



**Communicating  
Equality**

# **Gender-Transformative Approaches to the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls**

**Summary of a Scan  
of Grey Literature**

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**centre of excellence  
for women's health**

# Gender-Transformative Approaches to the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls: Summary of a Scan of Grey Literature

***Communicating Equality*** for Preventing Violence against Women and Girls is a research-to-action project led by the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health (CEWH). The aim is to develop gender-transformative messaging for primary prevention of violence against women and girls in the Canadian context.

CEWH researchers conducted an environmental scan of international and Canadian grey literature and communication products. The scan was guided by these questions:

1. What gender-transformative approaches and initiatives for primary prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) are available in grey literature and communication products?
  - 1.1. What gender-transformative approaches and initiatives specifically focus on engaging men and boys and transforming masculinities?
  - 1.2. What gender-transformative approaches and initiatives for primary prevention of VAWG in Indigenous communities are available in resources developed in Canada, Australia, USA, and New Zealand?
2. What gender-transformative approaches and initiatives in related fields such as gender equity and health promotion are available in grey literature and communication products?

The scan was conducted between December 2021 and September 2022.

A total of three hundred and fourteen ( $n = 314$ ) resources were included in the scan. Three hundred and six ( $n = 306$ ) resources were collected and included for analysis as a result of three iterations of document collection, citation mining and data extraction. An additional eight ( $n = 8$ ) materials were added to the study after the iterations were completed. Global, regional, multi-country, and country information was identified in these resources. The most frequent countries were Canada ( $n = 86$ ), global ( $n = 67$ ), Australia ( $n = 36$ ), United States ( $n = 30$ ), and various countries combined ( $n = 27$ ).

***Gender-transformative approaches highlight harmful norms, beliefs, systems, and structures, but also aim to transform them. In order to do this, a whole-of-society approach that engages all segments of society in the promotion of gender equality- including at the individual, household, community, institutional and policy/legal level- is often necessary [1-4].***

## **GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES WITHIN PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VAWG**

Several resources suggest that in order to understand the causes and correlates of VAWG, we must use a social-ecological lens that identifies several factors contributing to violence at various levels. The levels that have been identified are global, societal, system/institutional, organizational/community, relationship/interpersonal, and individual levels.

A review of global evidence conducted by Australia's national primary prevention organization, Our Watch, identified the following gendered drivers of VAWG: condoning of VAWG; rigid gender stereotypes and dominant forms of masculinities; men's control over decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life; and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasize aggression, dominance and control. These drivers were identified in other sources, along with an overarching social context that creates the conditions for VAWG such as gender inequality and other intersecting forms of oppression, discrimination, power and privilege (racism, ableism, heteronormativity, classism, etc.).

In line with the social-ecological model, many sources state that the most effective approaches to primary prevention of violence are multi-disciplinary, multi-level and multi-sectoral – that engaging all levels and sectors of society (individuals, communities, educational institutions, governments, etc.) is necessary. Several sources emphasize the following approaches as particularly salient in prevention work: engaging men and boys as stakeholders, partners, allies, and advocates; engaging with religious institutions/leaders, traditional authorities and community leaders; implementing school-based curriculums and initiatives; organizing public awareness campaigns; bystander approaches; promoting healthy relationships and positive parenting.

Sources suggest that gender-transformative messaging on the prevention of VAWG should be positive and encouraging and should embrace a strengths-based approach. This includes messages that frame men as allies in anti-violence, and men and women as allies and advocates together. Messages that are disempowering and that reinforce negative stereotypes should be avoided.

## **GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES AND INITIATIVES FOR ENGAGING MEN AND TRANSFORMING MASCULINITIES**

Several sources highlight that the rigid attachment to the norms and expectations of masculinity are among the causes of men and boys' VAWG. The literature emphasizes the importance of engaging men and boys at all levels of the social-ecological model and at every stage of life. This includes engaging them in early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, adulthood, as spouses and fathers, and at the individual, family, community, and system levels.

Prominent themes in gender-transformative work with men and boys for primary prevention of VAWG are transforming masculinities/healthy masculinities; parenting and care work; positive parenting; involved fatherhood; involving men in maternal, newborn and child health; and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The literature also identifies specific techniques for engaging men and boys such as direct participation programs (often education-based), communication and social marketing campaigns, and community mobilization.

