School violence:

Why gender matters and how to measure school-related gender-based violence

UNGEI

Global working group to end school-related gender-based violence

The Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) was created in 2014 to respond to SRGBV by raising awareness and finding solutions to ensure schools are safe, gender-sensitive and inclusive environments, where boys and girls can learn to unleash their full potential. The Group has expanded to more than 100 members representing 50 organizations, including humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, and regional and national offices.

www.ungei.org/what-we-do/school-related-gender-based-violence

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Understanding violence in schools

Violence against children (VAC) is a global problem and manifests in every society. While many forms of VAC take place in children's homes and communities, children also experience violence in and around schools. The kinds of violence seen at school include corporal punishment, sexual abuse and assault, bullying, denigrating sexual comments, physical fighting and psychological violence by peers or adults such as harmful taunting, insults, exclusion or denial of resources, bullying with words or images or property damage. Cyberbullying is often an extension of offline bullying in the material world as the internet expands the venues available for reaching targeted students.

Based on global survey estimations, we know that around one in three students report experiencing physical violence at or around school when asked about the previous month. There are similar prevalence rates for bullying, on one hand, and psychological violence, on the other hand, with each affecting around one in three students (UNESCO, 2019).[1] The global prevalence of sexual violence in schools has been more difficult to capture because of the sensitivity of the topic, inconsistencies in the definition of sexual violence and potential risks of disclosure. However, global data shows that one in four young women has already experienced violence by an intimate partner (sexual or other) by the time they are 24 years old (WHO and UN Women, 2021) indicating the presence of gender-based, or sexual violence among school-aged children.

Gendered dimensions of school violence

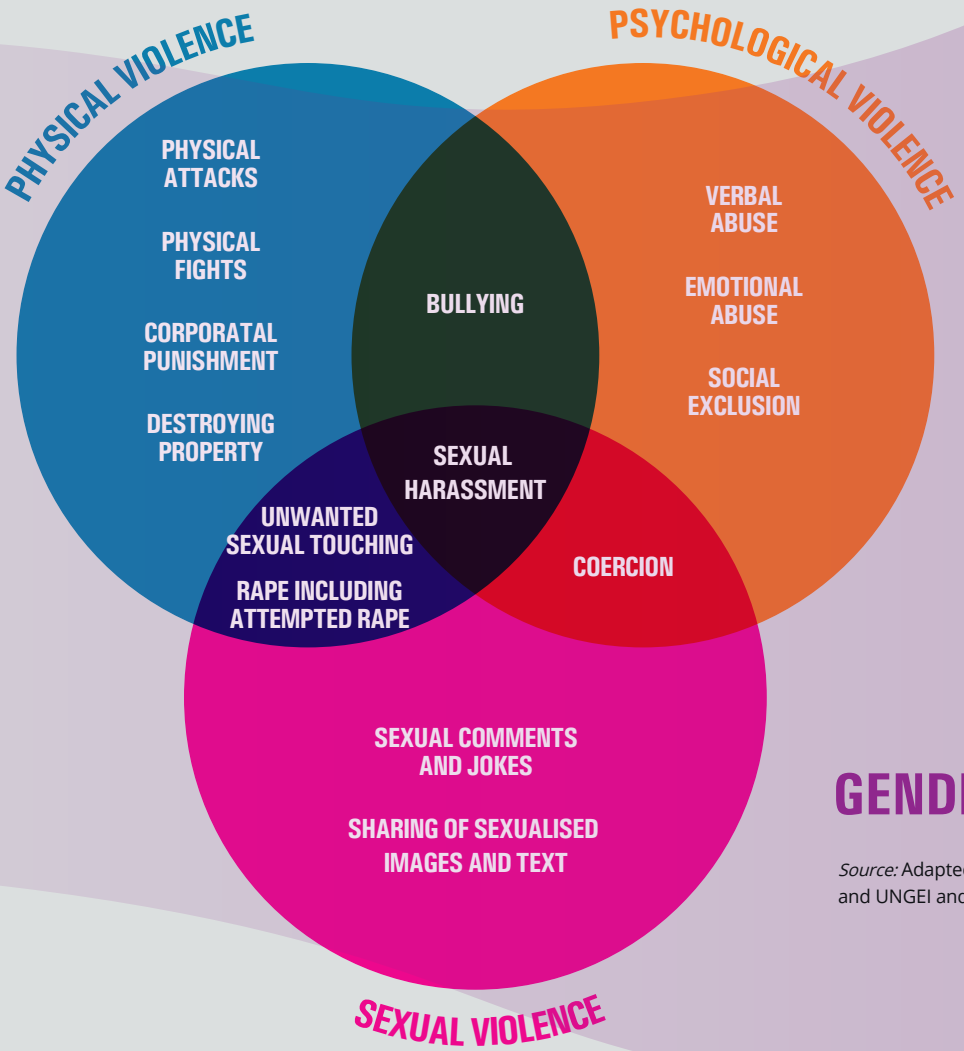
Gender inequalities and norms both contribute to, and reinforce violence at a broader social level. This has led to increased attention to the gendered dimensions of school violence over the past decade. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of harmful gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). It can take various forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence in school, on the way to school, online and wherever school relationships exist (see Figure 1). It can be perpetrated by students, teachers, other school staff or anyone involved with or visiting the school. SRGBV, like all violence against children, is a global scourge that violates the rights of children and compromises their learning, health and overall well-being. It also perpetuates gender inequalities, reinforces harmful gender norms that legitimize discrimination, harassment and abuse, particularly those forms experienced by women and girls. There are several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) addressing dimensions of SRGBV, as shown in Figure 2.

