

# Preventing violence against women and girls in the education context





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*This resource is part of Communicating Equality, a project focused on gender-transformative approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls. When we analyzed the evidence on this topic, schools emerged as an important context for advancing violence prevention and gender equality in Canada. This resource provides a summary of promising gender-transformative initiatives for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in educational contexts in Canada and around the world, with a focus on communication and messaging.*

[Communicating Equality](#) for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a Canadian initiative to address the root causes of VAWG by focusing on primary prevention. Worldwide, one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life [1]. In Canada, more than 50% of women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. This project links expertise in media and communication, gender-transformative thinking and violence prevention to highlight and address the drivers of VAWG and translate them into effective Canada-specific messages and actions for public consumption.

### KEY DEFINITIONS

<b>Violence against women and girls</b>	is defined as any act of gender-based violence that causes, or could cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life. This definition encompasses all forms of violence that women and girls experience (including physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, financial, and others) that are gender-based [3].
<b>Primary prevention</b>	means stopping violence against women and girls from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This includes changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence; and shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalize it [3].
<b>Gender-transformative approaches</b>	move beyond simply being aware of gender inequality, or sensitive to gender differences, and instead deliberately challenge harmful gender roles, stereotypes, practices and norms, with the explicit aim of shifting the unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men [3]. Concerning violence, gender-transformative approaches focus on eliminating violence against women and girls and ending gender inequalities at the same time. In order to do this, a whole-of-society approach that engages all segments of society in the promotion of gender equality- including at the individual, household, community, institutional and policy/legal level- is necessary. Overall, employing gender-transformative approaches requires creativity, critical analysis, and novel ways of thinking [3-6].

## SCHOOLS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

At school, children learn about the world around them. They learn how to relate to and interact with others, and how to conduct themselves. This socialization starts early in a person's life, where children typically begin attending school in their toddler years. Moreover, some people enter into their first intimate relationship with someone they met at school. Given this, schools represent an important setting for engaging in critical thinking, discussion and action on violence against women and girls.

Unfortunately, schools are often where children and young adults can also be exposed to different forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence perpetrated by other students as well as teachers, and other adults. In fact, more than 246 million children are subjected to violence in or around schools every year [7]. Girls and young women comprise most of the victims and survivors of this violence [8]. Thus, implementing gender-transformative school-based programming that prevents violence against women and girls is of utmost importance.

### Violence against women and girls in Canadian educational settings

Although many Canadian schools have made efforts to create safe learning environments, many children and young adults, particularly girls and women, still experience different forms of violence (including physical, sexual, and emotional violence) during their school years. Nearly 25% of Canadian school age girls have experienced sexual violence before the age of 16 [9]. In the context of dating relationships in Canadian colleges and universities, 79% of women reported being psychologically abused, 27% of women sexually abused, and 22% of women physically abused. Overall, it is estimated that 15-25% of North American female college and university students experience sexual assault [10].

Canadian schools are not immune to horrific instances of violence against women and girls. One of the most well-known examples of this violence is the [École Polytechnique massacre](#), also known as the Montreal massacre, where fourteen women were murdered by a man who entered a mechanical engineering classroom at the school on December 6, 1989 in a premeditated anti-feminist act of terror [11]. A more recent instance of violence against women and girls is the story of [Amanda Todd](#), a 15-year old girl who died by suicide on October 10, 2012 as a result of the cyberbullying and violence she faced at several schools across British Columbia [12].

[More than 1 and 7 girls say that they were sexually assaulted by another student- but schools lack policies to help](#)

One night, Rachel\*, a mother from Newfoundland, received a phone call no parent wants. It was her ex-husband who called to tell her that their eight-year old daughter, Emma\*, had told him that an older boy at her school had been touching her private parts and that this abuse had been going on for months. The abuser was a 14-year old boy who rode the same school bus as Emma. It would later be discovered that Emma was only one of three girls who had been assaulted by this same student [13].

\*The real names of the individuals have been changed to protect their identities.

Many Canadian organizations have recognized the importance of addressing sexual violence in schools. For example, a student-led network called [High School Too](#) has launched a countrywide campaign to end sexual violence in high schools. Organizers of the campaign say that the issue is not being tackled adequately enough [14].

On November 2017 in Thunder Bay, Ontario, boys in grade 7 to 10 partook in a workshop and training session aimed at ending violence against women and girls. At the event, the boys met with experts and activists of the [Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin](#) ("I am a kind man") program at the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre. Alongside other organizations, they discussed what it means to be a kind man and what role they can play in preventing violence. The event also examined messages and masculine role models boys encounter in music, media and social platforms, and focused on what comprises a healthy relationship as well as an Indigenous perspective on masculinity. The attendees were then tasked with organizing events to commemorate the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women on December 6 at their schools [15].

