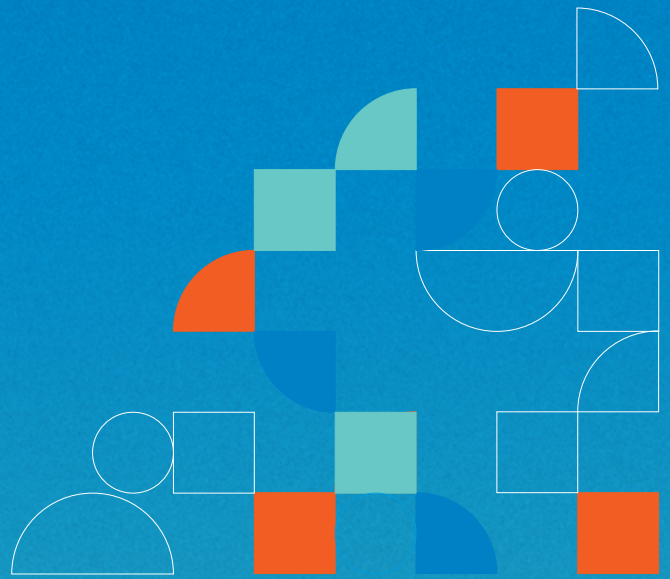


INNOVATION AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN



INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) set an ambitious target under the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG)¹ by 2030. Yet the current pace of progress is insufficient.² VAWG continues to be one of the greatest human rights violations of this era, affecting one in three women during their lifetime and threatening the health, wellbeing and empowerment of women and children.³ As such, in 2023 the UN Secretary General declared that gender equality is “300 years away.”⁴

Meeting that 2030 goal will require innovation, which is defined as “new or improved ways of working with the transformative ability to accelerate impact.”⁵ This will involve pursuing ‘**incremental innovation**’ – strategies that can firstly, improve our ability to target programmes effectively and adapt them to changing circumstances; secondly strengthen the impact of existing initiatives; and thirdly, deliver evidence-based strategies at a broader scale.

Yet with the VAWG prevention field being relatively young, it has far fewer proven solutions than related fields such as HIV prevention and mental health,⁶ and as of 2023, most of these are in pilot phases. We therefore simultaneously need to explore ‘**fundamental innovation**’,⁷ which in this case involves fourthly: high-risk, high-reward strategies that extend beyond traditional VAWG programming. These may be extremely novel approaches, may draw upon previously untested drivers, or they may leverage unanticipated resources or partnerships.

A focus on innovation gives practitioners the tools and vocabulary to stretch beyond the comfort of best practice, strengthen the dynamic cycle of evidence generation and grow the field. In this way, novel ideas will start to become supported by evidence and scale, and then themselves become the new reference points for further advancements.

There are many opportunities for VAWG prevention innovators to incorporate small (or large) changes that yield improved results. During intervention development for example, innovation can be used in the design process to inform the content of the programme or to build tools for delivering it to users. In the research phase innovation may include considering which methods can be added to or substituted for gold-standard evaluations, to make evidence creation more rapid or cost-effective. Then, taking programmes to scale in a sustainable and equitable way requires cross-fertilising innovation and VAWG prevention, using systems thinking to unpack the interconnected problems, craft shared agendas and catalyse responsive funding.





This knowledge brief aims to inspire and encourage policy-makers, activists, practitioners and researchers as they ask themselves how innovation may better fit into and strengthen their work to prevent VAWG. It offers a goal-based working definition of innovation, describing promising innovative approaches through examples and making the case for further advancements, without compromising ethical and safety standards or evidence generation.

1. A WORKING DEFINITION OF INNOVATION FOR VAWG PREVENTION

A comprehensive review of innovative VAWG programmes was recently published by the [International Development Innovation Alliance](#), which unites some of the world's leading development agencies. The Alliance defined innovation as **new activities that have the transformative ability to accelerate impact.**⁸ This definition encourages us to think of innovation in VAWG prevention as a broad concept, rather than the newest trend or cutting-edge technology. The Alliance's definition is broad enough to encompass any path-breaking improvements in the way that VAWG prevention practitioners are currently working. The report presents various ways of introducing innovation into VAWG prevention, including improved partnership models, novel business strategies, creative financing mechanisms and ideas fuelled by science and technology.