Addressing school violence effectively and fully requires an understanding of gender. The widespread nature of SRGBV points to the importance of correcting inequitable gender norms and power differentials for effective approaches to school violence prevention and response. However, there is no clear, internationally validated methodology to measure SRGBV.

1 Note that these are not necessarily the same students experiencing multiple kinds of violence.

Therefore, the Global Working Group to End SRGBV, led by the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), established an Expert Working Group in 2021 to consider models for estimating the prevalence of SRGBV using existing data sources on VAC and on school violence. The Expert Working Group reviewed and discussed a variety of existing approaches for measuring SRGBV.[2] This process generated several insights for education professionals and policy makers who wish to explore or gather data on SRGBV prevalence in their countries and localities, or to understand gender as a factor. This brief highlights some of these insights and explores gender norms as a key factor in school violence.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of school violence including SRGBV



Source: Adapted from UNESCO, 2019, and UNGEI and UNESCO, 2015

2 Including the School-Related Gender-Based Violence Measurement Toolkit (Dexis Consulting Group, 2020), secondary analyses of VACS data conducted by AidData and Together for Girls (Together for girls, 2021), and a secondary analysis study of data commissioned by the SRGBV Working Group (Fry, D. 2020. Generating Global Estimates for School-Related Gender-Based Violence Prevalence and Associations with Learning and Other Outcomes. Unpublished paper.), among others.

School Violence in the Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4.a and 4.7 have committed nations to making schools safe places to learn. SDGs 5 on gender equality and 16.2 on violence against children also require action to prevent and respond to SRGBV. The COVID-19 pandemic has set back progress towards quality, inclusive education and threatens to end the education of up to 20 million girls who may not return to class (Together for Girls, n.d.). However, the pause in learning due to school closures has offered an opportunity to strengthen holistic efforts to eliminate school violence, including SRGBV, when classes resume or move online (Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence, 2020; Safe to Learn, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Figure 2: SDG targets relevant to SRGBV

SDG 4.A
Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

SDG 5
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG 4.7
Ensure all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development . . . human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

SDG 16.2
End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

Why it matters to understand gender as a driver of school violence

'Gender-based violence' (GBV) was originally coined to emphasize the role that gender plays in driving violence against women and girls. As the understanding of gender as a social construct evolved, GBV has come to mean violence that is shaped or driven by gender norms or gendered power differentials, whether those experiencing the violence are women and girls, men and boys or gender non-binary. Sometimes the link to gender is explicit – such as with harmful practices like female genital cutting and child, early and forced marriages; sometimes the role gender plays in shaping violence is implicit – such as with corporal punishment, which is experienced more by boys than girls. Because people have individual biases shaped by their social and cultural settings, an act of violence can be gender-based even when the perpetrator remains unaware of how their behaviour is shaped by gender.

