver support

Two studies assessed the impact of interventions for parents and caregivers. The interventions assessed mothers and their infants over eight weeks[13] or, more intensively, over six to seven months.[14]

2 studies	
2 POSITIVE 0 MIXED 0 NEGATIVE	E
2 STRONG 0 MODERATE 0 WEAK	Q

The interventions aimed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment through improving the relationship between mothers and infants by promoting responsive and supportive caregiving. These parent-infant interventions show promise with a growing body of robust evidence.

Interventions that challenge parents' acceptance of violence in disciplining their children and encourage positive relationships also report positive results. Furthermore, children with greater attachment and more security are more resilient, more likely to report abuse, and more likely to raise securely attached children themselves.

Norms and values combined with parent and caregiver support

Eight studies combined a norms and values change component with parent and caregiver support. Seven of these evaluated one or more of the Parenting for Lifelong Health (Sinovuyo) programmes. Five of these studies reported reductions in violent or abusive parent behaviour and increases in positive parenting.[15, 16]

8 studies	
5 POSITIVE 3 MIXED 0 NEGATIVE	E
7 STRONG 0 MODERATE 1 WEAK	Q

Three reported no improvements in neglect and inconsistent discipline,[17] including a randomised controlled trial,[18] indicating that full delivery of the programme may be more complicated.

An evaluation of the set of four programmes within Parenting for Lifelong Health and a community mobilisation component[19] found that the combination worked to strengthen the attitudes and values related to positive parenting. It also engendered a sense of commitment within the community to positive parenting, and significantly reduced parenting stress.

A substantial amount of research has been done on the Parenting for Lifelong Health suite of programmes, compared to other interventions, and each piece has demonstrated new learning and adaptation to make the interventions more contextually relevant and feasible for scale up. Overall, the interventions showed improvements in both children and parent outcomes, from mental health to fewer experiences of violence.

Response services

Six studies in this category focused on child sexual abuse. An evaluation of the Fight with Insight diversion programme explored the rehabilitation of young sexual offenders. It noted a reduction in recidivism, an increase in assumption of responsibility on the offender's part, greater impulse control and self-awareness and improved problem-solving and decision-making skills.[20]

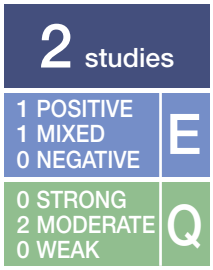
A group-based expressive art group intervention for sexually abused adolescent girls showed promise particularly in a low-resource context where individual-based therapy is not always possible.

A study assessing the impact of standard care on children at a sexual assault centre found that though some recovery was seen over time, particularly for depression, one in four children still showed clinical levels of anxiety nearly six months after having disclosed their abuse.

These studies highlight several issues: that there is often a disconnect between services and systems; that service providers working with affected children are overburdened and not sufficiently supported; and that the standard of care provided for victims is not sufficient to support recovery. Overall, the provision of mental health support to victims of child sexual violence shows some promise in helping children process abuse, rebuild attachment to family and caregivers and start the recovery process. These interventions work best when they involve support to parents and caregivers as well.

Schools as sites of intervention

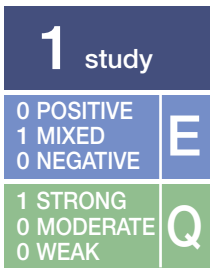
Two studies assessed school-based factors where the school environment itself was treated as an intervention. The first study explored the link between school connectedness and protection against violence and found that boys with a higher degree of school connectedness were protected against risk-taking behaviours.[21]



The second study explored girls' experiences of violence in same-sex schools. The study found that separating girls and boys may protect girls from sexual violence but not from peer-to-peer verbal and physical violence.[22]

The studies in this category, though limited, show that for peer-on-peer violence the categories of perpetrator-victim are not mutually exclusive and addressing the school environment remains important in preventing violence against children.

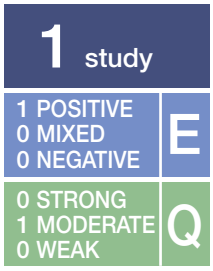
Economic strengthening



A single study assessed the impact of a conditional cash transfer on the reduction of IPV for young women.[23] Girls in the intervention were found to be at a lower risk of having an additional sexual partner and at a lower risk for physical IPV, but not sexual IPV.

The study proposes that the mechanism for change in the intervention was not a change in power dynamics between partners, but rather that the intervention gave young women the option to not engage in sexual partnerships.

Laws and policies



A single study assessed the impact of the 2004 Firearms Control Act on the prevalence of child firearm injuries.[24] The main outcome was a significant reduction in the incidence of firearm injuries and deaths in children after the introduction of the legislation.

However, the study did not consider any additional factors that could contribute to the reductions in firearm injuries in children, and was based on data from one hospital in one province.

Conclusion

This policy brief presented findings of an evidence review covering 60 evaluative research studies. It is not the intention of this review to identify individual programmes that should be scaled up. The aim of the review is to identify and distil principles, approaches and activities that hold promise for effectively reducing violence against women and children in South Africa. With this in mind, the following conclusions are drawn.

