



Editorial Introduction

Community-level strategies are a vital next step in preventing domestic, family and sexual violence. While much prevention activity has addressed risk and protective factors at the individual and relationship levels, community-level strategies move to more macro levels of society. Community-level strategies have a compelling rationale: they address the social norms, social relations and social inequalities that underpin domestic, family and sexual violence. They move violence prevention towards the general ideal that initiatives should be comprehensive, relevant, and engaging. Community-level approaches ideally engage whole communities, are based on community ownership, and empower community members.

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Community-level prevention: A vital next step in ending domestic, family and sexual violence

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Community-level strategies for preventing domestic, family and sexual violence are rare. They have been implemented less often than individual-level strategies and evaluated even less often (DeGue et al., 2012; Michau, 2005). However, community-level strategies are a vital next step in prevention (DeGue et al., 2012).

Primary prevention aims to prevent initial violence perpetration and victimisation. It involves changing the social conditions that support and promote domestic, family and sexual violence. Therefore, primary prevention means addressing the drivers of or risk factors for these forms of violence. It is aimed at changing structures, norms and practices (Our Watch, 2021).

Violence prevention comprises a spectrum of prevention strategies addressing the risk factors for domestic, family and sexual violence operating at different levels of society: individual, relationship, community and societal. Community-level strategies target modifiable characteristics of the community—structural, economic, political, cultural or environmental—to reduce the risk of violence perpetration and victimisation. ‘Community’ here refers to any defined population with shared characteristics or interests. Community-level strategies are community-wide; therefore, they are distinct from merely ‘community-based’ interventions, which are implemented in community settings but target behaviour change only at the individual, peer or family level (DeGue et al., 2016; Dills et al., 2019).

What community-level prevention involves

A wide range of strategies intended to change the characteristics of communities are possible.

- Initiatives that foster women’s economic empowerment and autonomy can reduce economic dependency and insecurity, which are well-documented risk factors for violence victimisation.
- Large-scale social norms campaigns can shift the cultural climates in which violence is excused and normalised.
- Workplace initiatives—policies, education, ally networks and shifting institutional risk factors—can reduce the likelihood of sexual harassment and abuse.
- Environmental or situational approaches can alter the environments in which violence occurs by reducing opportunities for and increasing the risks of perpetration and by tackling context-related risk factors such as alcohol availability.
- Policies regarding various areas—housing, employment, immigration, corrections, media and so on—can influence macro-level risk and protective factors related to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Other community-level strategies include community development and community mobilisation. Community development aims to strengthen relationships among community members and create positive settings. Consciousness-raising fosters people’s critical consciousness of the social conditions that affect them, such that they take collective action to change these (Townsend, 2017). Certain approaches involve combinations of education with broader advocacy and community mobilisation.

Community mobilisation extends strategies of community engagement and development. It involves bringing individuals and groups together and mobilising them through advocacy-based groups and networks, whether community action teams, coalitions among community groups or activist organisations and movements (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2010).

Current prevention efforts

Despite an emphasis in the field on the need to address community-wide and society-wide forces and factors which shape domestic, family and sexual violence (Our Watch, 2021), many interventions instead address individual and relationship-level factors. Prevention efforts have typically focused on the smallest levels of the ecological framework: addressing people’s personal histories and the contexts in which violence occurs, such as family dynamics and intimate partner or acquaintance relationships. Prevention efforts have rarely addressed the levels of preventable risk factors which are larger in scope, involving the social structures and institutions in which relationships and families are embedded: neighbourhoods, workplaces, social networks and communities and the larger society and culture. See Figure 1.

There is growing encouragement for the prevention field to move away from using only strategies at the smallest scales of the ecological model (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; DeGue et al., 2012; Tharp et al., 2011). This requires a paradigm shift away from low-dose education-only programming and towards investment in the development and rigorous evaluation of more comprehensive, multi-level strategies aimed at a wider range of populations (DeGue et al., 2014). It also requires a shift in policymaking and funding, as community-level strategies are near impossible without formal political will and financial support.

The rationale for community-level strategies

There is a compelling rationale for community-level approaches to violence prevention. They contribute more than smaller-scale strategies to the fundamental social changes required to end domestic, family and sexual violence. Community and societal strategies are essential to shift the cultures, social relations and structural inequalities which underpin this violence. They address preventable risk factors at a scale beyond individuals and their relationships.