Gender dynamics in and around schools

Schools reflect the gender dynamics in society. Behavioural expectations for boys and girls in all their diversity often reflect gender roles, and deviations from those expectations – for example, boys with perceived submissive or feminine traits – may be met with bullying, abuse or punishment. Inequitable gender norms and expectations, and their interactions with other factors like race, ethnicity, class or caste, normalize violence against the less powerful.

Violence and discrimination that are normalized are difficult to recognize but no less harmful – indeed, the normalization of many forms of violence or bullying is one of the challenges of measuring SRGBV. For example, mocking, humiliating or excluding a girl who is menstruating may be 'normal' behaviour in some contexts, but they are nonetheless acts of bullying and discrimination, and have negative consequences on the person concerned and other girls. Equally, understanding how gender shapes one's experiences aids with the recognition of gendered forms of violence. It is necessary to make visible the gendered power differences at play in a given event to understand how that event came to be and what impact it may have on the people involved. This explains why teachers have reported that increasing their understanding of gender dynamics gives them a better lens to recognize certain behaviours as violence (UNESCO et al., 2022). Without this lens, much violence goes unreported, and the extent of the problem is masked.

In addition, applying a gender transformative lens that breaks down gender norms and stereotypes is important for developing effective prevention and response approaches for school violence. For every learner (and adult) to feel safe from violence, harmful gender norms must be explicitly addressed in school physical and social environments. Finally, because education is a formative institution that contributes to creating the values, attitudes and behaviours of individuals and societies, reducing the replication and proliferation of inequitable gender norms and power imbalances in the next generation requires addressing SRGBV (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016). Fostering gender-sensitive learning and school environments will not only reduce violence in schools but also in communities.

Existing data sources for estimating SRGBV

Because there is no established methodology for data collection on SRGBV, the Expert Working Group examined large-scale, multi-country surveys of VAC and school violence as possible sources of data on SRGBV. Table 1 presents the surveys that were identified as useful sources for estimating the prevalence of SRGBV.[3]

3 There are additional assessments of learning that capture students' experiences of bullying and other surveys that measure forms of GBV not specifically related to schooling. These may be useful for understanding the situations of children in a particular country.

Table 1: Multicountry surveys of VAC and school violence

Survey	Ages or grades	Countries covered
Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS)	Ages 13–17	96: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America
Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC)	Ages 11, 13 and 15	48: Europe, North America, Israel
Violence Against Children Survey (VACS)	Ages 13–24	21: Africa, Asia, Latin America, Moldova
Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (ERCE)	Grades 3 and 6	16: Latin America

Since these surveys are broader than SRGBV, it is necessary to identify the measures of behaviours that can be considered as being related to SRGBV. The first parameter may seem simple:

Given a particular item in the survey, does it focus on events in and around schools?

However, some dimensions of the question are less clear. Should violence between classmates be included when it takes place outside of school facilities or other settings? If a teacher abuses one of their students at their home, is it 'school-related'? Should boarding facilities be included? Does it matter if the violence is interpersonal, at a group level or perpetrated by outsiders? The Expert Working Group found few survey items that were specific enough about location and perpetrators to grapple with these questions in a concrete way. Yet, they concluded that when children respond to a survey administered at school or in which other questions relate to their education, it is reasonable to believe that many or most students answer based on their experiences of violence within the school. The GSHS's questions on being physically attacked do not ask if violence occurred in or out of school, for example, but the context of the survey suggests that the data from those survey items is primarily about school violence.

The second parameter is perhaps more complicated:

When is school violence driven by gender?

Gender is an ever-present part of how people relate to each other, and therefore, most or all violence is shaped by gender norms. However, that does not mean that every act of violence in a school is relevant to understanding or measuring SRGBV. Choosing what points of data are relevant to SRGBV requires making certain assumptions about what forms of violence are primarily driven by gender. These assumptions guide the interpretation of the data, although they do not bear true universally; rather, they approximate the majority of examples, or the majority of countries and localities.

