



## BRIEF 2: UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Different social and health problems have different types of causes. We need to understand these various causes in order to develop effective prevention programmes. For example, the diagram (on the next page) gives two models of causation from the field of public health, which can help us understand the causes of violence against women (VAW):

► **Necessary direct cause: Malaria parasite | Malaria**

A mosquito infected with malaria parasites bites you. The parasite is a direct cause and is necessary for you to get malaria.

► **Multiple, overlapping causes | Heart disease**

Obesity, hypertension, smoking and eating fatty foods are all 'risk factors' that increase the probability of a heart attack. But the presence of one factor alone is less likely to result in heart disease. As with heart disease, VAW has multiple causes. Its prevention requires strategies that address multiple, inter-related risk factors and situational triggers.

### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Here, we introduce the multiple causes of VAW and how to analyse these factors in different contexts.

This brief, like others in the series, is designed to support practitioners, activists and policy makers to develop prevention programmes and initiatives to prevent VAW using a feminist-inspired approach.

## MODELS OF CAUSATION

### NECESSARY, DIRECT CAUSE

MALARIA PARASITE -> MALARIA



### MULTIPLE, OVERLAPPING CAUSES

-> HEART DISEASE



### WHY FOCUS ON CAUSES?

VAW is caused by multiple factors. Gender inequality is a powerful driver of VAW, and various risk factors and situational triggers make violence more likely. Understanding these multiple causes and how they intersect can help us develop programmes to address them and prevent violence. At the same time, there are certain protective factors that can be strengthened to lower the likelihood of violence occurring.

### CAUSALITY: UNDERSTANDING TERMS

- ▶ **RISK FACTOR:** A characteristic of an individual, setting or society that increases the likelihood of violence occurring.
- ▶ **PROTECTIVE FACTOR:** A characteristic of an individual, setting or society that reduces the likelihood of violence occurring.
- ▶ **SITUATIONAL TRIGGER:** An immediate event or circumstance which can precipitate an incident of violence.

## RISK FACTORS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

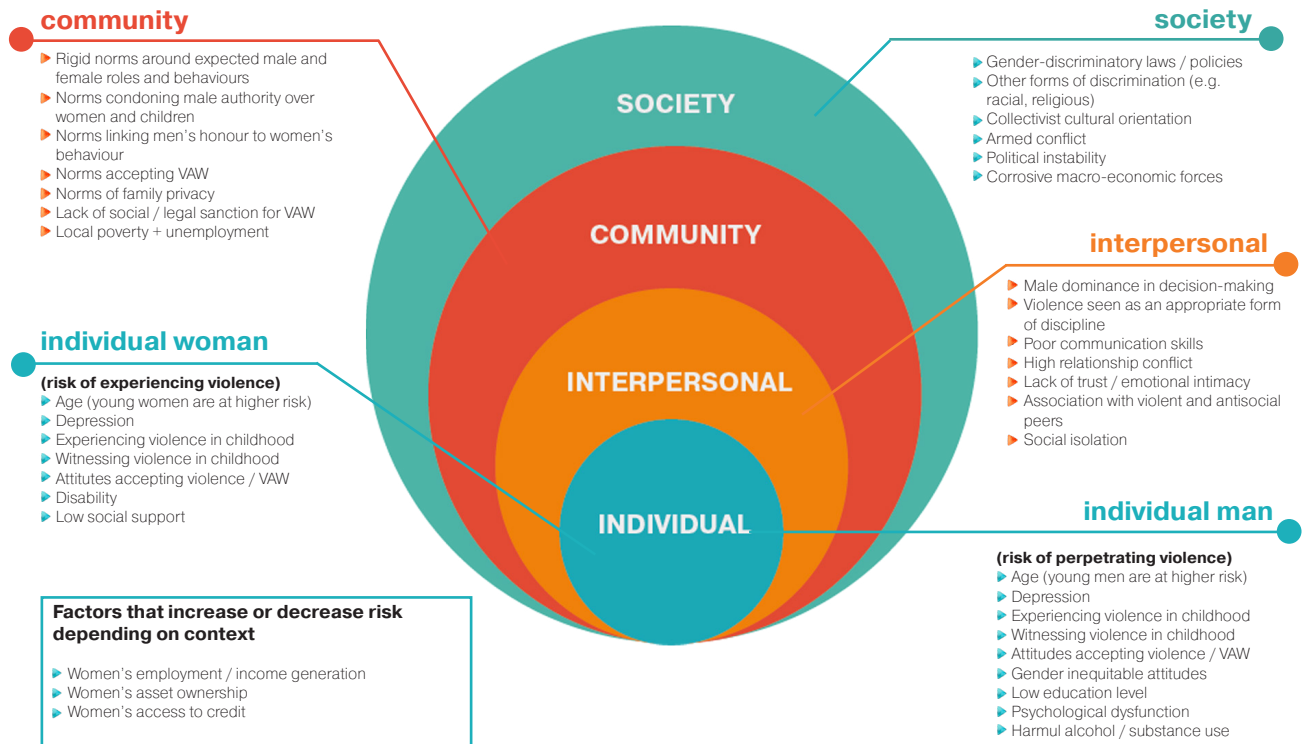
The socio-ecological model is a useful tool to explore the interaction between multiple factors operating across and within different levels: individual, interpersonal, community and societal<sup>1</sup>. The model can be used to analyse how risk factors at different levels intersect to increase or decrease the likelihood of violence. Since different types of violence (e.g. IPV, non-partner sexual violence, female genital cutting) have distinct risk factors that may vary in different settings, a socio-ecological model is most useful when it is tailored to a specific type of violence and specific setting. In this brief, we use a socio-ecological model for **IPV in heterosexual relationships**.

