

# School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change - with youth and for youth



**brave movement**  
End Childhood Sexual Violence

 Civil Society Forum  
Ending violence against children

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# Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. Children and young people who receive a quality education are less likely to experience poverty and more likely to build healthy, happy and productive lives. However, schools are not always the safe, nurturing, educational environment they should be. An estimated 246 million girls and boys experience violence in and around schools every year.<sup>1</sup>

**School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV): Acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around school, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.**<sup>2</sup>

Girls in particular are disproportionately affected by school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), both by students and adults - in school, on the way to school, and online. Girls endure gendered stereotypes and experience violence and sexual exploitation, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation in exchange for school fees or grades. Adolescent girls face heightened risks to these forms of SRGBV. As do girls with disabilities and from other marginalized and discriminated groups, such as religious minorities and indigenous communities. LGBTQI+ students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are also disproportionately affected by school violence and bullying.<sup>3</sup>

During conflicts and humanitarian crises, gender-based violence (GBV) risks are exacerbated — increasing the challenges already faced by affected communities. Girls and women are disproportionately affected by the impact of emergencies on education and explicitly targeted because of their gender.<sup>4</sup> Conflicts and crises also remove protection mechanisms that keep girls safer, including due to lack of staff, disruption of peer and trusted adult networks, and physical school environments being used by parties to armed conflicts.

Gender-based violence in and around schools violates children’s and young people’s rights and is a significant barrier for them - in all their diversity - to access safe, inclusive, quality education.

Gender based violence in and around schools (SRGBV) harms children’s and young people’s self-esteem, wellbeing and ability to learn, undermining hard fought efforts to transform education for all.

Global data shows that **one in four young women** have experienced violence **by the time they are 24 years old.**<sup>5</sup>

**Girls and young women with disabilities** face up to **10 times more gender-based violence** than those without disabilities;<sup>6</sup>

**LGBTQI+ students** experience school violence and bullying at a rate between **three and five times higher** than their non-LGBTQI+ peers;<sup>7</sup>

Children and young people who have experienced **homophobic bullying** in and around school are at **increased risk of anxiety, depression, fear, stress, low self-esteem, loneliness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.**<sup>8</sup>



<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2017) ‘A familiar face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents’

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO and UN Women (2016) ‘Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence’

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance’ 2021

<sup>4</sup> Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2020) ‘Education Under Attack 2020’

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO and UNGEI (2023) ‘School violence: Why gender matters and how to measure school related gender based violence (SRGBV)’

<sup>6</sup> UNFPA (2018) ‘Young Persons with Disabilities: Global Study on Ending Gender-based Violence and Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights’

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO (2017) ‘School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report’

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Discriminatory gender norms are one of the key driving factors behind gender-based violence in and around schools; for example, misogynistic stigma around menstruation can result in mocking or excluding girls from school and binary understandings of gender can result in homophobic bullying or punishment for any student perceived not to adhere to expected gendered behaviors.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore essential that all efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to all forms of violence within education systems are gender-transformative. A gender-transformative approach in education means that all levels of education systems work to intentionally transform harmful stereotypes and practices by challenging power relations, gender norms, and the systemic roots of inequality and oppression.<sup>10</sup> So that every child and young person is valued and respected in all their diversity, and they learn to respect difference and diversity in each other.

This brief argues that despite knowing the huge scale and wide-reaching impacts of SRGBV, as well as many examples of what works to end it, not enough is being done politically and at the education policy level to end violence in schools, and to recognise and address the gendered drivers and dimensions of violence.

Children, young people, survivors and local women-led organizations - specifically young feminist activists - are pioneering efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes that lead to SRGBV and implementing local initiatives to prevent, mitigate, and respond to SRGBV. However, the majority of these young leaders face significant barriers in accessing and influencing political discussions and decision makers at the global level.

This brief has been developed by youth and survivor activists from Transform Education's Ending SRGBV Collective, the Global Partnership for Education's Youth Leaders Group and the SAGE Advisory Board to the Brave Movement, supported by the Safe to Learn Global Advocacy Taskforce. They set out clear and specific recommendations for governments to urgently prioritize and implement so that all schools are safe places for all students whatever their gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation.