Some forms of violence are easily assumed to be gender-based because a person's sex and/or gender (or the perception of it) is integral to the behaviour, as with sexual violence. Violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) can be considered GBV for the same reason. In other cases, because social and cultural contexts differ and it is not possible to know the circumstances of every act of violence, the Expert Working Group based their assumptions on known predominant patterns in the overall evidence base on school violence. For example, they assumed that cyberbullying by pictures (also known as image-based sexual abuse) is predominantly gender-based because studies find strong sexual undertones in images being used, usually to target girls. Likewise, name-calling and rumours are often homophobic or otherwise rely on noncompliance with gendered expectations for behaviour and traits. Certain kinds of physical and psychological violence were more difficult to label. In the case of physical violence between peers of similar status and ability, gender might not always play a role, but it can be a strong factor when boys are attempting to demonstrate dominance in line with masculine norms. Given that most physical fighting between classmates involves boys and norms of dominant masculinity are common across societies, the Expert Working Group agreed that most physical fighting between classmates is gender-based. Furthermore, girls, too, face implicitly gendered expectations of behaviour that can lead to fighting, for example, in which kinds of conflicts warrant escalation to a physical fight with peers.

Indicators relevant to SRGBV

Acknowledging that currently available data is incomplete, the Expert Working Group arrived at a set of indicators from existing surveys that provide a useful approximation of SRGBV by bringing together indicators on different forms of violence and excluding those that could not be considered to be primarily driven by gender-norms. These indicators, presented in Table 2, can be considered the starting point for understanding school violence with the added lens of gender. They are helpful points of data to triangulate with other sources and stimulate further analysis and data collection. At national and local levels, the existing data sheds light on patterns of SRGBV but must also be understood through the lens of local gender inequalities and norms.

Table 2: Survey items for estimating SRGBV

Survey Items for estimating SRGBV	Survey
Sexual Violence	
Non-contact sexual violence/exploitation by schoolmate or teacher and/or at school	VACS
Attempted unwanted sex by schoolmate or teacher and/or at school	VACS
Physically forced sex by schoolmate or teacher and/or at school	VACS
Coerced sex by schoolmate or teacher and/or at school	VACS
Physical Violence	
Being physically attacked (without consent of victim to fight)	GSHS
Being kicked, punched, etc.	GSHS
Physical violence by a schoolmate	VACS
Physical violence by a teacher	VACS
Bullying	
Bullying victimization in past month or past 12 months	HBSC GSHS
Past year bullying prevalence	ERCE
Cyberbullying	
Cyberbullied by pictures	HBSC
Cyberbullied by messages	HBSC
Experiences of cyberbullying in the past 12 months	GSHS
Psychological Violence	
Being targeted by lies or rumours	GSHS
Being made fun of with sexual jokes, comments, gestures, etc.	GSHS
Being left out	GSHS
Being called names	GSHS

Note: See Table 1 for complete names of the surveys.

Gaps in existing data

There are several ways that the evidence base could be strengthened for a more accurate picture of the role of gender norms and power imbalances in school violence. These include: gathering more information about the circumstances of an act of violence; filling in gaps in our knowledge of sexual violence; harmonizing data parameters, and; adding explanatory power with qualitative studies.

Context in which violence is perpetrated

Most surveys ask children if they have experienced violence without asking about the context or other parties involved. As a result, perpetrator, bystander and location data is missing for most measures, making it difficult to decide whether some patterns of violence should be considered SRGBV i.e., whether harmful power and gender dynamics may have been a part of the violence.

Perpetration: Recording the sex, age and other relevant characteristics of perpetrators enables an assessment of the power dynamics of the situation in age differences between children, the number of perpetrators versus the number of victims, adult versus child status and how the violence is best described in terms of the gender of the perpetrator and the victim.

Bystanders: There is a need for a better understanding of the role of bystanders – the presence of others during an incident of violence can be an aggravating or a mediating force. In the digital realm, too, the ways that 'bystanders' – online observers – amplify or minimize abuse need more attention.

