

Preventing violence against women and girls in the family 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, the family 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 family 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

Violence against women and girls	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].
Primary prevention	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].
Gender-transformative approaches	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].

THE FAMILY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

The first setting where a child undergoes socialization is usually the family, often regarded as the primary social institution. This is where a child learns about the world around them, how to interact with other people, the norms, values, and principles by which to live, and knowledge and skills necessary for survival. Given this, the family and the home should be a source of comfort and safety so that one can develop into a whole and healthy human being.

Unfortunately, for many, the home is a place of conflict with violence taking place between members of the family. When children are victims of, or witness this violence, there can be lasting physical and psychological harms. Research demonstrates a link between a boy child's early exposure to violence with a higher likelihood of perpetrating violence against women and girls later in their life [7-17]. Indeed, a World Health Organization report titled "[Respect women: preventing violence against women](#)", states that one of the key risk factors for perpetration of violence against women is identified as childhood experience of violence and/or exposure to violence in the family [18]. Additionally, according to a collection of 15 years of data from The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), men who witnessed violence as children, particularly against their mother, were twice as likely to carry out intimate partner violence in adulthood [17].

It is important to note that research has not established childhood exposure to violence as a cause of violence against women and girls. Instead, research suggests that the quality of family relationships experienced in early stages of life impacts what is learned as normative practice within families in adulthood. While the majority of victims of childhood violence will not become perpetrators of violence as adults, among those who do cause harm, there is a greater proportion of men who were victims as children than in the general population [7].

The family represents an important context in which violence against women and girls must be addressed. Women and girls are most often the victims of family violence due to values and ideologies that position women and girls as inferior and to be controlled. Fostering healthy home and family relations free of violence and harmful gender norms presents a key approach in violence prevention efforts that are sustainable and long-lasting.

Violence in Canadian families

Violence in the family context in Canada includes intimate partner violence (IPV), child and elder abuse, child witnessing, and femicide (the killing of females because they are females [19]). Violence is a major concern, with police-reported incidents increasing for a fifth consecutive year in 2023. Experts have linked the COVID-19 lockdowns as a major contributor to this increase. According to a Statistics Canada report, in 2021, there were 127,082 victims of police-reported violence perpetrated by spouses, parents, children, siblings or extended family members. Women and girls represented two-thirds (69 percent) of the victims of this violence [20, 21].

Family violence, IPV, and femicide remain dire issues for many Canadians, most especially women. In 2018, 44 percent of women reported experiencing some form of psychological, physical, or sexual violence by an intimate partner. This rate is over 60 percent for Indigenous women [22]. Additionally, according to a report by the Canadian Femicide Observatory For Justice and Accountability, femicides have been on the rise in Canada with more than 800 women and girls killed between 2018 and 2022 [23].

Additionally, continued gender inequality in media and reporting means that many women's stories do not receive attention from the press. Worse yet, the stories of women who are victims of femicide are never fully told.

[No jail time for B.C man with history of domestic violence who beat ex-wife in front of 5-year old](#)

A disturbing incident comes out of British Columbia, Canada, where a 43-year old man beat his ex-wife in front of their 5-year old daughter. On September 16, 2019, the man in question physically assaulted his ex-wife, waking up their 5-year old daughter in the process who witnessed the attack. The ex-wife testified that the violent incident left her with bruising, pain in the head and neck, and dizziness. In addition, she now suffers from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and recurring nightmares. He will receive no jail time, instead, he will receive 3 months of house arrest [24]. Unfortunately, this is just one of many examples of family violence in Canada.

The following section provides some international examples of family-focused gender-transformative programming for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls which can serve as inspiration for further adaptation in the Canadian context.

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

Three approaches are particularly prominent in family-focused gender-transformative primary prevention of violence against women and girls programming, all of which are closely linked: 1) promoting positive parenting and healthy fatherhood, 2) promoting healthy couple relationships, and 3) a whole-family approach.

Promoting positive parenting and healthy fatherhood

A campaign by [Our Watch](#) called 'Because Why should gender stereotypes limit our children' (short form name: 'Because Why?') which is directed at parents/guardians and families at large, has two objectives. One, raising awareness on the limiting effects of gender stereotypes on children, and two, supporting parents and families in taking concrete steps to challenge these stereotypes. Some of the communication messages that comprise this campaign include: "let kids be kids", "but some boys love pink, and some girls love blue" and "boys must be more than just boys".