**Youth and survivor leaders' message is clear: we know what can and must be done to end school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), now is the time for action.**

#### Case example: Girls' Congress, Philippines

Girls' Congress is a youth-led organization based in the Philippines working with high school students to gather data and strengthen advocacy strategies and demands on addressing SRGBV. They have combined feminist leadership building, community organizing, and mobilizing together with collaborative partnerships and research to address SRGBV at a grassroots level.



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<sup>9</sup> UNESCO Global Education Monitoring report, 2021

<sup>10</sup> Plan International, Transform Education, UNGEI and UNICEF (2021) 'Gender Transformative Education: Reimagining education for a more just and inclusive world'



## Progress and challenges in ending SRGBV

There is an established and growing body of research and evidence around best practices in ending SRGBV.<sup>11</sup> We have many examples of effective approaches and interventions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to SRGBV,<sup>12</sup> yet challenges and barriers to implementing proven solutions and achieving sustainable, systemic change remain.

The introduction, implementation and enforcement of national SRGBV policies and programmes - and their integration within education, gender, and violence-focused policies and action plans - is a supportive tool in addition to other gender transformative approaches, which together can bring about the systemic change within education systems that is needed to address school related gender based violence. The pressure on education systems around the world is significant, many are already grappling with teacher shortages, infrastructural challenges and lack of time and resources for additional training on new programmes or curricula. This means that even where there is national legislation and policies on codes of conduct for teachers and other education staff in place, lack of training and support, as well as monitoring and accountability, means that many schools are either unaware of changes in policies and legislation or have no incentive or support to implement them.

Lack of political prioritization and investment remains a fundamental challenge in efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to violence at all levels, including access to funding for local, youth-led organizations and initiatives. As national education budgets and official development assistance (ODA) for education continue to be stretched and constrained, it is important to recognize the cost efficiencies for work tackling SRGBV; SRGBV project budgets show costs range from approximately \$5 to \$36 annually per learner.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the economic returns for investing in SRGBV prevention are clear with estimates showing that for approximately every \$1 spent on safer environments for children, there is a return of \$111.<sup>14</sup> Violence in schools can have severe consequences for children's mental and physical health and put them at increased risk of physical injury, sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal thoughts. Data shows that students affected by any form of violence in school have lower educational attainment, lower attendance rates and higher dropout rates.<sup>15</sup> As such tackling SRGBV represents value for money for Ministries of Education and donor governments, supporting their efforts to increase school attendance and enhance learning outcomes for all students.

There has been a positive shift in understanding how preventing, mitigating and responding to SRGBV in emergencies is lifesaving. In addition, work to mitigate GBV risks is becoming more integrated into humanitarian response.<sup>16</sup> However, actions to prevent GBV and mitigate GBV risk are still rarely prioritized and integrated into all aspects of humanitarian response from the outset of an emergency, including in Education In Emergencies (EIE). In addition, the capacity and accountability of EIE actors to prioritize work to mitigate and address SRGBV remains particularly low. More needs to be done to ensure that GBV and gender equality is comprehensively addressed and systematically integrated into EIE and all humanitarian policy, funding and response.

Drivers of gender-based violence in and around schools are rooted in gender inequality, entrenched social and gender norms and unequal power dynamics, which exist across the individual, family, school, community and societal level. Challenging all forms of SRGBV requires identification of the causes and the dismantling of unequal power dynamics between individuals as well as within schools, institutions and communities; this can often be met with resistance. A “whole school” approach to preventing SRGBV has been developed and successfully implemented to effectively engage and connect a wide range of stakeholders — from teachers and school staff, students, parents, community members, faith leaders, government officials and civil society

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<sup>11</sup> What Works to Prevent Violence and Fraser, E. (2022) ‘School-based approaches to tackling violence’

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO and UN Women (2016) ‘Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence’ and IASC (2015) ‘Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery’

<sup>13</sup> Girls’ Education Challenge (2022) ‘Ending violence in schools: Lessons from the Girls’ Education Challenge’

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank, Safe to Learn, and End Violence (2021) ‘Ending violence in schools: An investment case’

<sup>16</sup> Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Road Map 2021-2025

organizations — to collectively dismantle harmful norms and practices and make schools safe.<sup>17</sup> This and other school-based approaches can also have a catalytic impact in preventing GBV not only in school but also in the home and wider community spheres.