Box 1 A working definition

Innovation for VAWG prevention means developing novel strategies that have the potential to accelerate progress, either incrementally or fundamentally, via:

-  **Improved focus and adaptability:** Enabling practitioners to target programmes more effectively or adapt them based on changing circumstances or continuous learning.
-  **Greater impact:** Incrementally increasing the effectiveness of evidence-based strategies by strengthening the theory of change or enhancing programme compliance.
-  **Broader scale:** Enabling best practices to reach larger audiences cost-effectively and sustainably.
-  **Thinking outside of the box:** Bringing in fresh, novel approaches that expand the bounds of traditional VAWG prevention.

The four goals above embody the definition of innovation for VAWG prevention for the purposes of this brief. They require work across disciplinary boundaries and may draw on new methods of identifying and experimenting with drivers and root causes.



Photo: UN Women/Ye Ji Lee

2. BEST PRACTICES IN VAWG PREVENTION

The starting point for effective VAWG prevention is rigorous evidence that is carefully implemented in line with ethical standards. While just a decade ago the evidence base was still highly skewed towards high-income countries and VAWG response programmes,⁹ significant progress has since been seen for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The [RESPECT Women Framework](#)¹⁰ has become a benchmark for best practice in VAWG prevention.¹¹ It offers guiding principles

for effective programming, captures key factors for promoting an enabling environment, and suggests strategies to scale up effective programming. By focusing on ‘what works’ and rigorously evaluating the impact of interventions. In addition, What Works to Prevent VAWG – funded by the Government of the United Kingdom and implemented by civil-society organizations (CSOs) and researchers – has made important contributions to understanding effective prevention.

Box 2 Key elements for effective VAWG prevention

Based on the principles outlined in the RESPECT Women Framework and evidence summaries from the What Works programmes, key features of effective interventions include:

- **Women’s safety first:** Upholding the ‘do no harm’ principle, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, anticipating unintended consequences, and supporting survivors.
- **A strong Theory of Change:** Designing based on well-conceived, contextualized theories of change and addressing unequal gender and power relations.
- **Multi-level interventions:** Addressing multiple VAWG drivers simultaneously, selected based on knowledge of the local context. Combined interventions work with men and women, including extended families or communities where relevant, to address multiple risk factors.
- **Participatory approaches:** Encouraging critical thinking and maintaining sufficient duration and frequency to allow for personal reflection and experiential learning. Where possible, interventions also build participants’ voice, agency, and skills.
- **Thoughtful implementation:** Working through carefully selected, trained, and supported staff, volunteers, and facilitators. RESPECT also encourages coordination and partnering across sectors and organizations at local and national levels, generating evidence on what works, and sharing findings.

Most of the tested interventions included in these reviews favour in-person approaches over digital delivery channels. They also often call for time-intensive implementation, making them difficult to adopt and scale. When building from evidence-based interventions, innovation is crucial for

increasing the focus and adaptability, population-based impact, and the scale of VAWG prevention efforts. If combined with continuous learning, innovation can broaden the evidence base for what works to keep women and girls safe in relationships and communities.

3. ENTRY POINTS FOR INNOVATION

Innovation can take place at multiple entry points in an organization or programme. Diagram 1 summarizes how common VAWG prevention activities can be complemented by innovative approaches.¹² This can be seen as a menu of innovative

techniques that do not need to take place in order or in their entirety. It is likely that many other approaches exist, and that this brief simply offers highlights.

DIAGRAM 1 ENTRY POINTS FOR INNOVATION

Entry points	'Business as usual' VAWG prevention	Innovative approaches to VAWG prevention
3.1. Choosing the approach	a. Brainstorm a Theory of Change	a. Use behavioural science to pinpoint rationale for Theory of Change
	b. Deliver in-person workshops	b. Use digital approaches
	c. Transplant programmes tested in one location to a new setting	c. Adapt programmes using human-centred design
3.2. Learning about impact and taking to scale	d. Conduct short evaluations and programme monitoring for 'numbers reached'	d. Conduct impact evaluation of 'cases of VAWG averted'
	e. Take the same interventions to more people	e. Use implementation science; use systems thinking
3.3. Core ingredients for outside-the-box thinking	f. Programmes with the same network use similar methods	f. Enable an environment for cross-fertilization and innovation
	g. Programmes involve short timelines which limits novel ideas	g. Ensure core funding and longer timelines

Improved focus and adaptability

Greater impact

Broader scale

Thinking outside of the box

3.1. Choosing the approach

3.1.1. Using behavioural science to strengthen a Theory of Change

Many VAWG prevention-focused organizations already develop theories of change for VAWG programming. Despite the name, these figures do not always include a ‘theory’, but behavioural science can add strength to ‘why’ a certain activity may lead to the intended outcome.

