

# PREVENTION IS POSSIBLE

Global evidence on halving violence against women and girls from the UK's flagship VAWG prevention programme



## The Context

Today, women and girls in the UK and around the world are facing new and growing threats, from the spread of online misogyny to the climate crisis, driving up rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG). At the same time, we are seeing a rollback of women's rights and protections in many parts of the world. 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence. No country or context is immune. **The UK government's pledge to halve VAWG within a decade is an ambitious commitment at a critical time. And the global evidence tells us that prevention is possible.**

## The Solution

In the last decade, there has been a huge expansion in rigorous, policy-relevant evidence which has shown that VAWG is preventable and does not have to take generations. The UK has been a leading funder of this research globally, including through the *What Works to Prevent Violence Programme* (**What Works I**<sup>1</sup>), the UK's flagship VAWG prevention programme and the world's first multi-country study to pilot and rigorously evaluate a range of approaches to preventing VAWG across 12 countries in Africa and Asia.

As part of What Works, the UK invested £25 million in research to understand the prevalence, patterns and drivers of VAWG. Crucially, it **identified cost-effective approaches for prevention**. This research, now a **global public good**, has significantly expanded the evidence base, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, but there are lessons that could be applied in countries like the UK too. VAWG is a global problem that crosses borders, and our response has to do the same.

This briefing shares insights and successful models from the What Works Programme that are **crucial to strengthening efforts to prevent VAWG in the UK and around the world.**



**Research shows that every £1 spent on preventing violence against women and children can yield up to £87 in economic returns.<sup>2</sup>**



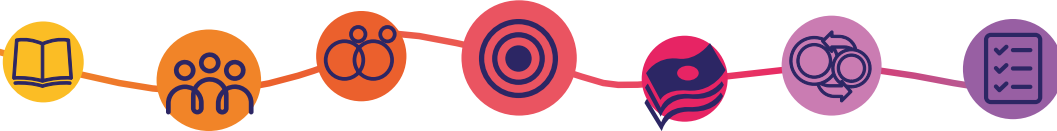
## WHAT WORKS: General approaches

Preventing VAWG involves addressing root causes through targeted interventions. Our evidence shows that well-designed programmes, implemented consistently over 2-3 years, **can halve rates of violence**. There is good evidence that the following approaches are effective and can be tailored to specific contexts.

### Effective when well-designed and executed:

- **School-based interventions** that take a participatory approach
- **Community activism approaches** that shift harmful norms and support survivors
- **Couples' programmes** that take a gender-transformative approach
- **Parenting programmes** to prevent intimate partner violence and child maltreatment
- **Targeted support for women** to get better jobs or start businesses, while also giving them chances to connect with others and gain confidence
- **Direct payments/benefits** to individuals and families, particularly combined with social support
- **Alcohol and substance use interventions** that work with individuals and/or couples

Source: What Works (2020) [Rigorous review of the latest global evidence](#)<sup>3</sup>



There is also an increased understanding that preventing violence is not just *what* approaches you use, but *how* they are designed and implemented.

### To be effective, prevention interventions need to:

- Be carefully planned, built on a good understanding of the context and target population
- Address multiple drivers of violence, such as gender inequity and poor couple communication
- Work with both women and men, rather than working with women or men only
- Ensure sufficient programme intensity and duration – about 3 years – with enough sessions to facilitate transformative social norm change and reduce the likelihood of harm
- Select and support well-trained gender-equitable staff and facilitators
- Integrate support for survivors of violence
- Use group activities that focus on reflection and discussion to change norms and values.

Source: What Works (2020) [Effective design and implementation elements in interventions to prevent VAWG](#)<sup>4</sup>

Beyond preventing violence before it starts, it is important to mitigate harm and stop violence from happening again. This can be done by integrating violence prevention and response into key sectors that support survivors, like health, security, and justice. For example, in India, the World Health Organisation tested a scalable model that trained 220 health workers to identify and help survivors of domestic violence during routine healthcare visits. A study conducted before and after the training showed that it improved healthcare providers' knowledge, attitudes and readiness to support survivors. Over a period of nine months, health workers identified 530 women as having experienced violence based on clinical signs and were able to provide support. Building on this work, the second phase of the What Works programme (What Works II) is now adapting the model to explore how the health sector can contribute to prevention as well as response.

## WHAT WORKS: Specific examples

### School-based approaches:

A **play-based life skills programme**<sup>5</sup> in Pakistan successfully reduced peer violence among students aged 11-15 and corporal punishment in schools. Integrated into the school schedule twice a week a total of 120 sessions in two academic years, the sessions focused on building social and emotional skills including communication, empathy, problem solving, collaboration, gender equality and coping skills..

The model is currently being rolled out to 160 schools through What Works II, with a greater focus on addressing sexual harassment. The aim is to create a cost-effective, replicable model that can be scaled-up. What Works II is also testing a range of other approaches in the education sector, including two in higher education in Eswatini and Nigeria, and three through primary and secondary education in Madagascar, Pakistan and Somalia.