Context-responsive

Several papers highlighted the significance of the conditions in which a programme was implemented. Communities experiencing high levels of violence are characterised by high levels of poverty, are marginalised (spatially), have low resources and poor infrastructure, are likely to be religiously or culturally conservative, and experience different forms of victimisation.

Effective interventions are context-responsive and culturally relevant. They address multiple risk factors, for example coupling gender transformative training and income support, parent/caregiver support with cash transfers, and community mobilisation advocacy. Interventions that contribute to sustainable change in behaviour work within a community's value system while transforming aspects that lead to violence.

Addressing poverty and inequality

Several studies recognise that addressing the conditions that keep black communities marginalised and poor is important to addressing violence. Where people experience grinding poverty, persistent food insecurity, have fewer chances of making positive contributions to society, unemployment, and poor education, violence might seem like a secondary concern.

Transformative economic empowerment of both men and women is paramount to undoing the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. To this end it is necessary to remove the risk factors for violence that are associated with marginality and a lack of access to resources.

Trauma-informed interventions

Violence prevention that is trauma-informed is likely to be effective. This means fostering trust, safety, and providing choice to communities. It also means collaboration and respect for diversity. It is clear from this review that programme implementers and participants (men and women, children and parents) are likely to have experienced some form of trauma or childhood adversity. This could be state-sponsored violence during apartheid, community violence, interpersonal or personal trauma. Addressing existing trauma is critical to reducing vulnerability to future violence.

Holistic approach needed

Although most of the studies neatly fitted into either the violence against women or violence against children categories, some did not. Studies reporting interventions with men found that men who experienced childhood sexual violence were more likely to be abusive to their partners and to be more violent in general. These men were also likely to be engaged in violence with acquaintances. This raises questions about the effectiveness of having fragmented policy interventions that focus on different types of violence, and whether South Africa could benefit from a holistic violence prevention strategy.

Addressing existing trauma is critical to reducing vulnerability to future violence in South Africa

Findings show that in a country like South Africa, with a history of violence (state-sanctioned, community and interpersonal), effective violence prevention will require measures to holistically reduce harm caused by exposure to violence in childhood, the community and in adult relationships.

Finding alternatives to criminal justice system

Most response interventions for male perpetrators are in the criminal justice system. This includes accessing protection orders, increasing arrests, improving access to justice, etc. These are important and will remain a vital part of reducing levels of violence in the country.

At the same time, interpersonal violence is endemic as Anthony Collins and Simóne Plüg argue,[25] and in some cases female partners do not want to pursue criminal charges against their partners. There is evidence that for some women, using the criminal justice system increases risk to victimisation.[26]

Furthermore, the criminal justice system is not always effective in dealing with violence.[27] Therefore findings suggest that alternatives for dealing with men who use violence are important in South Africa.

Plan for implementation

Lessons from the studies reviewed are that attention needs to be paid not only to the grand narrative articulated in policies like the Gender-based Violence and Femicide National Strategy Plan and White Paper for Safety and Security, among others, but the practical aspects of implementation as key to effectiveness.

Interventions that are effective are those that are well planned and executed. The following details all need to be taken into consideration for interventions to be effective:

- Details about which activities are relevant in which contexts
- The logistics of who, how, where and when interventions will be delivered
- Who will fund these activities
- Which NGOs or government organisations will implement them
- The capacities for implementation, management and monitoring implementation

Recommendations

Researchers

- Researchers need to ensure that knowledge generated through academic research is shared in an accessible manner with implementers and government.
- In addition to publishing positive results about which interventions work and how to achieve success, researchers need to publish negative results, reporting on challenges to implementation.
- More process evaluation work needs to be done to generate knowledge about the resources and implementation context required to achieve success. This knowledge can help push the field further.

Government

- The Departments of Social Development, Women, Basic Education, Higher Education, Health, Justice and Constitutional Development, and the South African Police Service are central to efforts to reducing violence in South Africa. However, government departments should aim to focus on establishing enabling policy and service provision environments because violence prevention at the community level requires flexibility that government agencies are not always able to achieve due to the restrictions within the public service management system. Government should work in collaboration with community-based organisations, based on trust and with predictable funding to support sustainable violence prevention.
- The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation should ensure that government interventions build on what we know about risk factors and what works in the South African context. This department should also ensure that large government programmes such as the 16 Days of Activism, Child Protection Week, community dialogues, etc. and policies are periodically evaluated under the National Evaluation Policy Framework.

Community-based organisations

- Plan for the evaluation of interventions to contribute to knowledge generation and evidence building.
- Collect and share process information from interventions about what is effective and in which contexts to address violence in communities.

Donors

- Invest in building the capacity of community-based organisations to monitor performance and measure change through evaluative studies.
- Fund partnerships between researchers and community-based organisations to enable rigorous evaluations of promising interventions.
- Fund co-created organic community-based solutions piloting and evidence generation for scale up by the public and private sectors.

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Notes

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