Preventing and combating school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV): laying the foundations for a safe, equitable, and inclusive school

Vassiliki Pliogou[1], Sophia Tromara[1], Christina Hajisoteriou[2]* and Panayiotis Angelides[2]

[1]School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Western Macedonia, Florina, Greece, [2]School of Education, University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus

Introduction

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a widespread socio-cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical, socioeconomic and cultural boundaries, affecting students globally. In 2024, ~115 million children and adolescents were victims of some form of gender-based violence (GBV; UNGEI, 2024). SRGBV encompasses any act or threat of physical, sexual, or psychological violence that occurs in and around schools, as well as online, and is "perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics" (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023, p. 1). It is interconnected with broader systems of social inequality, power, and control and has various manifestations within diverse institutions, discourses, and spaces (Burke et al., 2023).

Empirical research highlights that SRGBV largely remains unnoticed and thus unattended (Burke et al., 2023). However, it bears detrimental consequences that expand to adulthood, as it not only violates children's and adolescents' rights and negatively impacts their wellbeing, but also affects their academic achievement, and overall development (Ginestra et al., 2022). Combating SRGVB requires a multilevel approach targeting its root causes and the systemic factors perpetuating it. Thus, school, as a context of primary socialization, has a substantial role to play in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for all learners, regardless of their gender.

Therefore, this opinion article aims to examine the complexity of SRGBV, its driving factors, provide insights into various interventions that may address SRGBV more effectively in school settings and urge for more concrete and holistic responses.

The meanings and complex factors driving SRGBV

SRGBV refers to a wide range of violent behaviors and actions taking place in educational settings. It can take the form of bullying, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, corporal punishment and other harmful behaviors against individuals or groups based on their gender identity or normative gender roles. The manifestations of SRGBV rarely occur as isolated incidents, but usually overlap, resulting in even more complexity (Ginestra et al., 2022). SRGBV can manifest between students, between teachers and students, and between

teachers and other staff (Holt and Birchall, 2022). Factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, sex characteristics, physical appearance, geographical location, socio-economic and ethnic background, and disability influence the form and intensity of SRGVB. Although SRGBV may affect every gender, girls are disproportionately affected and are more likely to experience psychological bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and violence (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023), while boys are more prone to physical violence. Female adolescents with disabilities are 10 times more vulnerable to GBV (Vanner, 2021).

The complex causes of SRGBV are related to individual, family, school, community, socioeconomic, cultural and political factors that appear to have increased intersectionality. DeCrosta and Spear (2024) support that SRGBV is deeply rooted in pervasive, unequal gender norms and stereotypes about gender roles and expectations, which are reinforced by systematic power imbalances, and hegemonic male identities, while intersecting with racism (Valtýsdóttir and Halldórsdóttir, 2025). From a feminist perspective, these discriminatory practices and processes reflect oppressive and male dominated power relations emanating from patriarchy, which result in structural inequalities (Dahal et al., 2022) and permeate school settings (Pliogou and Katsarou, 2024). Setty et al. (2024), without essentializing gender, analyze the disproportionate impact of SRGVB against girls and LGBTQ+ adolescents through a cultural lens that perceives gender norms as intersecting with sexual predetermined scripts. Eisen et al. (2021) support that family has a decisive role in producing and sustaining rigid gender stereotypes even from an early age. Beyene et al. (2019) report the critical role of parents, as exposure to parental violence increases the risk of sexual violence. While some cases of violence are overtly gendered, others are more subtle and thus are often being dismissed as mere acts of violence rather than identified as manifestations of GBV. Discriminatory norms within school environments instill feelings of shame and fear in victims, discouraging them from reporting or asking for support (Burke et al., 2023). Tanton et al. (2023) report a lack of SRGBV disclosure, something that restrains data collection and consequently an in-depth understanding. Consequently, these interrelated factors contribute to a complex school ecosystem, where discrimination and violence are misinterpreted or distorted as non-gendered or common, thus go unnoticed or/and normalized fostering a culture of complicity and silence around GBV in and around schools (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023).

What types of interventions are needed for addressing and preventing SRGBV?