Engaging men as fathers and targeting fatherhood has been consistently identified as a necessary feature of primary prevention of violence efforts, and many international organizations have implemented fatherhood programs [12, 25-32]. Two Canadian organizations - [Alberta Men's Network](#) and [Shift! The Project to End Domestic Violence](#) - have recognized fatherhood initiatives as one of the most effective entry points for violence prevention in Canada [11, 33]. The initiatives discussed here aim to tackle harmful gender norms that promote male dominance, violence, and control by modelling healthy forms of fatherhood. More specifically, rather than narrowly viewing fathers in disciplinary or financial provider roles, the initiatives expand the idea of fatherhood to that of caregiver and companion to children and partners [12, 34-36].

One Man Can, a South Africa-based initiative implemented by Sonke Gender Justice focuses on both positive parenting and healthy fatherhood and emphasizes alternatives to corporal punishment of children [34, 37, 38]. My Dad Can, a sub-campaign of One Man Can in partnership with MenCare, celebrates “men who care” by profiling South African fathers in the local media. In this campaign the audience is exposed to the day-to-day experiences of fathers and learns about why involved fatherhood is so important. Messaging focuses on the benefits of involved fatherhood for fathers, mothers and children and emphasizes a shift from portraying dad as strong or violent, to caring and supporting. For example, ‘My dad can lift a car!’ shifts to ‘My dad can cook!’.

The Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fatherhood initiative implemented in Uganda incorporated a mentorship component into their programming in which men were paired up with other men who use nonviolent discipline and conflict resolution in their parenting. A key lesson communicated to fathers through this program was that children can have desired behaviours explained to them without the use of corporal punishment and violence. Fathers were taught that children will not only listen to them, but their relationship with their children will improve with acts of kind communication and trust [34-36]. The quotes below are examples of messaging included on posters used in the REAL Fatherhood initiative.


An Elder’s reflection:
"He cares for his
children financially and
emotionally"

A child says:
"My father
comforts me"

A friend says: "I learn
from him about new
ways of caring for my
family"

A young father says:
"I know that working
together with my wife
benefits our family"

Another noteworthy initiative spearheaded by Equimundo and Sonke Gender Justice, is the [MenCare global fatherhood campaign](#), which is active in more than 60 countries in five continents. The goal of the campaign is to promote: men's involvement as equitable, nonviolent fathers and caregivers to achieve family well-being; gender equality; and better health for mothers, fathers, and children. MenCare has received global attention having participated in events such as the Clinton Global Initiative conference and TEDx Barcelona. Within a comprehensive communications approach, MenCare uses posters as one mechanism to disseminate their messages. This [link](#) takes you to a page that displays hundreds of posters used internationally in different settings. Here are a few examples:






**YOU AREN'T AFRAID TO HOLD ME CLOSE.
YOU ARE MY FATHER.**

The older generation might not get it. Your friends might not get it - even some of them who have children of their own. But you're different. You're not afraid to show your affection for your family in public or to share the parenting responsibilities.

In a world in which too many children feel that their fathers are distant, dominating or closed-off, you have a chance to be a father who cares deeply and compassionately for those that he loves - and who is not afraid to show it.

For more on fathers & affection: www.men-care.org

MenCare is coordinated by:
 





**YOU NEVER MISS A PRENATAL VISIT.
YOU ARE MY FATHER.**

You are starting on the adventure of a lifetime: you get to be a father. You are needed from the start: to learn, to be involved, to be responsible.

Not only will you discover things you never knew about yourself, you will help significantly increase the chances of a safe and comfortable birth of your child and for her mother.

As a father, you can show you care by supporting the mother at every step of the pregnancy.

For more on fathers & prenatal care: www.men-care.org

MenCare is coordinated by:
 

Healthy couple relationships

Often, positive parenting and healthy fatherhood initiatives include a focus on supportive and healthy partnerships.

In the [REAL Fatherhood Initiative](#), communication skills training for couples promotes non-violent conflict resolution, with the understanding that building these skills can reduce child exposure to IPV and maltreatment [35]. Here are some quotes from a young wife featured on a campaign poster promoting the healthy relationships objective of REAL Fatherhood: “He respects me and I respect him”, “He shows care for me and the children”, “He discusses important issues with me”, “We parent together”, “We work as a team to have a peaceful home and family”.