Behavioural science is the study of how humans make decisions and how subtle factors in their social, physical, or institutional environment inadvertently impact their behaviour.¹³ Practitioners seek to understand which factors inhibit or enable positive shifts in behaviour.¹⁴ They also rely on strategies that have effectively influenced how people act in analogous contexts, and on rigorous testing to track progress against behaviour-based goals.

Successful outcomes from these strategies have built momentum for behavioural science as a public policy tool; for example, the UN Secretary General has urged UN agencies to explore its application.¹⁵ In VAWG prevention, strategies from behavioural science have driven positive changes in protective or preventive behaviours. These are practical tactics that, when added to a programme’s design, can improve its uptake and effectiveness.¹⁶ A recent UN Women [report](#), for instance, used behavioural insights to identify how men can support VAWG prevention through actions at the community and societal level, offering individual behaviours and interpersonal dynamics that men could adopt in their roles as allies, intimate partners, or fathers.

Innovation highlight: Using behavioural science

In Uganda, three short films were screened during local film festivals in various villages, each vignette created by local screenwriters, lasting less than ten minutes (and available online).¹⁷ The communities that viewed the films had higher rates of reporting VAWG cases and lower rates of new VAWG incidents.¹⁸ However, there were no changes recorded in attitudes to violence or gender. The authors concluded that the protective effect was due to the willingness to disclose experiences of violence and the perception that local leaders would take action. This fits with behavioural science findings that people’s actions can change quickly with small adjustments to their local setting (such as making it easier to report, or sensing that leadership cares about an issue). This ‘nudge’ was less costly and less intensive than workshops to shift attitudes – and had better results on VAWG reduction in the framework of this programme.

Behavioural science can therefore strengthen theories of change for VAWG interventions by clarifying behavioural impact pathways and incorporating behavioural strategies into content or delivery mechanisms.



Photo: UN Women/Christopher Herwig

3.1.2. Digital approaches to VAWG prevention

Digital approaches can complement existing VAWG prevention tools and help to solve critical implementation challenges.¹⁹ This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when, facing mobility restrictions and the increased urgency of VAWG prevention in many contexts, a move from in-person to online channels was hastened.²⁰ Prevention initiatives had to adapt rapidly, some by mobilizing volunteers through grass-roots organizations to continue critical work, and others by fast tracking the further development of digital interventions, such as hotlines and the use of online platforms.²¹

Digitally enabled VAWG prevention programmes are promising but underexplored, with rigorous evidence of effectiveness still rare from LMIC settings.²² Meanwhile, in a review of 171 apps for preventing or responding to VAWG,²³ most fit within the response rather than the prevention sphere, such as SOS buttons for one-time emergencies.²⁴

The principle of safety in digital VAWG prevention

More work is needed to improve reach and develop effective protocols to deliver services online without compromising user confidentiality and safety. This is particularly important given that technology-facilitated violence is a growing concern for women, girls, and gender minorities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated online and technology-facilitated VAWG,²⁵ and although hard to estimate, studies suggest that the current prevalence of digital violence is high, mostly impacting young women and girls, women in public life, and women with intersecting identities. A 2022 UN Women [policy paper](#) reviewed innovative interventions that have emerged to address online violence, before making the case for more prevention work focused on online solutions.

What is equally important but perhaps less well understood, is the accessibility limitations of digital interventions. The same gender, economic, and isolation factors that drive VAWG will also influence how a woman or girl can access a phone, for example. Those who do not have safe and confidential access (or well-powered phone batteries) are likely to be the ones most in need of violence prevention support. This suggests that future digital efforts should not replace in-person care, social support, or preventive services.



Photo: UN Women/Ye Ji Lee

3.1.2.a. Using digital channels to complement or replicate in-person connections

Changing the delivery mode of proven interventions from in-person delivery to digital channels need not necessarily compromise their effectiveness.²⁶ Practitioners report that digital tools often complement existing in-person interventions because young people find digital channels less threatening and more confidential than in-person communication.²⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology therefore allowed some organizations to increase their reach. In some cases, it also allowed them to host more gender-equitable sessions by overcoming unhelpful pre-pandemic dynamics such as travel restrictions or limitations on women's movement.