Efforts to prevent domestic, family and sexual violence must address the established drivers or determinants of this violence, and these forms of violence have causes that are societal and cultural, not just interpersonal and individual (Edwards & Banyard, 2018). Prevention strategies must address drivers at all levels of the social-ecological framework (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; Michau et al., 2015), including community-wide factors, aiming to produce social and structural change. As Our Watch’s *Change the Story* framework emphasises, primary prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence requires a change in norms (understandings of what other people do and what people are expected to do), practices (behaviours and interactions), and structures (systems and organisations that arrange our norms and practices (Our Watch, 2017).

Prevention strategies that address only microlevel risk and protective factors may have some positive influence on these in the short term. However, their impact will be reduced by the negative influence of other unaddressed factors (DeGue et al., 2016, p. 162). Due to their limited reach and the countervailing effects of other unaddressed factors, they may not have impacts that are substantial or sustained. As DeGue et al. (2016, p. 164) note, “Behavior change is difficult when it is not supported by environments, social norms, and cultural contexts to facilitate and reinforce positive behavior and discourage negative behavior.”

Community-level approaches also bring violence prevention closer to the general ideal in prevention that initiatives should be comprehensive, relevant, and engaging. Initiatives are more likely to be comprehensive if they rest on community participation and collaboration.

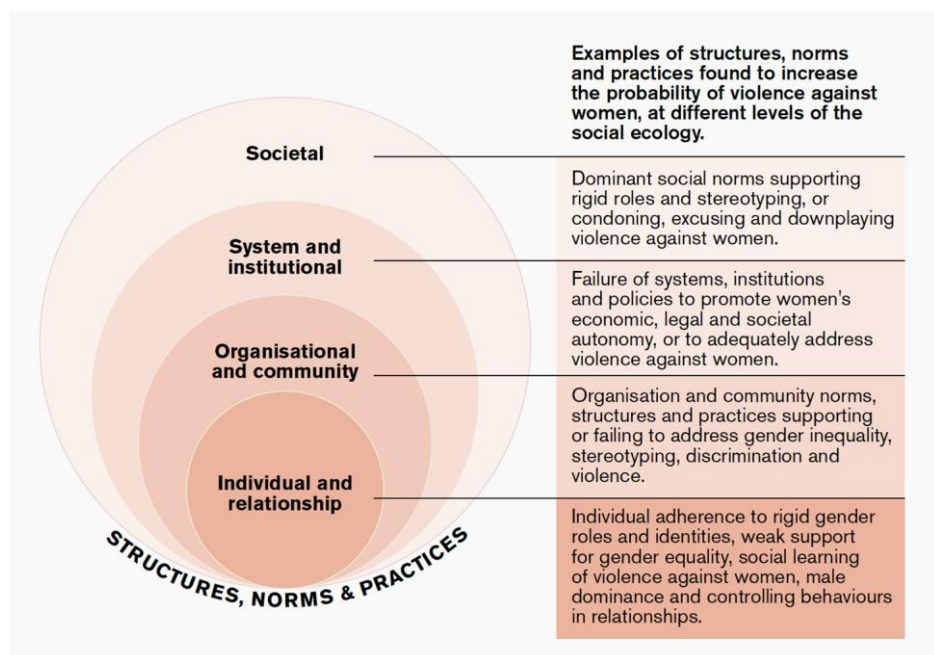


Figure 1. The Social-ecological Model of Violence (Our Watch, 2021)

The involvement of community members or their representatives in the design and implementation of prevention initiatives likely leads to the development of more culturally relevant and engaging interventions (Kim-Ju et al., 2008). In addition, the active participation of community members and groups ideally leads to greater effectiveness and efficiency in addressing problems requiring community building and social connections (Kim-Ju et al., 2008, p. 57). Finally, community strategies such as collective mobilisation empower participants, as members (ideally) become involved in both personal and collective change.

Community-level prevention in practice

There is an increasing amount of guidance on community-level prevention, which indicates principles for this work. First, where community-wide approaches involve directly engaging with community members, they must be *holistic*: they require commitment from and engagement of the whole community. Ad hoc efforts that engage isolated groups or implement sporadic activities have a limited impact (Michau, 2005, p. 3).

Second, prevention strategies must be based on community *ownership*, with projects engaging and being led by community members. Third, violence prevention should build local communities' ability to respond effectively to violence by strengthening the capacity of individuals, groups and organisations to be agents of change in their community (Michau, 2005). Fourth, community-level prevention ideally involves *empowerment* in which community members are involved in defining the problem, the solutions and undertaking resulting initiatives. Finally, successful initiatives also involve *linkages and resources*: they link communities to other people, organisations and resources to support the work (Townsend, 2017).