Another notable example of programming on the prevention of VAWG in Canadian schools is the [Four R Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships](#), a whole-school, universal prevention approach created by experts from Western University in London, Ontario. The program is taught in classrooms across the country and focuses on reducing risk behaviours, including violence and bullying, unsafe sexual behaviour, and substance use, in order to prevent violence and promote healthy relationships among youth [16].

While these initiatives demonstrate that conversations and programming around violence against women and girls in Canadian schools is taking place, there is a need for more gender-transformative primary prevention programming and campaigns to be implemented in schools across this country, as girls and women continue to experience violence in educational institutions. The following section highlights international examples of gender-transformative primary prevention programming at schools, which can serve as inspiration for further adaptation at Canadian educational institutions.

## **GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE INITIATIVES FOR THE PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS**

School-based curriculums and initiatives that aim to prevent violence against women and girls are important and necessary for combatting this public health issue [17-22]. Evidence from global and country-specific initiatives have found that education-based settings offer opportunities for engaging men and boys in primary prevention work [22-32]. Research and knowledge from experts in the field suggest that programming in schools should focus on: addressing and changing gender norms and attitudes; dating violence and sexual abuse; relationships and consent; policy and access to support services; coordinated effective responses; bystander intervention; raising awareness about roots of gender-based violence; risk reduction and resistance training; and comprehensive sexual health education [17-22].

This section highlights school-based initiatives globally at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels that have focused on these topics. However, there is a dearth of concrete messaging examples to accompany these initiatives. Acknowledging this limitation, the next section highlights key gender-transformative primary prevention programs and focuses on communications activities and approaches that could inspire the development of gender-transformative prevention messaging.

## Programming in early childhood and primary education settings

Numerous programs have been implemented in elementary and middle schools across the globe, in the USA, Afghanistan, Kenya, India, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Some of these programs engage boys exclusively [33-35], other programs engage boys and girls [36-39], and still others include key members of the wider community including teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders [36]. Programs focus on promoting more equitable views and attitudes about gender norms and roles and challenging harmful and rigid gender stereotypes [33-39], promoting healthy masculinities [34, 35, 37, 39], decreasing dating violence and abuse and promoting healthy intimate relationships, non-violent conflict resolution [36, 37] and bystander training [33, 35, 39].

The session leaders of a U.S.-based program [Reducing Sexism and Violence Program - Middle School Program \(RSVP-MSP\)](#) facilitate active learning via several means such as storytelling, role playing and multimedia. Additionally, the boys are encouraged and supported to become leaders of positive change in their communities by being active “upstanders” [33].

For the [Peace Education](#) curriculum implemented in elementary school curriculums in Jawzjan province, Afghanistan, incorporated radio messaging that engaged the wider community. In particular, this consisted of:

- 90-minute weekly roundtable radio discussions that involved three to five participants representing various parts of the community (e.g. religious leaders, influential women, women's CSO members and other civil society activists, and government officials). Radio guests would engage in discussion related to the rights of women and girls, such as: early and forced marriage, violence against women and girls, lack of girls' access to education, child protection, women's empowerment, and the role of women in development and economic activities.
- Broadcasting 90 episodes of scripted radio dramas where each episode focused on a different issue related to conflict and violence against women. For example, prohibiting girls from going to school or favouring the education of boys, denying women's rights to property and inheritance, and the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women in Afghan families [36].

As part of the U.S.-based program [Coaching Boys Into Men](#) [34] and its Indian adaption [Parivartan](#) [35], sports coaches are trained to deliver violence prevention messages to their athletes given their unique position as influencers and role models for male athletes.

[Girls Rising](#) is a global campaign that focuses on ensuring girls around the world have access to education. Social action is inspired through storytelling and powerful partnerships. The campaign incorporates several communications activities and approaches to transform rigid social norms and beliefs about girls and women and inspire people to embrace equitable ideas and practices, and ultimately change behaviours. These approaches and activities include: high quality media tools produced with celebrity influencers; powerful storytelling and narration (specifically, a feature film that highlights nine stories); showcasing gatekeepers such as boys, fathers, teachers and others as role models and individuals who advocate against violence against women and girls and for girls' right to education [38].

## Programming in secondary education settings

Notable programs have been implemented in high schools globally, including in the U.S, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Spain, Romania, Italy, Portugal, the UK, South Africa, as well as the Balkans region. Like initiatives at the primary level, some programs engage boys exclusively [40-43], while other programs engage both boys and girls together [44-48]. Initiatives focus on challenging stereotypical and harmful gender role expectations (particularly of men) that encourage violence and promote equitable values around gender norms and roles [40-45, 47], promoting healthy masculinity [40-43, 46], and femininity [46], preventing dating violence and fostering healthy relationships [40, 44, 46-48], promoting sexual and reproductive health [40, 47], and bystander interventions [40].