- ▶ The wider **society** comprises the broader environment that either enables or inhibits IPV, including relevant policy and legislative frameworks and economic and cultural influences.
- ▶ The **community** level captures the factors in the immediate environment that encourage, condone or create a local enabling environment for men to perpetrate IPV.
- ▶ The **interpersonal** level comprises factors in relationships that increase the risk of IPV. Depending

on the setting, this may include factors operating at the level of intimate partners, a family, and/or a peer or friendship network. In intimate partner relationships, these risk factors need to be understood alongside a set of specific situational triggers that can precipitate an incident of violence.

- ▶ At the **individual** level, risk factors related to individual attributes, developmental (childhood) histories and behaviours can increase the likelihood of men perpetrating violence and women experiencing violence.

The diagram below lists risk factors which have been shown through research in multiple settings to increase the risks of men perpetrating IPV and women experiencing IPV. These risk factors can be reframed as protective factors. For example, social isolation can increase the likelihood of women experiencing violence while social support can decrease it. The most salient risk and protective factors may vary in different settings, and there may be additional risk and protective factors in certain settings.

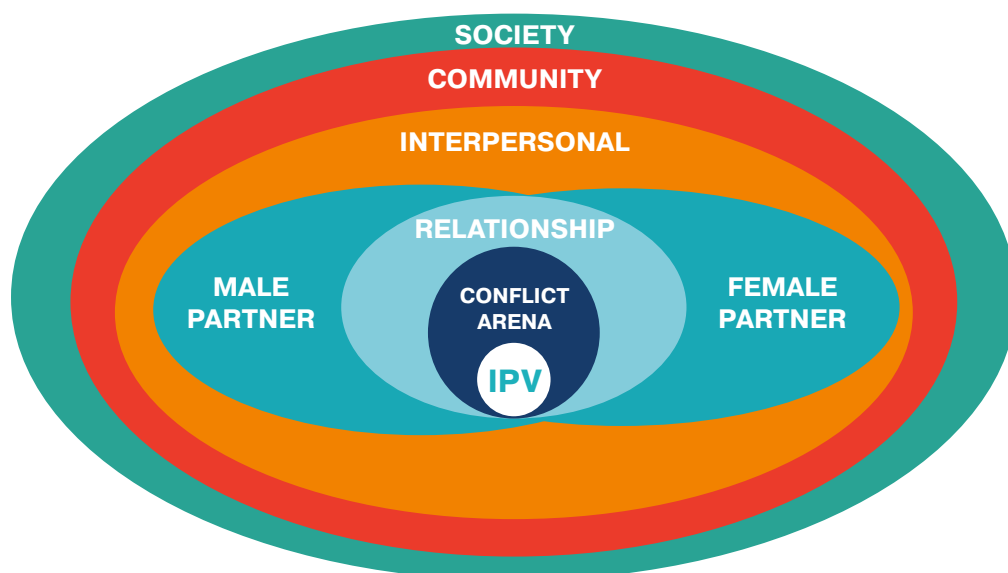


## WHERE DOES GENDER INEQUALITY FIT?

Systemic gender inequality, which exists in nearly all societies across the world, is a powerful driver of men's violence against women. In most societies, men have greater access to power and resources than women. These gender inequalities are created and reinforced at every level of the socio-ecological model, for example, through discriminatory social norms, practices and structures within families, communities and institutions.

## SITUATIONAL TRIGGERS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Recent research on IPV in heterosexual relationships has identified **situational triggers** — immediate events or circumstances that can cause conflict in a relationship and precipitate an episode of violence — such as excessive drinking, jealousy and disagreements about household spending. Some of these situational triggers relate to instances where a woman or man fails to meet certain gendered expectations. For example, a man may beat a woman as a form of “discipline” for some perceived domestic infraction such as failure to prepare a meal or to care for the children “properly”. Likewise, conflict can arise if a man does not bring home sufficient money for the household, thus failing to meet gendered expectations of men as providers. Feelings of shame, inadequacy or anger can prompt men to respond violently, especially if they feel their authority or masculinity is somehow threatened.



### SITUATIONAL TRIGGERS

- ▶ (Perceived) failures to meet gendered expectations