The GEMRT (2020) reports several types of school-based interventions that aim to combat SRGBV. These include curriculum-based programs (*Connect with Respect*), such as comprehensive sexuality education aiming to promote equality and respect. Other interventions (*Young Men Initiative*) exclusively target boys and challenge rigid notions of masculinity. In addition, some programs (*Shifting Boundaries*) invest in inclusive and safe infrastructure to ensure students' safety and wellbeing. Finally,

other interventions (*Zero Tolerance Programme*) aim at robust mechanisms for reporting and supporting eyewitnesses and victims to break the silence and reduce the stigma surrounding SRGBV.

UNESCO and UN Women (2016) propose a transformative model for SRGBV that targets three main areas: leadership, teaching/learning, and family/community involvement, emphasizing that all interventions must be holistic, context relevant, child-centered, developmentally appropriate, participatory and inclusive for all children. The model's guiding principles involve: a strong institutional framework to combat SRGBV; a supportive and safe school; prevention through gender-transformative curricula and teaching/learning strategies; direct measures to effectively address incidents of violence at school level; strengthening partnerships with all stakeholders; continuous monitoring/assessing the effectiveness of SRGBV interventions.

Similarly, GEC (2023) advocates for interventions using socio-emotional learning (SEL) as a critical strategy for preventing and addressing SRGBV, particularly for girls from vulnerable groups. Such interventions cultivate a set of social, emotional, and other values, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to students. Standish et al. (2022) suggest that SEL enhances positive relationships at schools, which are very important in combating SRGBV. Moreover, prior research shows that SEL programs should start in Early Childhood Education (Ollis et al., 2021), as addressing harmful gender norms through critical reflection has a significant impact on improving attitudes against GBV. Kågesten et al.'s (2021) interventions aimed at girls' empowerment through enhancing their problem-solving and critical reflection skills to increase their confidence and at boys' empowerment through verbal skills and positive expression of masculinity. The results were positive, as both groups became more able to negotiate their sexuality and agency and gained self-protective strategies.

Schools reflect and reinforce prevailing gender relations and dynamics permeating society. Thus, filtering all forms of violence through a "gender lens," helps the identification of SRGBV as inherently gendered, because gender identities influence how individuals interact in various social contexts, including schools. This gender-based approach, implemented through gender-transformative education, allows an in-depth examination of how power and discrimination intersect with school settings, challenges and dismantles harmful gender perceptions, behaviors and practices by unveiling power relations, gender norms, and the systemic roots of inequality and oppression to create more inclusive and safe learning environments for all students (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2023).

Conclusions

Gender equality is a global priority reflected among two of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN's Agenda 2030-SDG4 (Quality Education) and SDG5 (Gender Equality)- and a key catalyst for achieving all SDGs. Education stands out as the most transformative institution, capable of initiating positive change that starts individually and expands to the entire social spectrum (Pliogou and Tromara, 2024). The prerequisites are a strong political will and commitment to prevent, address, and eliminate SRGBV, placing SRGBV highly on the educational

agenda, and raising awareness on the deeply gendered dimension of the phenomenon. Prioritizing gender equality as inextricably linked with social justice in and through education is thus the key to establish safe, equitable, and inclusive learning environments.

Toward this endeavor, first, we argue that the impact of fragmented interventions is limited toward a long-term change, as they do not dismantle the root causes of SRGBV. Secondly, we argue that cross-sectoral and multilevel collaboration across policymakers, schools, students, families, and communities—a whole school approach—is the only way to effectively address the structural root causes that sustain SRGBV. Third, gender-transformative education can have more tangible and sustainable outcomes, as it dismantles harmful entrenched gender norms and unequal power dynamics.

In conclusion, SRGBV has detrimental effects on students, teachers, parents and the entire community. Eliminating SRGBV is therefore not only a matter of protecting individual wellbeing, but also contributes to the establishment of more democratic, prosperous, sustainable, and peaceful societies.