### Case example: Mirror Mirror, Vietnam

Mirror Mirror is a youth-led organization based in Viet Nam working to create open, inclusive, empathic, and safe spaces to discuss SRGBV and other gender-related issues. Their programmatic strategies include applied arts (drawing, storytelling, crafting, movement, writing, film, and theater) and experiential-based learning. They have developed a deck of facilitation cards in the form of a board game to help communities learn about GBV in schools and private spheres.



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<sup>17</sup> UNGEI and the Global Working Group to End SRGBV (2018) 'A whole school approach to prevent school related gender-based violence'



## Existing international commitments on SRGBV

There are several international legal conventions and treaties that have been adopted by the majority of the world's governments to progress political action on gender equality and ending all forms of violence against children, including SRGBV. In addition, many governments have made international political commitments to tackle SRGBV and promote gender equality. Governments have a duty to uphold these legal conventions, as well as their own political commitments, and are accountable for making progress on preventing and responding to SRGBV.

Legally binding conventions related to SRGBV include:

- **The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)** guarantees the political, economic, social, cultural, civil rights of women; including ongoing recommendations for actions on ending gender-based violence against women.<sup>18</sup>
- **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)** Article 19 enshrines the basic right of children and young people to be protected from violence, including all forms of exploitation and sexual abuse.

International political commitments related to SRGBV include:

- **The Beijing Platform for Action (1995)** adopted a roadmap for the achievement of gender equality, where each woman and girl can realize all her rights including the “right to go to school” and the “right to live free from violence”.<sup>19</sup>
- **The Sustainable Development Goals (2015)** adopted indicators to eliminate SRGBV across a number of the goals, including SDG 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, and SDG 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.<sup>20</sup>
- **Transforming Education Summit (2022)** included over 60 national commitments to tackle violence in schools, with a number of specific commitments on ending SRGBV. The Youth Declaration on Transforming Education<sup>21</sup> and the ‘Call to Action on advancing gender equality and girls’<sup>22</sup> and women’s empowerment in and through education’ were also launched, building on the Freetown Manifesto for Gender Transforming Leadership in Education<sup>23</sup> and the Safe to Learn Call to Action to accelerate political action to end all forms of violence in and through schools.<sup>24</sup>
- **The Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies 2021-2025 Road Map** agreed an action plan to ensure GBV risk mitigation and the promotion of gender equality are central to all humanitarian efforts, including Education in Emergencies (EIE).<sup>25</sup>



<sup>18</sup> The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) [www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no-35-2017-gender-based](http://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no-35-2017-gender-based)

<sup>19</sup> Beijing Platform for Action (1995) [beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about](http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about)

<sup>20</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals [un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/](http://un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/)

<sup>21</sup> Youth Declaration on Transforming Education (2022) [un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2022/09/tes\\_youthdeclaration\\_en.pdf](http://un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2022/09/tes_youthdeclaration_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> ‘Call to Action on advancing gender equality and girls’ (2022) [un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/advancing-gender-equality](http://un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/advancing-gender-equality)

<sup>23</sup> Freetown Manifesto for Gender-Transformative Leadership in Education (2022) [ungei.org/freetown-manifesto](http://ungei.org/freetown-manifesto)

<sup>24</sup> Safe to Learn Call to Action [end-violence.org/safetolearn/call](http://end-violence.org/safetolearn/call)

<sup>25</sup> The Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies 2021-2025 Road Map [calltoactiongbv.com/](http://calltoactiongbv.com/)

# Recommendations and asks for change

## 1. Support and empower children, young people and survivors as change agents

Children, young people and survivors of SRGBV - as well as local women-led organizations - are leading the way in advocating for and implementing policies and strategies to prevent, mitigate, and respond to SRGBV. They know what needs to change and they are critical leaders in creating and ensuring systemic change is implemented at school, community and national levels. Their voices must be heard and their efforts must be supported. All governments and global education actors must:

- Facilitate the collaboration of children, young people, survivors of SRGBV, and local women-led organizations with government bodies, education institutions and stakeholders to share valuable insights, recommendations, and feedback on SRGBV-related policies and programmes; genuine consideration and implementation of youth and survivor recommendations is essential in driving meaningful change. This should be done in a safe and supportive manner and a diversity of representatives from varying backgrounds and abilities, including those from marginalized groups, should be prioritized.
- Provide more public platforms so the voices of children, young people and survivors who want to speak out can be heard, ensuring the inclusion of girls and those from marginalized groups; putting in place support for safety, confidentiality, and mitigating harmful backlash. By supporting and amplifying their voices through documentaries, social media, art, and public events, their narratives can raise mass awareness of rights and services, challenge norms, and foster empathy, driving transformative change.
- Offer training and capacity building to empower children, young people and survivors who wish to advocate against SRGBV, particularly girls and those from underrepresented groups. Offer workshops on public speaking, advocacy, media engagement, strategic thinking and leadership skills to support them and enhance their skills and confidence in driving positive change.
- Support and amplify youth-led SRGBV prevention and advocacy initiatives through funding, resources, mentorship, and recognition. Empower young people to develop and implement their own projects, campaigns, and initiatives, leveraging their unique perspectives, creativity, and passion to have impact in the fight against SRGBV.
- Ensure long-term flexible funding for youth and survivor activists is accessible; including support for sustainable programmes, clear communication of funding objectives and timelines, and appropriate alternatives for restrictive mechanisms that make grassroots organizations not eligible, such as criterias for organizational annual turnover that are set too high to exclude small scale local youth and women-led organizations.

## 2. Implement a “whole school approach” to preventing, mitigating, and responding to SRGBV

Youth and survivor activists are clear that implementing a “whole school approach” should be a priority and that bringing together all stakeholders to challenge norms, change behaviors, and ensure accountability will be a significant step in making every school a safe learning environment for children and young people of all genders.

***“GBV and discrimination in children/students usually stems from the culture, community and surroundings that they are brought up. So here, parents, family members and community plays a significant role in shaping the mindset of the students who are prone to take part in SRGBV. By taking a participatory approach to involve the community in the process can create greater impact in the change making process regarding SRGBV.”***

***Tasfia Tasnim Dishi - Fellow, Teach For Bangladesh***



All governments and education actors working at the national and local level must:

- Engage students and teachers, parents, family members, community members and faith leaders through social and behavioral change programming to challenge harmful social and gender norms and stereotypes to prevent SRGBV. Taking a participatory approach to involve the community in the process can create greater impact in the change making process regarding SRGBV.
- Ensure all school staff, students, and management committees provide safe and gender transformative learning environments for all children, especially those from marginalized groups, that promote positive discipline, child-centered teaching and protect and improve children's physical and mental wellbeing. Provide teachers and school staff with ongoing training and support to create safe environments for all students; teachers are essential for effective SRGBV prevention and response, they must be supported and equipped to respond appropriately to all forms of SRGBV.<sup>26</sup>
- Review and strengthen school curricula in collaboration with other stakeholders to include concepts of gender equality, human rights, and an intersectional understanding of GBV and gender discrimination, as well as effective approaches to preventing SRGBV and social emotional learning.
- Promoting student-led initiatives and clubs that focus on gender equality and inclusivity, allowing students to actively participate in creating a safe environment. Encouraging peer education programs where students can educate their peers about menstrual health, gender equality, and respectful behavior.
- Require all schools to implement, monitor and evaluate safeguarding policies and procedures, such as codes of conduct, digital safety guidance, and clear reporting procedures for all cases of SRGBV. Such procedures and policies must be made public to parents, guardians, and teachers at all levels of the school system to ensure transparency and accountability, avoiding violence and abuse cases.
- Ensure the physical environment in and around all schools is safe, including in humanitarian settings. This includes undertaking analysis of potential barriers to accessing school for high-risk groups, and designing the learning environment with the wellbeing of all students in mind, such as appropriate toilets that meet the menstrual hygiene management needs of girls.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Put addressing SRGBV at the heart of national education systems and policies

National governments are responsible for ensuring all children receive a safe, quality education. Ministries of Education, as well as all key education partners, must prioritize mitigating and addressing gender-based violence in, around and through schools as a central pillar of national education systems, including in the following areas:

- **Investment**

Increase domestic resource allocation to support people, programming, and processes to better prevent and respond to SRGBV.