Key success factors for innovative digital VAWG interventions are consistent with those established for in-person interventions, among them an evidence-based theoretical framework and a solid understanding of the intended audience.²⁸ Using popular techniques or attractive delivery channels cannot stand as a substitute for a strong theoretical underpinning. For instance, simply providing factual information about

drivers of violence can be insufficient and sometimes ineffective in promoting sustainable behaviour change.²⁹

Innovation highlight: Facilitated group conversations

The ParentChat programme from the Global Parenting Initiative fosters playful parenting to reduce violence against children (VAC) and enables facilitated group conversations via popular messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, or Telegram).³⁰ This combines multimedia content, such as text/audio messages with video messages, illustrated comics, and home activity assignments. The programmes aim to replicate the success of previous group-based and prevention-based participatory learning interventions to reduce VAC and VAWG, while reducing barriers for participants to join and complete long in-person programmes.

3.1.2.b. Using tech-enabled edutainment

The term 'edutainment' is used for educational content that entertains.³¹ It can support learning by helping end users relate to the behaviour of others, even if these are fictional characters. TV and radio have been the traditional channels for edutainment, such as MTV's *Shuga* and a radio programme called *The Story Kitchen* in Nepal, supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund).³² Now, tech-enabled edutainment has moved beyond one-way communication channels to more dynamic storytelling, with users now able to participate in characters' stories and even choose how a story ends.

Innovation highlight: Edutainment chatbots

#SafeSigns is a WhatsApp chatbot that helps young women navigate unhealthy relationships in South Africa.³³ It uses behavioural science techniques to address some of the most relevant drivers of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the country, adapting the techniques via a participatory process with end users.

The curriculum includes critical reflection to promote positive beliefs about power in relationships; gamified skills practice to identify unhealthy relationship dynamics, find social support from a trusted person, and learn healthy communication; self-affirmation techniques to build self-efficacy; and safety planning. A randomised controlled trial shows that the gamified digital chatbot significantly improved young women's attitudes on power equity and reduced their exposure to past-month intimate partner violence by 11.3 per cent, three months after the intervention. It has now been packaged as an open-source toolkit for practitioners to adapt and scale.

UNICEF's Project Caretas is an AI-based storytelling experience that started in Brazil and was replicated in South Africa and Argentina. It uses the fictional story of a locally-relatable character to show the potential impact and consequences of sharing intimate images of other people online without their consent, and successfully sparked conversations among youth on Facebook and Facebook messenger.³⁴

3.1.2.c Experiential learning through games or virtual reality

Games are another engaging and evidence-based format for delivering educational content,³⁵ with video games particularly suited to young audiences.

Innovation highlight: Video games

Chuka is a video game that aims to teach boys and girls aged seven to 12 to recognize different types of violence and practise how to respond safely, and was supported by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Government of Mexico.³⁶ The game unfolds as a nightmare being lived through by the main character, Chuka, a 13-year-old girl. She encounters different monsters, each representing a different type of violence: physical, sexual and emotional. The user can control her response to these scenarios through dialogue and emojis, which represent potential emotions or actions (such as stop, kick, call for help or call for the teacher).

TSIUNAS, developed for rural and indigenous youth in Colombia, targets gender-based violence prevention among high school students.³⁷ The video game aims to shift patriarchal norms and promote co-responsible masculinity by asking gamers to confront fictional situations that represent attitudes or beliefs that justify gender inequality or violence. An early-stage evaluation shows high end-user acceptability and suggests that it holds promise for shifting knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding gender roles.

When applying virtual reality (VR) formats for VAWG prevention, some innovations focus on building empathy towards survivors and changing attitudes towards VAWG, while others have used VR tools as a training ground for frontline workers.³⁸ A 2017 study showed the potential of VR to transform socio-perceptual processes that underlie aggressive behaviours. It tested a VR intervention for IPV perpetrators, where they were asked to embody a woman during an IPV situation.³⁹ Before the intervention, when the emotional skills of the perpetrators were assessed, they tended to experience difficulty recognizing fear in female faces, with a bias towards labelling it as 'happy', in comparison to the control group. After the embodiment intervention, the ability of perpetrators to recognize fear in female faces had improved.