Author contributions

VP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ST: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

References

Beyene, A. S., Chojenta, C., Roba, H. S., Melka, A. S., and Loxton, D. (2019). Gender-based violence among female youths in educational institutions of Sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Syst. Rev.* 8:59. doi: 10.1186/s13643-019-0969-9

Burke, P. J., Coffey, J., Parker, J., Hardacre, S., Cocuzzoli, F., Shaw, J., et al. (2023). 'It's a lot of shame': understanding the impact of gender-based violence on higher education access and participation. *Teach. High. Educ.* 30, 1–16. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2023.2243449

Dahal, P., Joshi, S. K., and Swahnberg, K. (2022). A qualitative study on gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nepal. *BMC Public Health* 22:2005. doi: 10.1186/s12889-022-14389-x

DeCrosta, L., and Spear, A. M. (2024). Hegemonic masculinity and institutional betrayal: an oppressive silencing of the feminist ear in Burkina Faso secondary schools. *Gend. Educ.* 36, 266–282. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2024.2320923

Eisen, S., Matthews, S. E., and Jirout, J. (2021). Parents' and children's gendered beliefs about toys and screen media. *J. Appl. Dev. Psychol.* 74:101276. doi: 10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101276

GEC (2023). *More Than Grades: The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning in Girls' Education*. London: UK Aid, Girl's Education Challenge.

GEMRT (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Gender Report. A New Generation: 25 Years of Efforts for Gender Equality in Education*. Paris: UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report Team.

Ginestra, C., Bella, N., and Eck, M. (2022). *School-related Gender-based Violence Impedes Inclusive Education of Good Quality*. Available online at: https://world-education-blog.org/2020/11/25/school-related-gender-based-violence-impedes-inclusive-education-of-good-quality/ (accessed January 10, 2025).

Holt, A., and Birchall, J. (2022). Student violence towards teaching assistants in UK schools: a case of gender-based violence. *Gend. Educ.* 35, 53–68. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2022.2142532

Kågesten, A. E., Oware, P. M., Ntinyari, W., Langat, N., Mboya, B., and Ekström, A. M. (2021). Young people's experiences with an empowerment-based behavior change intervention to prevent sexual violence in Nairobi informal settlements: a qualitative study. *Glob. Health Sci. Pract.* 9, 508–522. doi: 10.9745/GHSP-D-21-00105

Ollis, D., Iannucci, C., Keddie, A., Holland, E., Delaney, M., and Kearney, S. (2021). 'Bulldozers aren't just for boys': respectful relationships education challenges

gender bias in early primary students. *Int. J. Health Promot. Educ.* 60, 229–242. doi: 10.1080/14635240.2021.1875020

Pliogou, V., and Katsarou, V. (2024). *Pedagogical Comparative Approaches to Forms of Gender-based Violence in the Social-school Environment*. Teachers as Agents of Social Transformation. The example of Epirus. Athens: Grigori Publications [in Greek].

Pliogou, V., and Tromara, S. (2024). "Quality in education and sustainable development goals through the protection of seas and oceans: gender equality and global citizenship perspectives," in *Conference Proceedings. 1st International Scientific Conference of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education* (Niš: Pedagogical Faculty in Vranje), 479–495.

Setty, E., Ringrose, J., and Hunt, J. (2024). From 'harmful sexual behaviour' to 'harmful sexual culture': addressing school-related sexual and gender-based violence among young people in England through 'post-digital sexual citizenship.' *Gend. Educ.* 36, 434–452. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2024.2348534

Standish, K., Devere, H., Suazo, A. E., and Rafferty, R. (2022). "Introduction. Defining the platform of positive peace," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace*, eds. K. Standish, H. Devere, A. E. Suazo, and R. Rafferty (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan), 4–24. doi: 10.1007/978-981-16-0969-5

Tanton, C., Bhatia, A., Pearlman, J., and Devries, K. (2023). Increasing disclosure of school-related gender-based violence: lessons from a systematic review of data collection methods and existing survey research. *BMC Public Health* 23:1012. doi: 10.1186/s12889-023-15526-w

UNESCO and UN Women (2016). *Global Guidance on Addressing School-related Gender-Based Violence*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO and UNGEI (2023). *School Violence: Why Gender Matters and How to Measure School-Related Gender-Based Violence*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNGEI (2024). *Frequently Asked Questions: School-Related Gender-Based Violence*. New York, NY: UNGEI.

Valtýsdóttir, B. S., and Halldórsdóttir, B. E. (2025). Construction of gender-based violence in prevention material in the Icelandic education system: a critical discourse analysis. *NORA—Nord. J. Fem. Gend. Res.* 1–14. doi: 10.1080/08038740.2025.2452540

Vanner, C. (2021). Education about gender-based violence: opportunities and obstacles in the Ontario secondary school curriculum. *Gend. Educ.* 34, 134–150. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2021.1884193