Campaigns are more likely to be engaging and effective when men and boys are involved at every stage of the process, including needs assessment, messaging co-creation, and testing. It is also recommended to avoid a gender-neutral approach or framing that elicits responses of shame and judgement in campaigns and programs with men

and boys. Some resources highlight key challenges to engaging men and boys in violence prevention, including addressing men's complicity in maintaining systems of gender inequality; navigating resistance and backlash; and maintaining accountability to women.

## **GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES AND INITIATIVES FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VAWG IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

There are unique causes and correlates of violence against Indigenous women and girls, thus prevention approaches must be led by and tailored for Indigenous communities. Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, values, and experiences should comprise the foundational elements informing and driving primary prevention efforts in Indigenous communities.

Indigenous organizations have identified historical and ongoing impacts of colonization as the key cause of disproportionate levels of violence against Indigenous women and girls, and that this violence is sustained at the systemic and institutional level.

In Australia, a conceptual model about violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women identifies three underlying drivers of this violence: 1) The ongoing impacts of colonization for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 2) The ongoing impacts of colonization for non-Indigenous people and in Australian society, 3) Gendered factors – both gender and inequality in a general sense, and specific gendered drivers of violence that are a consequence of colonization and patriarchy.

In Canada, community-based and community-driven initiatives that focus on prevention and awareness, community safety, policing measures and justice responses, and self-determination are identified as key priority areas of the prevention of VAWG in Indigenous communities. Guiding principles of

prevention initiatives that promote community healing are also identified. In the Inuit context, these include Piliriqatigiinnngniq (working together for the common good), Avatikmik Kamattiarniq (environmental wellness), and Pijittsirarniq (service to others and leadership). Grounding these principles in community and culture and involving Elders and community leaders are highlighted as particularly important to the success and effectiveness of primary prevention initiatives.

In Australia, actions to address the drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children have been identified: 1) Addressing the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonization for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities, 2) Addressing the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonization for non-Indigenous people, 3) Addressing the gendered drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Connecting boys and young men with adult male role models in the community who embody healthy masculinity as well as incorporating Indigenous teachings of honesty, love, and respect have also been identified as necessary to engaging men and boys in the primary prevention of violence against Indigenous women and girls.

## **GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES AND INITIATIVES IN GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH PROMOTION FIELDS**

The subjects explored in this area spans a wide range of topics including: women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected states, the building of peaceful and inclusive societies, understanding the root causes of child marriage, working with faith leaders to change community mindsets on gender norms, economic and housing influences on ending VAWG, involving men in the promotion of non-violence and supporting bystander

interventions, skills for negotiation of consent and engaging boys in girls' health issues.

Resources in this area highlight themes pertaining to the intersection of engaging men and boys, and gender equity and health promotion. These themes include the social and economic benefits of implementing men's parental leave, and guidance on recruiting and retaining men in gender-transformative programming. Notably, two resources identified workplace settings as an opportune context to connect with men and boys.

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## Conclusion

In order to effectively engage in the primary prevention of VAWG, it is critical to understand its root causes and correlates. Much of the literature acknowledges the complexity of these issues and accordingly, the need for multi-faceted approaches. There is significant global interest towards, and action on, gender-transformative approaches.

While the literature acknowledges the important role men and boys play in violence prevention, further research is required to understand how to promote and retain men's interest and motivation to act in this area. Additionally, while using a gender-transformative approach to primary prevention of violence against women and girls is a well-explored area, there is a need for further information on developing, communicating, framing, and testing gender-transformative messaging geared towards men and boys, and within Indigenous communities.

### References:

1. Our Watch, *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*. 2021: Melbourne, Australia.
2. *Making it Better: Gender Transformative Health Promotion*, ed. L. Greaves, A. Pederson, and N. Poole. 2014: Women's Press.
3. *Being intentional about gender-transformative strategies: Reflections and Lessons for UNICEF's Gender and Policy Action Plan (2022-2025): A compendium of papers*. 2021, UNICEF Office of Research: Innocenti: Florence.
4. Pederson, A., L. Greaves, and N. Poole, *Gender-transformative health promotion for women: A framework for action*. Health Promotion International, 2015. **30**(1): p. 140-150.



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respectfully acknowledges the First Nations, Inuit, and  
Métis peoples as the first inhabitants of the traditional  
custodians of the lands where we live, learn, and work.*