Innovation highlight: Virtual reality for bystander interventions

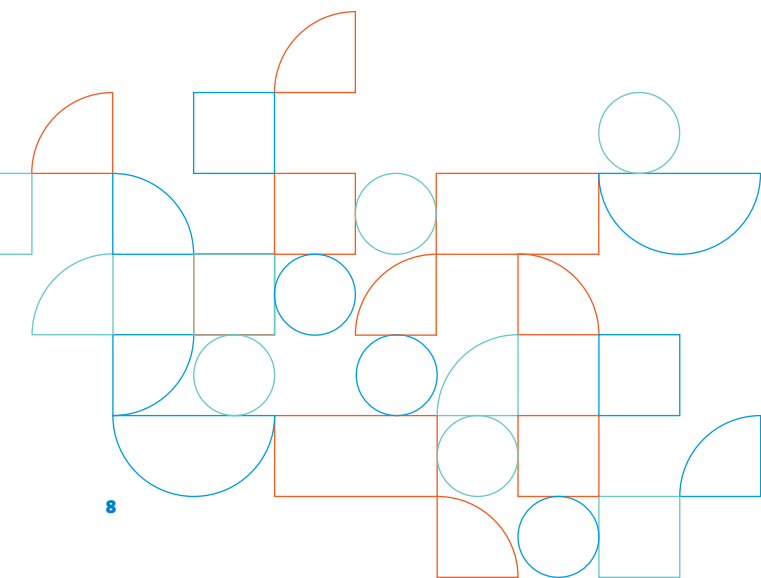
This Life, an NGO in Cambodia, created an awareness campaign using VR for bystanders, including individuals, communities and local authorities.⁴⁰ Under the call to action of 'Reach out, Check in and Act', the social media campaign used an immersive video to help reduce the culture of victim blaming and encourage bystander action against IPV. The campaign exceeded expectations in the number of impressions and traffic to the website but it is not known whether actual cases of VAWG were reduced, which will be an important question for future VR projects.

3.1.2.d. Enabling referrals to onward care

Many VAWG prevention efforts are focused on preventing new episodes of violence against survivors. Called 'secondary prevention', these help VAWG survivors plan for safely navigating a violent situation.⁴¹

Innovation highlight: An online app for safety planning

myPlan is among the first technology-enabled decision aid apps to be adapted and tested in a LMIC. It draws on evidence showing that safety planning can encourage protective behaviours. The app's algorithm produces a tailored, step-by-step safety plan based on a user's self-assessment of their relationship health, the severity of relationship violence, and their safety priorities.⁴² An impact evaluation showed that myPlan users reported improvements in safety preparedness immediately after the intervention, and reported the increased helpfulness of safety strategies in the allocated three-month follow up.⁴³ However, the study did not find significant changes in VAWG exposure, suggesting that additional components or a longer follow-up time is warranted.



Another component of secondary VAWG prevention is referral to live services. While this is traditionally done in person by a service provider, digital approaches have also tested chatbots and hotlines for real-time referrals. Interestingly, these have targeted both survivors and perpetrators as end users.

Innovation highlight: Chatbots and hotlines for real-time referrals

GOJoven's ZonaSegura is a trauma-informed, youth-centred app and a 24/7 WhatsApp chatbot developed in

Honduras to prevent teen dating violence (TDV).⁴⁴ This app provides theory-based, gamified educational content about healthy relationships and gender equality, enables peer support, and uses geo-location to connect young people to their nearest TDV services.

Linea Calma in Colombia is a hotline for men that offers one-to-one phone and video chats with trained psychologists to help them deal with anger and jealousy, de-escalate relationship conflict, and question gender norms.

3.1.3. Human-centred design for developing programmes

Human-centred design involves designing with and for people so that solutions are tailored to their realities. Because effective VAWG interventions employ highly contextualized and locally rooted content, many are already designed with community-based methods. However the standardized processes and techniques in human-centred design can help to ensure that the best design practices are consistently available to the myriad of actors working in VAWG prevention. These include participatory tools for ethnographic research that draw insights about user wants and needs, along with design sprints for ideation and co-creation, and ways of prototyping ideas to iteratively test and adapt draft solutions (for services, products, and processes). By helping to ensure that interventions offer the solutions that users want, this design approach has the potential to improve uptake and scale in VAWG prevention.⁴⁵

Innovation highlight: Human-centred design

In Uganda, **Becoming One** delivers church-based premarital counselling sessions in collaboration with gender and violence prevention experts.⁴⁶ The project is designed to offer progressive religious interpretations of gender roles, along with practical tips and exercises to improve communication, emotional regulation, shared control over finances, sexual consent and pleasure. To design the approach, the design team (comprising both women and men) used rapid prototyping by testing out new ideas with faith leaders several times over the course of eight weeks.⁴⁷ They quickly learned that a two-day training is less accessible to faith leaders than a readable manual with video instructions. The impact evaluation of **Becoming One** has found sustained shifts in power from men to women, increased closeness, and reduced frequency and severity of VAWG.⁴⁸

Safe at Home is an integrated programme focused on family wellbeing. In a randomised trial in emergency settings in the Democratic Republic of Congo, **Safe at Home** was found to have reduced IPV by approximately 80 per cent.⁴⁹ It also improves discipline practices, shifts gender equitable attitudes, and improves power-sharing. The programme uses human-centered design to define the household dynamics that drive both VAWG and VAC. Rather than targeting men as possible perpetrators, early formative research focuses on family functioning and positive parenting as shared values across household members.⁵⁰



