



Review article

Addressing Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence Among Adolescents: Emerging Evidence of Effectiveness


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 A B S T R A C T

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence (SV) are widespread among adolescents and place them on a lifelong trajectory of violence, either as victims or perpetrators. The aim of this review was to identify effective approaches to prevent adolescent IPV and SV and to identify critical knowledge gaps. The interventions reviewed in this article reflect the global focus on interventions addressing violence perpetrated by men against women in the context of heterosexual relationships. Interventions for girls and boys (10–19 years) were identified through electronic searches for peer-reviewed and gray literature such as reports and research briefs. Studies were excluded if they were published before 1990 or did not disaggregate participants and results by age. Programs were classified as “effective,” “emerging,” “ineffective,” or “unclear” based on the strength of evidence, generalizability of results to developing country settings, and replication beyond the initial pilot. Programs were considered “effective” if they were evaluated with well-designed studies, which controlled for threats to validity through randomization of participants. A review of 142 articles and documents yielded 61 interventions, which aimed to prevent IPV and SV among adolescents. These were categorized as “parenting” (n = 8), “targeted interventions for children and adolescents subjected to maltreatment” (n = 3), “school based” (n = 31; including 10 interventions to prevent sexual assault among university students), “community based” (n = 16), and “economic empowerment” (n = 2). The rigor of the evaluations varies greatly. A good number have relatively weak research designs, short follow-up periods, and low or unreported retention rates. Overall, there is a lack of robust standardized measures for behavioral outcomes. Three promising approaches emerge. First, school-based dating violence interventions show considerable success. However, they have only been implemented in high-income countries and should be adapted and evaluated in other settings. Second, community-based interventions to form gender equitable attitudes among boys and girls have successfully prevented IPV or SV. Third, evidence suggests that parenting interventions and interventions with children and adolescents subjected to maltreatment hold promise in preventing IPV or SV by addressing child maltreatment, which is a risk factor for later perpetration or experience of IPV or SV. Results suggest that programs with longer term investments and repeated exposure to ideas delivered in different settings over time have better results than single awareness-raising or discussion sessions. However, lack of rigorous evidence limits conclusions regarding the effectiveness of adolescent IPV and SV prevention programs and indicates a need for more robust evaluation.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

The results of this review suggest that promising approaches to prevent intimate partner violence and sexual violence among adolescents should be replicated and scaled up in different settings, including school-based dating violence, parenting, and community-based interventions.

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There is increasing global recognition that addressing gender-based violence among adolescents is a human rights and public health imperative. The far-reaching consequences of gender-based violence among women are well documented, with significant sexual and reproductive health outcomes [1]. Tragically, exposure to gender-based violence places many adolescents on a lifelong trajectory of violence, either as victims or perpetrators [2]. The magnitude of the problem among adolescents, especially girls and young women, is significant. Evidence suggests that the prevalence of exposure to gender-based violence is already high among adolescent girls, indicating that violence commonly starts early in their lives. A report on estimates of intimate partner violence (IPV) based on data from 81 countries shows that the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPV among ever-partnered girls (15–19 years) is 29.4% and 31.6% among young women (20–24 years) [1]. In some countries, violence affects as much as half of 15- to 24-year-old girls/women [3].

IPV occurs primarily from adolescence and early adulthood onward, most often in the context of marriage or cohabitation, and usually includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as controlling behaviors. Sexual violence (SV) can occur at any age—including childhood—and can be perpetrated by parents, family members, teachers, peers, acquaintances and strangers, as well as intimate partners. Although IPV includes, but is not limited to SV, SV includes all perpetrators including intimate partners. Among adult and young women, SV by intimate partners is much more common than by other perpetrators. This may not be the case, however, for very young adolescents (i.e., 10–14 years). As children grow into puberty, they may experience sexual harassment or assault in their home, community, or school or forced first sex. Research also shows that violence is not limited to sexual debut but can be an ongoing feature of adolescent relationships. Generally called “dating violence” in the United States and Canadian literature, it refers to physical or SV occurring in the context of a relationship that is neither marriage nor a long-term cohabitating partnership. In Asia, and parts of the world where marriage often takes place at a young age, the phenomenon of dating violence is rare and IPV begins earlier. Internationally, population-based studies of dating violence are few, but limited evidence suggests that this affects a substantial proportion of youth [2]. Although more females are sexually victimized than males, there is growing recognition that the sexual victimization of boys and men may be a serious, yet largely invisible, problem especially in conflict-affected settings [4–6]. IPV and SV also occur in same sex relationships,

although prevalence is not well documented. Particular groups of adolescents may be especially vulnerable to SV such as adolescents from marginalized groups, working children, those with disabilities, homeless youth, youth living in conflict-affected settings, and children who have dropped out of school [7–10].

A number of reviews identify risk and protective factors for victimization of women and for perpetration by men in the context of heterosexual relationships [2,6,11]. Gender inequality is a root cause of IPV and SV at the population level; however, at the individual level, childhood violence is also a risk factor. Evidence suggests that risk factors for adolescents may be similar to those identified for adults. These include exposure to violence as a child, prior victimization, bullying and homophobic teasing, poor parental practices, harmful alcohol and substance use, unequal social norms that condone gender-based violence, lack of empowerment among women and girls, controlling male behavior, and laws and policies that perpetuate gender inequality (Table 1) [2,12–18]. The importance of exposure to violence as a child or witnessing parental abuse as a child in shaping both the risk of victimization of women and for perpetration by men highlights the need to take a life course perspective, particularly in examining interventions that are aimed at preventing or addressing violence against children.

Therefore, concerted efforts at multiple levels are required to address IPV and SV among adolescents. Given that many adolescent girls and young women already experience high levels of violence, primary prevention efforts among younger adolescents are needed to stop violence before it occurs. Moreover, adolescence represents a unique opportunity to promote attitudes and behaviors that prevent IPV and SV over the life course because it is during this period that gender role differentiation intensifies, and boys and girls try out new ways of thinking and acting in intimate relationships. The aim of this review was to identify effective approaches to prevent gender-based violence, in particular, IPV and SV among adolescents in heterosexual relationships. The questions guiding this review are as follows: What types of interventions or programs show evidence of being effective in preventing experience/perpetration of IPV and SV among adolescents? What types of interventions change adolescent attitudes which support IPV and SV? What are the critical knowledge gaps? What lessons can we learn from the growing evidence in this area? What are the implications for designing programs and policies for preventing gender-based violence among adolescents? This article was commissioned for

Table 1

Risk and protective factors for intimate partner and sexual violence among adolescents (based on evidence in the literature)

Perpetration by men	Both perpetration by men and victimization of women	Victimization of women
Individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Antisocial personality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Harmful alcohol and substance use ● Witnessing or being a victim of violence ● Belief that violence is justified/tolerable ● Low education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Socioeconomic status (weak) ● Risky sexual practices ● Young age ● Marital status ● Depression
Relationship and family <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bullying and homophobic teasing ● Academic achievement ● Partner has concurrent relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Violence within family ● Connectedness with adults ● Divorced/separated parents ● Poor parenting practices (harsh discipline, lack of supervision, and low affective proximity) ● Friends with delinquent behaviors/who approve of/experience IPV ● Relationships characterized by power imbalances ● Relationship conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Forced/unwanted first sex

Data from [2,11,17,18,20].

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