- **National education sector plans and policies**

- Review, reflect and update education sector plans (or similar existing national education policies) to ensure a priority policy focus on ending SRGBV, recognising the gendered drivers of violence and addressing the needs of marginalized groups most at risk of GBV. This must include detailed implementation frameworks with details on:
  - i) Reporting mechanisms to be established, accessible, safe, and confidential
  - ii) Referral pathways to be established to enable accountability
  - iii) Survivor-centered response services to be implemented to protect and heal the survivor, not protect the perpetrator

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<sup>26</sup> Coalition for Good Schools (2021) 'Evidence review: Prevention of violence in and through schools in the Global South'

<sup>27</sup> UNICEF (2019) 'Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Quality framework: A tool to identify potential barriers in accessing services in humanitarian settings'

iv) Clear roles and responsibilities allocated for those involved in the system from the ministry, district, school and community level.<sup>28</sup>

- Include all relevant stakeholders in SRGBV policy development, including children and young people; prioritizing safe, accessible, supportive and dignified consultation with survivors of SRGBV, if they wish to take part in the process.
- Sensitively communicate existing, updated or new SRGBV policies, beyond students and school-level to reach wider stakeholders including parents and community leaders.

***“Policy change and a whole school approach for SRGBV will not have an effective impact unless all the plans and executions are under Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). Therefore, priority should be given to whichever initiatives include a proper and functioning MEL plan and implementation to check the progress, challenges and authenticity of data.”***

***Samantha Shahrin, Teach For Bangladesh***



### ● **Reporting and Data**

- Generate and use evidence on how to effectively prevent, mitigate and respond to gender-based violence in, around and through schools - and share this widely and ensure disaggregated data by gender and LGBTQI+ and monitoring.
- Increase investment in research and evaluation about interventions to prevent SRGBV, in particular longitudinal studies and social and behavioral evidence.
- Integrate SRGBV indicators into existing national information systems and surveys such as Education management information systems (EMIS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).
- Ensure that disaggregated data on incidents of SRGBV is collected in a safe and ethical manner.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Girls' Education Challenge (2022) 'Ending violence in schools: Lessons from the Girls' Education Challenge'

<sup>29</sup> Global Working Group to end School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV), UNESCO and UN Girls' Education initiative (2023) 'School violence: Why gender matters and how to measure school-related gender-based violence'

#### 4. Uphold existing international commitments and drive forward new commitments

Increased global political prioritization and action is urgently needed to achieve gender equality and end all forms of violence against children, including SRGBV. All governments must:

- Uphold existing legally-binding international conventions and treaties related to gender equality and SRGBV, as well as their own stated commitments, to drive forward urgent political action.
- Report on efforts to end SRGBV by addressing progress against all relevant SDG indicators in one consolidated report.

Increase the visibility and prioritization of SRGBV in global political discussions and new global commitments on gender equality and education.

#### 5. Prioritize addressing SRGBV within humanitarian response

Failure to take action on SRGBV in all learning contexts represents a failure by humanitarian actors to meet their most basic responsibilities for promoting and protecting the rights of affected children and young people, including girls and marginalized populations most at risk. Therefore, all actors within the humanitarian system must prioritize mitigating risks and addressing SRGBV within humanitarian funding and response from the outset of an emergency.<sup>30</sup>

Specifically, the Education in Emergencies (EIE) sector and donors must:

- Systematically address GBV within all aspects of EIE work, including in assessment, analysis and planning; implementation; monitoring and evaluation throughout the programme cycle, and resource mobilization.
- Ensure consultation with women and girls and other at-risk populations to understand the specific risks and barriers they face to access and complete their education.
- Support local actors, particularly local women's organizations, to meaningfully engage in safe programming.

#### 6. Increase donor investment for addressing SRGBV

Alongside domestic resources, increased public and private investment is needed to end SRGBV. Therefore, global education donors must:

- Recognise the importance of addressing SRGBV and include it as a key pillar in all education funding.
- Include SRGBV prevention, mitigation, and response as a life-saving intervention in broader humanitarian funding mechanisms.
- Address the lack of human resource and technical capacity on SRGBV within their structures, teams and management.

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<sup>30</sup>IASC (2015) 'Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery'





# Safe to Learn

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