- ▶ Women's challenge to male authority/perceived disobedience
- ▶ Reaction to women working / earning income Men's failure to provide economically
- ▶ Women's perceived inadequacy in domestic sphere
- ▶ Refusal of sex, especially in marriage
- ▶ Behaviours perceived to threaten family honour
- ▶ Jealousy and accusations of infidelity
- ▶ Disagreements over money or resources
- ▶ Arguments over alcohol or substance use
- ▶ Discord around children's care or behaviour
- ▶ Intoxication
- ▶ Other stressors/shocks



### AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

When understanding the causes of VAW, it is important to identify the ways in which gender inequality intersects with other sources of oppression and discrimination, power and privilege. These intersections can increase the risk, severity and/or frequency of experiencing violence for specific women.

An intersectional approach analyses how women's experiences of violence are shaped by their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, (dis)ability and geographic location as well as legacies of slavery, colonisation and ethnic conflict<sup>3, 4</sup>. This approach is essential to ensure that prevention initiatives are tailored to women's diverse needs and do not compound exclusion.

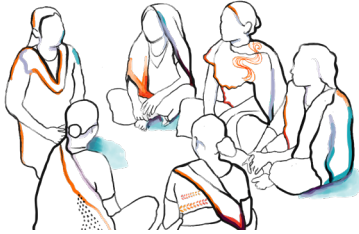
### APPROACHES TO ADDRESS DIFFERENT FACTORS

Violence prevention programmes can address underlying gender inequalities, risk factors and situational triggers either individually or in combination across the different levels of the socio-ecological model. To understand which factors are most relevant in a specific context, it is important to read existing studies, commission research or build on your own learning on the causes of violence in this specific setting. The table overleaf gives some examples of approaches to address specific factors at different levels. Individual programmes need to prioritise the most relevant factors and develop a clear theory of change for their approach.



## SOCIETAL LEVEL

- ▶ Promote positive social movements against violence.
- ▶ Amend laws and policies that discriminate against women.
- ▶ Widely publicise laws that prohibit VAW.
- ▶ Guarantee women's equal access to employment, wages, political participation, access to credit and ownership of property.
- ▶ Increase budgets for healthcare and education for women and children.
- ▶ Address poverty and malnutrition through national social protection programmes.