Location: Even when survey questions focus on school settings, the location of an incident is rarely pinpointed to a place such as an office, classroom, hallway, outdoor grounds, toilets or outside the school altogether. To design safer schools, data collection should seek greater specificity about location. For online violence, this requires information about which platforms are used for cyberbullying.

Intersectionalities: In some cases, little is captured about the student experiencing the violence other than their sex or gender. Other traits – such as SOGIE, ethnicity, migrant status, poverty and ability – intersect with gender to shape vulnerabilities and resilience to violence and should be recorded for both perpetrators and victims. This information bolsters the understanding of the most disadvantaged children, who are most likely to experience violence and abuse and the least likely to report it. Family and community-level drivers, such as attitudes towards violence against children and interrelationships with peers and teachers, are also important intersectional factors to consider when measuring school violence.

Sexual violence

The scarcity of data on school-related sexual violence is probably the greatest existing limitation on the world's understanding of SRGBV. Data collection on school violence is more likely to address physical violence than psychological or sexual violence (UNESCO & UN Women, 2016). There is little data on sexual violence in particular, partly because it is a sensitive topic, and as a result, it is more hidden than other kinds of abuse. Survey items apply multiple definitions of sexual violence, making it hard to aggregate datasets and often limiting information to a narrow set of behaviours. Coerced or

transactional sex is not always seen to be violence, for example, even though girls may not feel they can refuse without risking their relationships or, when a teacher is the perpetrator, without risking their academic success. Unwanted touching and sexualized comments may be so normalized that students do not disclose them unless they are specifically asked about them.

Data harmonization

As there are no global standards for the measurement of school violence and SRGBV, surveys use different recall periods, age groups and other parameters. This limits the ability of policy makers to identify priorities and target resources for safe schools where they are most needed. Establishing standardized parameters for data collection will help delineate the specific role of gender across contexts.

Qualitative data

Targeted qualitative studies can add explanatory power to the analysis of quantitative datasets and often point to topics that need further exploration. This is especially true for research on children and adolescents, who, in some settings, comprise subcultures with language and behaviours that adults may not be able to interpret as abusive although they are experienced as such. Qualitative research also illuminates localized patterns and definitions of violence that do not easily fit into global analytical frameworks.

Recommendations for the measurement of SRGBV

Use a gender lens to collect, interpret and employ data on school violence. As described above, it is important to centre the role of gender in driving school violence. Effective prevention is built on knowledge of the many ways that gender norms and expectations shape the nature of violence, even those that are normalized or hidden. These norms and stereotypes should be kept in mind when designing research, programmes and/or programme evaluations. For example, you might want to know if girls or boys face insults or bullying if they are seen as 'too smart'. In settings where intimate partner violence against women and girls is widely accepted in society, a useful indicator might be whether it is taking place at school. Also consider how gender affects the disclosure of violence – girls under pressure to demonstrate 'sexual purity' and boys under pressure to demonstrate 'sexual prowess' are not likely to report sexual abuse, for example. A gender lens brings into focus what you need to know in order to recognize and address school violence driven by gender.

Explore existing data to see if it meets your needs. The multicountry surveys in Table 1 together cover countries from all major world regions. They are the best place to start gathering national- or regional-level information. Raw data from many of these surveys can be accessed for further analysis by skilled statisticians to examine additional levels of disaggregation and relationships between indicators. In addition, many national governments have collected high-quality data on VAC, sometimes in standard of living or similar surveys, or through information systems in child protection, education or health. Likewise, local organizations and universities around the world often conduct excellent independent research on children and violence. Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multi-Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and VACS sometimes include data on violence against girls or

violent discipline, although not limited to school settings. In addition, these and other surveys often include questions on perceptions of gender and violence, such as acceptance of domestic violence or women's autonomy, that provide insight into the value of women and girls and gendered power differentials.

Coordinate with other actors for primary data collection. When planning data collection on SRGBV or any school violence, consult with civil society organizations, UN agencies, governmental departments and research institutions in your area to see what they might already be doing. Collaboration across organizations ensures that findings are widely relevant and will be well-used for improved programming and advocacy; it also reduces duplication of efforts and maximizes cost-effectiveness. At a minimum, work with peer agencies to harmonize data collection methods and measures, including using the same recall periods, age groups, violence classification and survey questions so that data can be aggregated and comparisons can be made.