Photo: UN Women/Ye Ji Lee

3.2. Learning about impact and taking it to scale

3.2.1. Understanding how to avert new VAWG cases with impact evaluation

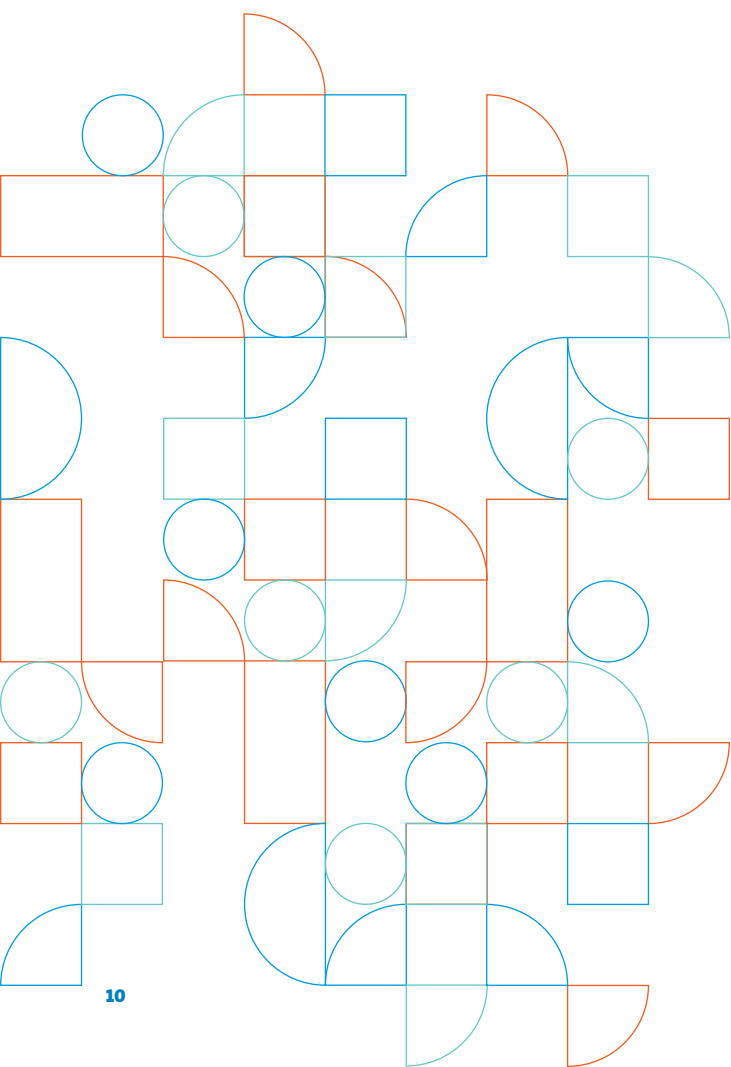
Most programming globally to prevent VAWG focuses on ‘numbers reached’. Yet given resource scarcity, field workers and funders can also pay attention to ‘cases averted.’

Systematic reviews can help to make sense of such approaches – via documents that assess all the published information about VAWG interventions up to a certain date. For example,

systematic reviews often bring together all randomised controlled trials (RCTs) on a certain approach. RCTs are sometimes called the ‘gold standard’ of evidence when researching causality because they randomly assign people to two groups: an intervention group, and a control group. As a result, there is sufficient evidence for the effectiveness of a number of approaches to VAWG prevention’ (Diagram 2).

DIAGRAM 2 REVIEWS OF IMPACT EVALUATIONS THAT AIM TO PREVENT NEW VAWG CASES

Overall finding	What this means	Programme example
Protective effect	Programming is shown to improve VAWG prevention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s economic empowerment,⁵¹ cash transfers,⁵² and self-help groups⁵³ • Digital safety planning for secondary prevention⁵⁴ • Whole school approaches to preventing VAC⁵⁵
Null effect	Robust evidence shows that approach has no effect on VAWG.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University dating violence programmes⁵⁶ • Bystander interventions for VAWG prevention⁵⁷ • Asset transfers in conflict settings⁵⁸
Evidence gap	Approach holds promise but does not yet have sufficient evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital interventions for primary prevention⁵⁹ • Interventions to prevent VAWG in adolescence⁶⁰ • Sexual and reproductive health care for those at high risk of HIV⁶¹ or in conflict settings⁶² • Housing interventions for secondary prevention⁶³



A shortcoming of systematic reviews is that they may not capture locally developed solutions or community programming that holds promise but lacks rigorous evidence. There are several ways to improve impact evaluation within the VAWG prevention field in relation to this. Among these, community organizations should be funded to bring in local research partners who can design research that wraps around existing programming.

