Starting Young

More than 50 percent of children have experienced some form of sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect in their lifetime. The wide-ranging and lifelong consequences of witnessing or experiencing violence in childhood can be profound. Individuals exposed to childhood violence, including child sexual abuse, physical abuse and harm, or witnessing the abuse of their mothers, are at greater risk of becoming perpetrators or victims as adults.

Through our core work and grant-making, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) is building evidence to help us respond to violence as early as possible and to stop it from continuing. Between 2016 and 2020, we funded several studies on violence against children in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia and other regions (in partnership with the World Bank Group). This research has taught us that services and prevention programmes must start with parents and families, and continue throughout the individual’s life. To be most effective, programmes need to target critical development phases, from pre-conception and conception through early childhood to adolescence. Programmes to prevent violence in the home, including programmes that offer parenting support, are essential.

Continuing research into childhood violence, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is essential. Research can help us to effectively prevent and respond to both violence against women and violence against children, and it is essential for creating policies and practices that really work.

Promoting positive parenting through book sharing in South Africa

It is well established that sharing picture books with young children promotes cognitive development and facilitates responsive caregiving. Between 2015 and 2017, the SVRI supported research by the Institute for Life Course Health Research at Stellenbosch University to explore whether a book-sharing intervention could improve interactions between children and caregivers, reduce child behaviour problems and support children’s social understanding and empathy. The researchers evaluated the intervention by comparing the participating group of 70 caregivers and two-year-olds from Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, with another group that received no intervention.

The intervention targeted a complex intersection between components of parenting, child development and early violence prevention.

The study showed that the group-based book-sharing intervention had meaningful impacts on positive caregiver-child interactions – such as caregiver sensitivity, caregiver-child reciprocity, and complex cognitive talk – as well as on child language and cognitive outcomes. There was also a reduction in certain aspects of harsh parenting. Although initially no benefit was apparent for child behaviour problems and the development of social understanding and empathy, analysis of the research design clarified how future research could measure this and answer important questions regarding the benefits of such interventions.

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Adolescents in Papua New Guinea taking action around sexual violence

Equal Playing Field is a charity working with young people to drive change in Papua New Guinea, which has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. They work with volunteers to run School Action Groups to promote gender equality among adolescents. The School Action Groups aim to build the advocacy and leadership potential of students aged 13 to 16 years. Young people who join the clubs learn about gender equality, ending violence against women, and building skills around advocacy and campaigning.

Research by Equal Playing Field and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology shows that the initiative is proving successful and creating change. Their evaluation found that the School Action Groups have seen an increase in participation by young people at four participating schools in Papua New Guinea. Moreover, parents see the intervention as positive, citing positive changes in behaviour and attitudes. Schools have also become more open to facilitating School Action Group clubs because they see positive changes in the ways that students engage with one another and become positive peer role models.

The implications are promising: these groups have the potential to change the attitudes and build the advocacy skills of thousands of young people across Papua New Guinea. This cohort of young people could become a central part of the future strengthening of Papua New Guinea’s institutional responses to ending violence against women.

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A comprehensive sexuality programme in Mexico City aims to change youth attitudes and behaviour

Researchers have learnt more about what effectively prevents intimate partner violence among adolescents through an evaluation of a comprehensive sexuality education programme at a secondary school in Mexico City. Prevalence of intimate partner violence is high: a 2016 national survey in Mexico states that 43.9 percent of women aged 15 and older reported experiencing this type of violence.²

The findings of the evaluation suggest that participants gained new skills and insights: they reflected on gender roles and norms and learnt to identify types of violence within relationships. They also learnt how to support each other to address intimate partner violence, began to address harmful behaviours in their own relationships and became more prepared to seek information and support.

Overall, the evaluation indicated that comprehensive sexuality education, implemented by highly skilled health educators, is a feasible strategy for preventing and responding to intimate partner violence among adolescents. The success of the programme also confirmed that comprehensive sexuality education that seeks to prevent intimate partner violence should aim to address power imbalances and harmful social norms. It should incorporate and address the issues of violence, gender inequalities and sexual and reproductive rights.

The research findings have been used as the evidence base for a manual to strengthen gender-based violence care during the implementation of the Comprehensive Sexuality Course in Mexico. The findings have also supported regional initiatives in Peru, Ecuador, Guyana and Bolivia aimed at strengthening gender-sensitive training for educators.

This research was undertaken by the International Planned Parenthood Federation Western Hemisphere Region (IPPFWHR), together with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar (Mexfam).

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Building the evidence base to end family violence in Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the Pacific region. It’s here that the Safe Families programme, an aid initiative initially implemented by Oxfam on behalf of the Australian government between 2015 and 2018, is creating change. The programme aims to shift local beliefs, attitudes and norms so that family violence will no longer be considered acceptable and tolerable. It includes a variety of activities, such as the establishment of community-based Family Violence Prevention Action Committees and the development of community-led action plans to prevent and respond to violence in the home.

An evaluation of the programme has generated vital insights for future programming. The initial evaluation findings indicate that the programme has contributed to social transformation at both personal and community levels. The analysis confirms that violence against women and girls is driven by gender norms that normalise violence and affirm that men have a right to control women.

This evaluation will contribute to future programming, building the evidence base for “what works” and strengthening national women’s institutions, laws and policies in the Solomon Islands.

Lessons for integrated programmes to prevent violence against women and violence against children

Around the world, violence against both women and children occurs in the same communities, homes and families. Not much is known about the prevalence, though data (largely from high- and middle-income countries) suggests that these forms of violence occur together in as many as 40 percent of households. A 2015 study in Uganda conducted by Raising Voices identified several commonalities and intersections between violence against women and violence against children. No similar research had previously been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa. The results indicate the potential for more streamlined programmes – provided that important differences between women-centred and child-centred programming are also considered.

The quantitative component involved a fresh statistical analysis of data from a prior study. The researchers also designed a qualitative research process involving focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and participatory activities.

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The research identified four common patterns of intersecting violence:

- Bystander trauma: women and children express trauma after witnessing violence against another family member.
- Role modelling: children, especially boys, may adopt abusive behaviour after witnessing intimate partner violence.
- Further victimisation: the mother or child tries to stop the violence against a family member, often triggering further abuse.
- Displaced aggression: parents intentionally use children to retaliate against each other, or women redirect violence against themselves to their children.

While fully integrated approaches may not always be desirable, this innovative research highlights potential entry points for programmes to prevent violence against women and violence against children. Findings underscore the need to address the patriarchal family structure and consider the different power dynamics between intimate partners compared to parents and children.

**READ MORE HERE**

**Additional grants given for research into Starting Young**

Development of an early parenting intervention to promote and support effective parenting practices in South Africa. [Read about this here.](#)

Impact evaluation of the Adolescent Mothers Program of the Juanfe Foundation for the prevention of gender-based violence in Colombia. [Read about this here.](#)

Building the evidence base to understand and prevent campus sexual assault in Swaziland. [Read about this here.](#)

Evaluating a walking school bus as a school-related gender-based violence intervention in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. [Read about this here.](#)

Zona Segura: A trauma-informed youth-centred innovative solution to teen dating violence prevention in Honduras. [Read about this here.](#)

Making sense of early marriage among Syrian refugee girls. [Read about this here.](#)

Building the evidence base for “Safe Families” – a comprehensive community-led model for violence prevention in Solomon Islands. [Read about this here.](#)

Prevention of intimate partner violence among newly married couples in Jordan. [Read about this here.](#)