There are further desirable elements to more comprehensive approaches to prevention:

- Practitioners should aim to move away from one-off and didactic psychoeducational interventions, increasing their duration and intensity, complementing them with other strategies and integrating them into comprehensive initiatives.
- More comprehensive 'prevention packages' should be used that incorporate multiple approaches targeting potential perpetrators, victims and bystanders (Edwards & Banyard, 2018).
- Prevention efforts in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—should be embedded in a whole-of-institution approach, involving the adoption of top to bottom and multi-pronged intervention strategies (Dills et al., 2016).

Initiatives must address not only risk factors but also *protective* factors, those factors that lessen the likelihood of perpetration or victimisation. 'Positive' or 'strengths-based' approaches are necessary at the community level to build environments characterised by positive social norms and gender-equitable relationships, thus supporting positive changes in individuals' attitudes and behaviours (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; Our Watch, 2017).

Initiatives should seek to be *gender transformative*: to transform the inequitable gender roles, norms and relations that underpin domestic, family and sexual violence (Our Watch, 2017). While this standard has been articulated particularly for initiatives aimed at men and boys (Flood, 2021; Wells et al., 2020), all prevention initiatives should seek to create more gender-equitable relations.

Finally, aligning with shifts in the violence prevention field more generally, community-level prevention should be *intersectional*. It should recognise the intersections of multiple forms of social privilege and disadvantage. Initiatives aimed at changing the social, economic and political characteristics of communities should be responsive to the forms of social injustice that compound the risks and harms of domestic, family and sexual violence (McCauley et al., 2019).

Evidence of impact

Community-level strategies show significant promise for violence prevention. However, because such initiatives are rare, they have been evaluated less frequently than more micro-focused interventions. For example, a systematic review of outcome evaluations of primary prevention strategies for sexual violence found that few included community-wide impacts (DeGue et al. 2012). It is particularly challenging to evaluate violence-related outcomes of interventions at the community level: to gauge interventions' impact not only on those who participate directly in the intervention but among the wider contexts and communities in which the intervention occurs (DeGue et al., 2012). Nevertheless, a more recent review identified four rigorous evaluations of multi-component social norm change interventions implemented at the community level. Such campaigns have produced declines in violence-supportive attitudes and domestic violence victimisation and perpetration (Fulu et al., 2014, pp. 7–9).

There are now some impressive examples of evaluations of community-level interventions. SASA! is a community mobilisation intervention developed by Raising Voices in Uganda that seeks to prevent both violence against women and HIV transmission by addressing the core driver of both: gender inequality. SASA! was evaluated at a community level using a pair-matched, cluster, randomised controlled trial in eight communities in Uganda from 2007 to 2012 (Abramsky et al., 2014).

The evaluation design included matched pairs of intervention communities, with the control communities waitlisted to receive the intervention. In the communities in which SASA! occurred, there was lower social acceptance of intimate partner violence, greater acceptance that a woman can refuse sex, lower past year experience of physical and sexual intimate partner violence among women and more supportive community responses among women experiencing violence. The positive impact of this intervention on levels of men's violence against women was evident at the community level, and not limited to those with high levels of exposure to the intervention (Abramsky et al., 2014).

Challenges in community-level prevention

There are five challenges in community-level strategies of violence prevention. First, knowledge of community-level and societal-level risk factors for domestic, family and sexual violence is limited relative to knowledge of individual- and relationship- or family-level factors. This makes it harder to know what to target. Second, there is limited guidance for identifying promising programs, strategies, or policies that impact violent behaviour at the community level (DeGue et al., 2012). Third, it can be difficult to evaluate violence-related outcomes at the community level. Police and crime data and health and hospital records are limited by low rates of reporting and even lower rates of prosecution. Therefore, other forms of data collection may be necessary to gauge impact (DeGue et al., 2016; DeGue et al., 2012). Fourth, community-level strategies are time-intensive and complicated by the number and range of individuals and organisations involved (Kim-Ju et al., 2008, p. S11). Finally, community-level strategies are dependent on substantial political and institutional support and funding.

Conclusion

Violence prevention efforts must shift towards much greater use of community-level strategies (DeGue et al., 2014; Dills et al., 2019). We must target risk and protective factors not only at the individual or peer levels but at the community level, aiming to modify community and contextual supports for and structural enablers of violence (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; DeGue et al., 2012; Dills et al., 2019; Sharp et al., 2011). Without significant shifts in the social, cultural, and economic organisation of communities, we are unlikely to make real progress in reducing domestic, family, and sexual violence.

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