Innovation highlight: Pairing community organizations and local researchers

What Works to Prevent VAWG⁶⁴ was a major investment in understanding how theory-based interventions can reduce cases of VAWG. The project made important contributions to our understanding of effective violence prevention through reviews of past work and new research. A total of 16 studies in LMICs were funded, and community organizations were encouraged to select local research partners. The main findings were that rigorous evidence can be obtained around VAWG prevention, theory-based and multi-level interventions can reduce violence exposure.⁶⁵

3.2.1.a Complementing traditional VAWG research with tech-enabled tools

We often learn about the effect of programming on end users via paper surveys. Yet during the strongest COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, researchers learned that asking women about violence could be done safely by phone and WhatsApp, enabling programming and research to continue.⁶⁶ Moreover, there has been new consensus around how to conduct VAWG research remotely while meeting high ethical standards.⁶⁷

Innovation highlight: Tech-enabled data collection

One study in Nepal explored the patterns, prevalence, and vulnerabilities of online IPV among teenagers and young people aged 16-24 using an artificial intelligence

tool to detect online abuse.⁶⁸ The SenseMaker®, which understands Nepali language, is a tech-enabled tool to collect stories from communities and strengthen formative research. Once these short, open-ended micro-narratives have been collected, the system provides participants with visual prompts, inviting them to give further meaning to their story and to prioritize which parts of their story are shared. The resulting analysis uncovers key themes and identifies emergent questions for communities to respond to during participatory analysis workshops. Plan International used this approach to understand the risks, drivers, and consequences of child marriage in the [Philippines](#)⁶⁹ and [Zimbabwe](#).⁷⁰

3.2.2. Combining implementation science with systems thinking

Until recently the VAWG field has focused on evidencing approaches to preventing violence. As more effective models emerge, practitioners need to be asking next-generation questions, such as:

- What are promising ways to adapt an intervention?
- Which components of a multi-level intervention are most impactful?
- Which strategies support local actors to take promising approaches to scale?
- Which interventions are the most cost effective?

More extensive studies of this kind would help overcome implementation bottlenecks and improve scalability. Implementation science can pinpoint ‘how’ and ‘why’ programmes lead to the intended impact, and try out different strategies for taking promising interventions to scale. It helps the VAWG prevention field learn from interventions, even when they do not work as planned.

Meanwhile, VAWG is a complex challenge – rooted in societal, community, interpersonal, and individual dynamics that sustain both inequality and violence –⁷¹ and systems thinking is one discipline that offers practical frameworks to understand complex systems, map their components, and identify the interconnections across them. However, it is yet to be fully explored for VAWG prevention, nor in combination with implementation science.⁷² Many effective VAWG prevention efforts successfully integrate certain elements of systems thinking by for example, strengthening the legal and policy environment,⁷³ building the capacity of governments and institutions,⁷⁴ or empowering community actors to access justice and advocate for their rights.⁷⁵ Yet systems thinking can be applied more intentionally throughout a project to focus interventions on bottlenecks, where a small change can initiate large shifts.⁷⁶ It can improve integration or coordination across silos,⁷⁷ and guide practitioners as they consider how to target programmes towards larger societal drivers.⁷⁸

Innovation highlight: Using implementation science to make sense of trial findings

In South Africa, a trial among peri-urban men showed that the Sonke CHANGE intervention had null effects on reducing VAWG perpetration.⁷⁹ Longitudinal qualitative views from programme facilitators, managers, community leaders, and participants themselves pointed to contextual factors that were hindering the success of the intervention. Among these, extreme economic and social marginalization among

participants made it hard for them to take up the planned activities and mobilize their neighbours.⁸⁰ Accompanying quantitative analyses showed how food insecurity among men was a cause of high rates of VAWG perpetration.⁸¹ The authors concluded that programmes among men need to target basic needs around food and employment to make inroads in violence prevention.

3.3 Core ingredients for thinking outside of the box

The steps above are not novel on their own – many other fields for health and human rights already use them to change the systems and resources that shape people’s lives. However, they are relatively new to the VAWG prevention field, where ‘business as usual’ tends to mean taking a common set of

programmes to more people. There is sometimes less room for innovation in this field because resources are scarce and programmes work to tight deadlines. Real innovation will require an enabling environment that pushes collaboration and new ideas.