**Relevance to the UK:** This approach shows the effectiveness of a structured, age-appropriate curriculum that allows students time to reflect on gender issues, consent, and healthy relationships —an approach recommended in the 2021 **Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges**.<sup>6</sup>

### Community activism approaches:

Approaches that include a focus on engaging men and boys to diffuse new ideas on gender relations and violence through communities and support survivors have proven impact. A What Works funded intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) worked closely with faith groups and the wider community to challenge harmful gender norms and reduce intimate partner violence (IPV). Christian and Muslim leaders promoted positive masculinities and gender equality through sermons and community activities, while trained Gender Champions led community dialogues on the root causes of violence. Community Action Teams raised awareness in public spaces and helped survivors access local services.

**Relevance to the UK:** Empowering communities, faith leaders, and men and boys to challenge harmful masculinities offers a scalable, adaptable strategy for diverse UK settings.

### Working with couples and/or families:

In Rwanda an intensive couples-based intervention funded by What Works was designed by CARE Rwanda with partners to improve relationship skills, promote gender equity, and reduce IPV. Couples participated in a 21-session workshop over five months, focusing on transforming values and beliefs around gender, power and relationships, and building skills such as communication and activism. It also had a community component, and some participants received additional training to become community activists.

**Relevance to the UK:** Couples-based approaches could be delivered through parenting or relationship support in local health settings, like antenatal care, helping new parents during this key life stage.

A randomised controlled trial with 8,000 students found a 59% decrease in peer violence against girls and 33% against boys, along with improved gender attitudes and less depression.



69%

29%

Women's experience of any form of IPV decreased from 69% to 29%. Women's experiences of non-partner sexual violence in the past 12 months reduced from 20.7% to 3.7%.

20.7%

3.7%

A rigorous evaluation showed a 55% reduction in women's experience of physical and sexual IPV, sustained over 24 months.

## WHAT'S NEXT: Scaling impact

Building on the success of What Works I, we are now scaling up these approaches through What Works II. The UK has invested £62.7 million in this seven-year programme, which is reaching more communities, integrating violence into key sectors such as education, health and climate action, and testing the use of technology as a tool for VAWG prevention at scale. Supporting 14 projects across 12 countries, the programme funds specialist women's rights organisations with deep local knowledge and understanding of their communities, aiming to support evidence-based, locally-led change.

In the short term, What Works II will reach over 1 million women and children. In the long term, it will create evidence that will protect generations from violence.

Many of these prevention approaches can be adapted for use in the UK. We hope that by sharing lessons learned from What Works, we can make real progress, both globally and in the UK, toward a future where all women and girls can live free from violence.

## WHAT WORKS: Value for Money

Investing in women and girls drives economic growth, fosters peace and helps tackle global challenges like climate change. It's also good value for money – saving millions of pounds annually in the public purse.

Research shows that every £1 spent on preventing violence against women and children can yield up to £87 in economic returns.<sup>7</sup>

Conservative estimates indicate that governments can lose up to 4% per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to violence against women,<sup>8</sup> with violence against children costing up to 5% of GDP.<sup>9</sup>

### Proven Economic Benefits of Preventing GBV include:

- **Household Stability:** Reducing violence lowers out-of-pocket expenses, protects household income, and enhances financial security.
- **Business Growth:** Lowering workplace violence reduces absenteeism, increases productivity, and enhances company reputations.
- **Government Savings:** Freed funds from violence response can be reallocated to growth-promoting sectors like education and infrastructure.
- **Education Outcomes:** Reduced violence leads to better school attendance, higher completion rates, and stronger workforce readiness.

### Endnotes

- 1 What Works website: <https://ww2preventvawg.org/>
- 2 Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children (2016) *Towards a World Free from Violence: Global Survey on Violence against Children*. New York: Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children
- 3 Kerr-Wilson, A.; Gibbs, A.; McAslan Fraser E.; Ramsoomar, L.; Parke, A.; Khuwaja, HMA.; and Jewkes, R. (2020). *A rigorous global evidence review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls, What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls*. Global Programme, Pretoria, South Africa
- 4 Jewkes, R., Willan, S., Heise, L., Washington, L., Shai, N., Kerr-Wilson, A., Christofides, N. 2020. *Effective design and implementation elements in interventions to prevent violence against women and girls*. What Works To Prevent VAWG? Global Programme Synthesis Product Series. South African Medical Research Council, Pretoria.
- 5 What Works I website information on Right to Play Pakistan: <https://www.whatworks.co.za/global-programme-projects/right-to-play-pakistan>
- 6 Ofsted (2021) Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, London: Ofsted.
- 7 Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children (2016) *Towards a World Free from Violence: Global Survey on Violence against Children*. New York: Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children
- 8 Ashe, S., Duvvury, N., Raghavendra, S., Scriver, S., and O'Donovan, D. (2016) *Costs of Violence Against Women: An Examination of the Evidence*. What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls.
- 9 Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children et al (2022) *The Violence Prevention Dividend – Why Preventing Violence Against Children Makes Economic Sense*.

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Through our helpdesk, What Works offers a research and advice service for the UK Government to help prevent violence against women and children, and is available to support strengthening policy and practice in the UK.