[Wiseguys](#), a program developed by the Centre for Sexuality in Alberta Canada, works to improve mental and sexual health and decrease male-perpetrated violence by deconstructing stereotypical gender role expectations for male-identified adolescents. It incorporates a photo-based storytelling activity where participants were asked to lead a project where they took photos of men in their life (after being trained on the ethics of photo-taking) while considering two key questions: 1) What does it mean to be a guy in your world before your involvement in Wise Guyz? 2) What does it mean to be a guy in your world after being involved in Wise Guyz? After the photos were taken, the boys engaged in an exercise with a graduate research assistant where they critically reflected on gender experiences of men and boys [41, 42].

[Amor Del Bueno \(True Love\)](#), implemented in schools in Mexico, incorporates activities with adolescent boys and girls that include cooperative games, analysis of songs and videos, role-playing, theatre, and study of personal and hypothetical situations. As part of this program, a film was created to highlight violent behaviours in interpersonal relationships. As the website states, the film “provides a jumping-off point for a conversation about the 10 Signs of a Healthy and Unhealthy Relationship”. This program features “real love does not hurt” as a key communication message [48].

[Young Men’s Initiative](#) implemented in the Balkan region countries tasked young male participants with leading and coordinating a social marketing campaign that held the objective of transforming popular notions of what comprises ‘manhood’. Other activities included street/graffiti art, film projects, dramas, and online discussions [43].

[Lights4violence](#), a program ran in Spain, Romania, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom aimed to develop healthy relationships among secondary school youth. It included modules where students learned about cinema and film with the ultimate goal of having the students develop a short film that depicted the knowledge they had obtained during the program [44].

A classroom-based critical literacy program implemented in South Africa that engages learners to think critically about concepts such as masculinity, femininity, relationships, and power. The activities prompt students to critically examine how women are portrayed in advertising, magazines and newspapers, in fiction and in a variety of other texts to raise awareness of how language is used as a social tool and to transform learners’ perceptions and attitudes on gender norms and roles [45].

## Tertiary and post-secondary education settings

At colleges and universities in several countries, including the USA, Italy, China, and Ghana, some initiatives engage men on their own, and others engage students regardless of gender. Initiatives focus on: transforming the culture that fosters and condones sexual harassment, abuse and violence [49-51]; challenging and transforming unequal gender norms that foster violence and gender inequity [49, 52-54]; transforming thinking around masculinity that promotes violence and abuse [55]; preventing dating violence and promoting healthy relationships [49, 51-54]; and training bystanders to take action [49, 50, 55-57].

The [University Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence \(USV\) react: A Staff Training Program to Prevent Sexual Violence at Universities](#) is an intervention based in Italy. It emphasizes the need to avoid stigmatizing the victim of sexual violence, changing a culture that justifies violence, perpetuates shame, self-stereotyping, and transforms people from passive bystanders to active and reactive subjects. As part of the training, students review case studies and watch vignettes and movies to generate critical discussions on gender and violence [50].

A psychoeducation group intervention that focuses on violence prevention in dating had participants view videotaped re-enactments of couples engaged in several forms of relationship conflict in order to increase awareness of the impact of power and control in relationship. This helps to develop important skills such as anger management, positive communication, and identification and expression of emotions [53].

[Realconsent](#) is comprised of six 30-minute media-based interactive modules that include didactic activities and episodes of a serial drama. It covers topics of informed consent, communication skills regarding sex, the role of alcohol and male socialization in sexual violence, empathy for rape victims, and bystander education. The serial drama includes the modelling of positive behaviors and outcomes as well as intervening in situations of violence and abuse, positive communication with female sex partners, and obtaining effective consent for sex [55].

## CONCLUSION

This resource provides an overview of examples of gender-transformative approaches for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in school settings. These examples highlight initiatives that can be carried out at all learning levels (including primary, secondary, and tertiary educational settings), and focus on addressing and changing unequal gender norms, preventing dating abuse and fostering healthy relationships, equipping students with effective bystander training, and promoting healthy masculinity. They demonstrate that teachers, coaches and learning institutions can serve as powerful role models and catalysts for broader systemic and long-lasting societal change, creating a world where girls and women globally can have the opportunity to learn in safe and positive environments. Inspiration can be drawn from these approaches to develop messaging that is appropriate for each specific school-setting and demographic.

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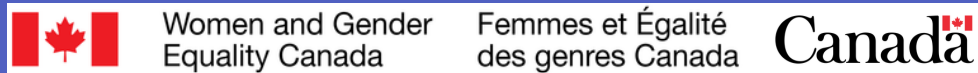


# Communicating Equality

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*The Centre of Excellence for Women's Health respectfully acknowledges the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples as the first inhabitants and traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn, and work.*