3.3.1. Cross-fertilizing innovation and violence prevention

Only a small number of practitioners and researchers work across both the innovation and VAWG sectors, each of which are characterized by certain terms, methods, and ways to disseminate findings. To boost innovation therefore, systems-level players such as multinational organizations or funders should proactively bring together innovation and VAWG teams in meeting spaces and funding calls. New communities of practice could bring VAWG and innovation professionals together with seed funding and learning opportunities. For example, space to share lessons learned across these two fields could be crafted during international conferences or during an online series of webinars. A series of project notes highlighting the moments of intersection for these two fields could convert academic outputs into accessible tools and guidance.

Innovation highlight: Cross-fertilizing VAWG and poverty alleviation

Innovations for Poverty Action, a research and policy nonprofit organization, issued a [call](#) for proposals from those managing existing research projects in poverty alleviation or economic productivity who were interested in VAWG prevention. Across four rounds, the funding call supported 16 projects in LMICs that were not originally designed for violence prevention but could theoretically have an impact on it. The call’s focus on ethical data collection, a well-defined theory of change, and rigorous evidence already aligned with most research in the field. What stood apart was the willingness to support existing teams to add a VAWG expert or collect additional data, with an incentive for research and programme teams to intentionally collaborate.

3.3.2. The need for core funding and longer timelines

Another key aspect of innovation in the field is in supporting local organizations to be prime recipients of VAWG prevention funding. This will not only make programmes better adapted to local needs, but is necessary to make the field more inclusive and representative. Future VAWG projects should fund local practitioners and researchers as the lead organizations, inviting them to choose partnerships with teams locally or from other settings that will support their vision.

Longer time frames (five to eight years as opposed to one to four years) are meanwhile crucial to contextualize proven interventions to new settings and implement them with fidelity at the population level. For example, a recent failure to replicate the community mobilization efforts of the SASA! Programme model in Rwanda was partly due to the considerable modifications needed to adapt the informal activism model to the Rwandan context.⁸² Delayed implementation meant that participants started the revised SASA! close to reporting timelines, potentially impacting researchers’ ability to detect an effect.

Innovation highlight: Core and flexible funding

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Trust Fund adjusted its operations and responded swiftly to the evolving crisis. Immediate actions included project reviews to enable the quick reallocation of existing funds so that grantees could: respond efficiently and innovatively to pressing challenges, ensure the safety of their staff and institutional sustainability, manage potential organizational risks, and make sure that women and girls received essential support. The UN Trust Fund also established a specific Ending Violence against Women COVID-19 Response Funding Window to provide existing grantees with core resources – prioritizing small women’s organizations – so that they could actively respond to pandemic-related challenges. Among other things, this core and flexible funding enabled grantees to invest in safe, ethical and adaptive digital infrastructures (which are often at the core of innovations), allowing them to reach more people and respond to future crises.⁸³

4. CONCLUSION

This knowledge brief is aimed at policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and activists who can either create an enabling environment for innovation from the ‘top’ or embrace innovative strategies in their applied daily work. The innovation discussed in this briefing can be grouped into several steps, all of which may fit well with the promising prevention work taking place across the globe.

- **Choosing the approach** for preventing VAWG required innovation in techniques. New methods like behavioural science can help theories of change align with the newest evidence on how individuals and communities make choices. Digital approaches can complement the most promising in-person programmes and may offer proven approaches at lower cost.
- **Learning about impact and taking it to scale** requires measuring programme success in new ways. ‘Cases of VAWG averted’ can be assessed with new impact evaluations,

or a careful look at reviews that summarize what the field has learned during the past two decades. Engaging systems thinking from the start of a programme can help predict complexities when taking a smaller project to large numbers.

- **Providing core ingredients for outside-the-box thinking** means setting the stage for innovation within VAWG prevention. Opportunities for interdisciplinary teams, whether in funding calls, network meetings, or briefs, can bring new ideas about preventing violence to the fore.

We already have many tools to prevent VAWG, but given the scale and complexity of the problem ‘business as usual’ may not be enough – particularly with 2030 looming on the horizon. We need to reach more people effectively to advance the SDGs. When combined well with principles of safety and participation, innovation – both of the incremental and fundamental kinds – is an approach well worth considering.



Photo: UN Women/Ye Ji Lee

ENDNOTES

- 1 VAWG is a form of gender-based violence (GBV), defined by the UN as “any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. The term “woman” includes all female-identifying people, including all trans women.
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