The [Indashyikirwa](#) (‘agents of change’) couples program in Rwanda aims to prevent IPV and promote healthy relationships. The concept of power is central to the program, encouraging participants to reflect on power over, power with, power within, and power to. Power discrepancies between women and men at individual and structural levels are framed as the root cause of violence against women, but program participants are encouraged to work towards balancing power in their communities and relationships. To complement this, community posters highlight this gender-power analysis through showcasing scenarios of both men and women using power in positive and negative ways. Field officers have pointed out that depictions of women, as well as men, using power in different ways is effective for engaging men [39-42].

[Reproduction Health Uganda \(RHU\)](#) uses sexual and reproductive health as the entry point to engage couples, but most especially men, in the promotion of healthy and equitable relationships. Through this program, men are engaged in multiple capacities through a diversity of communication platforms and educational spaces to promote men’s sexual and reproductive health. The program provides sexual and reproductive health education to men at churches, football tournaments, using community outreach, theater, the distribution of posters, monthly radio programs, bi-weekly community sensitization meetings, and media briefs to local media houses. Men also participate in workshops that challenge harmful gender norms and unequal gender roles and promote the benefits of more equitable alternatives. Included in the workshops are local health service providers, religious leaders, cultural leaders and local couples, who are invited to share their experiences with sexual and reproductive health service utilization and domestic responsibility. Finally, the program also engages men as advocates of change through peer educators who encourage men's participation in the promotion and delivery of sexual and reproductive health. The project participants are invited to share their personal experiences and testimonies on radio programs and in community groups to contribute to messaging and increased dissemination in support of the goals of the program [43].

Another program using reproductive and sexual health as an entry point is the [Bandeberaho](#) (“role model”) couples' intervention in Rwanda, a program that engages men and their partners in participatory, small group sessions where participants critically reflect on and discuss a variety of topics including gender and power, fatherhood, couple communication and decision-making, IPV, caregiving, child development, and male engagement in reproductive and maternal health [44].

Whole-family approach

Some initiatives pursue a whole-family approach where members of the family beyond the parents/couple are engaged in programming [45-47].

The [Sibling Support for Adolescents in Emergencies \(SSAGE\)](#) program implemented in Nigeria aims to challenge intergenerational cycles of violence and prevent future perpetration of violence against girls through a whole-family support approach. The initiative focuses on challenging normative beliefs and interpersonal dynamics that fuel violence against girls and women, advancing equitable attitudes and behaviours within families, and encouraging positive masculinities. Adolescent girls, their male siblings, and their male and female caregivers are enrolled in the program where interactive and synchronized age and gender-specific sessions are delivered, allowing opportunity for intra-familial discussion on weekly topics [45, 46].

The [Sammanit Jeevan](#) (“Living With Dignity”) program is a family-centered initiative implemented in Nepal aimed at reducing IPV. Women-led income-generating activities are pursued to improve young women’s economic conditions and challenge harmful gender and social norms. This program focuses on young married women, and involves their husbands and in-laws in the program activities [47].

Although no specific messages were identified for either the SSAGE and Sammanit Jeevan program, these examples of whole-family initiatives can serve as inspiration for future messaging that centres the entire family unit, positioning the family as a team that must work together in harmony to stop violence against women and girls.

CONCLUSION

The family is an institution that can serve as a powerful springboard for ensuring wider systemic societal change, especially when multi-generational and multi-faceted approaches are used. These initiatives are some of the most promising gender-transformative examples and approaches for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in the context of the family. They promote men’s involvement as non-violent fathers and caregivers, healthy relationships, and equitable attitudes and behaviours within families, in order to achieve family well-being, gender equality, and better health for mothers, fathers, and children. any of these gender-transformative initiatives have originated in countries in the Global South and offer clear inspiration for initiatives that could be adapted and advanced in Canada.

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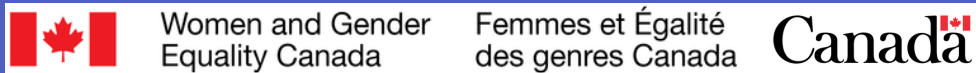


Communicating Equality

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This resource is part of the Communicating Equality Toolkit.

The Centre of Excellence for Women's Health acknowledges the financial support of Women and Gender Equality of Canada for this project.



Last Updated: October 2023

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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.