Collect data for specific uses. Identify how you will use data before data collection begins and carefully focus your approach to meet your specific needs. Most of this brief is concerned with data on the prevalence of school violence, but school administrators may be more interested in how well response systems are working. Policymakers may be more interested in the consequences of violence, such as which students are most likely to leave school because they experienced violence. The call for more contextual data on locations, perpetrators and victims does not mean that research cannot be well tailored to purpose.

Integrate questions about violence into national information systems and periodic surveys. Education management information systems (EMIS) are one mechanism for tracking incidents of school violence. Such systems can be strengthened and balanced to gather more complete information without creating a heavy burden for reporters that would disincentivize reporting. Likewise, national population, demographic, health, standard of living or school-based surveys are opportunities to integrate key questions about gender, violence and school violence.

Include or advocate for the inclusion of data that is commonly missed. There are significant gaps in what we know about perpetrators, bystanders, locations, intersectionalities and the occurrence of sexual violence. Gathering this data will make an important contribution to our collective understanding of SRGBV, school violence and VAC more generally.

Gather qualitative data to explain the 'why' of school violence. Even a small number of interviews or focus group discussions allows exploration of what violence looks like, reasons why it persists and the nuances of complex human dynamics that can facilitate or deter violence. More substantial qualitative studies will provide a wealth of data and insights to improve programming and the allocation of resources to those issues that are most urgent to address. The increasing use of online forums for school activities offers another setting for qualitative data collection, including through observation of message boards and social media.

Ethical and safety recommendations for conducting research or data collection on all forms of school violence, including gender-based violence

Do no harm. Prevent any potential harm and assess whether involvement of the individual child is justified. Ensure safeguarding, keep the safety of respondents and the research team paramount and let this guide all decisions.

Ensure that appropriate support is provided, such as psychosocial support and counselling, to survivors of violence or abuse. Different types of support will be needed for survivors of different ages.

Protect confidentiality and create a safe environment for speaking to ensure the safety of those involved and the quality of the data. Consider how research data will be stored and filed, and who will have access to the data.

Research with children must be just and equitable. Treat all children equally, distribute the benefits and burdens of participating fairly, and do not exclude children based on discriminatory factors and biases.

Ensure research conducted benefits children individually, collectively or both.

Obtain informed consent from all research participants. Participants should understand the nature of the research and what they will be expected to talk about before the interview or survey starts. Obtain informed and ongoing consent from child participants, as well as parental consent. Respect indications of children's dissent or withdrawal from the research.

Broach violence with care. Incorporate violence questions into surveys designed for other purposes only when ethical and methodological requirements can be met.

Ensure participation is voluntary. No one should feel forced to be involved in any type of research.

Prioritize and budget for research staff self-care. Constant exposure to trauma can lead to stress and burn-out among those working on SRGBV if they do not have adequate opportunities for self-care.

Source: UNGEI, 2019.

Conclusion

This brief highlights the outputs of the Global Working Group to End SRGBV's Expert Working Group, which references the existing sources of data and measures of SRGBV and suggests several ways to improve the body of evidence. The ultimate aim of data gathering on school violence is to design more effective policies and programmes to prevent and respond to violence at all levels, with a whole-school approach. It is therefore necessary to apply a gender transformative lens that recognizes the gender norms and stereotypes fuelling school violence, so that harmful norms and power imbalances can be explicitly addressed in the school environment. It is equally important to address current gaps in the evidence base, particularly related to school-related sexual violence, as well as data on perpetrators, bystanders, location of violence. Various sources of data already exist and can be examined to help estimate the prevalence of SRGBV. However improved harmonisation between data sources, the systematic inclusion of standardised indicators in national surveys, and strengthened coordination would all contribute to more robust and comparable data across different contexts.

The Sustainable Development Goals call for safe, non-violent and inclusive schools that foster future peaceful and non-violent societies and the UN Secretary General's Vision Statement from the 2022 Transforming Education Summit highlights the important role that schools must play to achieve gender equality and to build resilient and inclusive societies. The elimination of violence based on gender is Integral to the realisation of this vision.

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