## WITHIN COMMUNITY

- ▶ Challenge norms that sustain violence and justify gender inequality.
- ▶ Promote flexible roles and gender norms for women and men.
- ▶ Reduce stigma and increase support for victims of violence.
- ▶ Support legal and community sanctions against violence.
- ▶ Facilitate women's access to employment and the public sphere.
- ▶ Develop local interventions to tackle poverty and deprivation.
- ▶ Promote local collective activism against violence.



## INTERPERSONAL (WITHIN HOUSEHOLDS)

- ▶ Reduce harsh punishment.
- ▶ Reduce exposure to violence in the family.
- ▶ Teach positive, nonviolent strategies for disciplining children.
- ▶ Challenge gender inequality and gendered division of labour in the household.
- ▶ Improve livelihoods to reduce poverty, deprivation and unemployment.



## INTIMATE PARTNERS

- ▶ Catalyse reflection on inequitable gender roles, responsibilities and entitlements.
- ▶ Enhance communication skills between partners.
- ▶ Build capacity in conflict resolution, shared decision making and managing finances.
- ▶ Foster sexual intimacy, including full consent.
- ▶ Encourage shared responsibility for childcare and domestic labour
- ▶ Promote empathy and deep listening.



## WOMEN

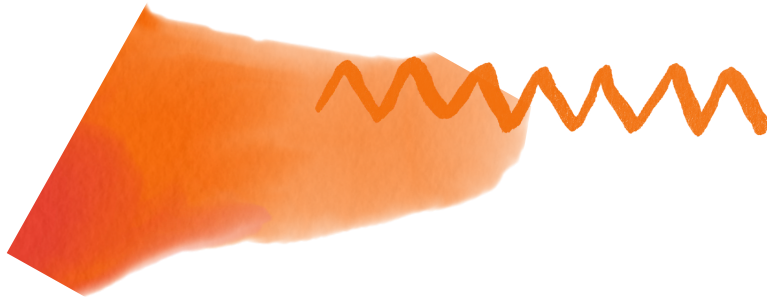
- ▶ Promote social and economic empowerment.
- ▶ Challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs around gender and violence.
- ▶ Cultivate critical reflection skills, assertiveness, leadership, self-efficacy and other capabilities.
- ▶ Improve mental health and address unresolved trauma and depression.



## MEN

- ▶ Reduce harmful alcohol use.
- ▶ Improve mental health and address unresolved trauma and depression.
- ▶ Challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs around gender and violence.
- ▶ Improve communication and emotional regulation skills.
- ▶ Strengthen livelihood options.





## WHAT'S NEXT?

Brief 3 introduces different types of prevention programmes, who they target, how they work and specific examples of successful programmes.

## REFERENCES

1. Heise, L. (1998). Violence against women: An integrated, ecological framework. *Violence against Women*, 4(3), 262-290. For the full article see [https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Heise\\_1998\\_ecological\\_model.pdf](https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Heise_1998_ecological_model.pdf)
2. Michau, L., Horn, J., Bank, A., Dutt, M., & Zimmerman, C. (2015). Prevention of violence against women and girls: Lessons from practice. *The Lancet*, 385(9978), 1672–1684. For full article see [http://10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61797-9](http://10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9)
3. Keel, M., Torney, J., Fulu, E., McCook, S., Holmes, S., Hunt, M., Lay, Y., & Warczak, C. (2017). Putting the prevention of violence against women into practice: How to change the story. Melbourne: Our Watch, Australia. For full article see [https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Our-Watch\\_2017\\_Putting-Prevention-into-Practice-1.pdf](https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Our-Watch_2017_Putting-Prevention-into-Practice-1.pdf)
4. The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African-American legal scholar.



The Prevention Collaborative works to strengthen the ability of key actors to deliver cutting edge violence prevention programmes informed by research-based evidence, practice-based learning and feminist principles. For more information go to [www.prevention-collaborative.org](http://www.prevention-collaborative.org)

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