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Review

Teaching Equity to Prevent Violence: The ANULA School-SAFE Framework Across Continents

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Abstract

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global health issue with significant physical, psychological, and social consequences. Schools, as universal knowledge distribution institutions, hold unique potential for prevention yet remain underutilized. This paper introduces the ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework, a four-pillar model (Safeguard, Act, Foster, Empower) designed to embed equity, safety, and resilience within school systems across diverse cultural and resource contexts. The ANULA project integrates safeguarding measures, spiral curricula, teacher training, family and faith engagement, inclusion strategies, digital safety, and survivor support into a comprehensive prevention approach. By co-producing interventions with communities and aligning with global strategies the framework positions education systems as transformative levers for generational change. The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework offers policymakers and educators a practical, scalable roadmap to prevent VAWG and foster safer, more equitable school environments worldwide.

Keywords: violence against women and girls; SCHOOL-SAFE framework; school-based interventions; safeguard; act; foster; empower

Background

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most pervasive and intractable global health challenges, undermining human rights and threatening sustainable development across all regions [1]. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, most often at the hands of intimate partners, with profound effects on physical, psychological, and reproductive health. Beyond individual harms, VAWG destabilises communities, entrenches economic inequalities, and obstructs achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite advances in legal reform and service provision, prevention remains limited, fragmented, and culturally contested. Schools, which reach nearly every child and adolescent worldwide, are uniquely positioned to act as transformative spaces where norms of equity, safety, and respect can be embedded across generations [2].

VAWG emerges from a complex interplay of structural inequalities, harmful masculinities, poverty, conflict, and intergenerational trauma. In many societies, children witness or experience violence within households, communities, and increasingly online, normalising coercion and exploitation [3]. Adolescence represents a critical developmental period when gendered beliefs

consolidate, yet most education systems remain silent on prevention. Where school-based interventions do exist, they are often isolated donor-funded pilots that lack sustainability, scale, and alignment with national curricula.

Schools themselves can also perpetuate harm. School-related gender-based violence including sexual harassment, corporal punishment, and bullying based on gender, sexuality, disability, or ethnicity remains widespread across geographies. Without deliberate, systemic interventions, schools risk reinforcing rather than challenging cycles of violence. Embedding a comprehensive, rights-based, and culturally responsive prevention approach within schools is therefore both an ethical and practical imperative [4].

Geographical Variability and Prevalence

VAWG is universal, yet its patterns differ by geography. In Asia, intimate partner violence affects up to 40% of women in South Asia, exacerbated by practices such as dowry violence and child marriage [5]. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than one-third of women report lifetime exposure to violence, with prevalence magnified in conflict zones and intersecting with harmful practices such as female genital mutilation [6]. South America experiences some of the highest femicide rates globally, where “machismo” cultures and organised crime expose adolescent girls to harassment and early pregnancy [7]. In Europe, one in five women report intimate partner violence, with migrant and refugee populations facing compounded risks linked to racism, poverty, and social exclusion [8]. North America reports high levels of dating violence among adolescents, with up to 20% of teenage girls reporting sexual assault in schools; technology-facilitated abuse has surged, intersecting with entrenched racial and socio-economic inequalities. These variations underscore the necessity for a prevention framework that is globally coherent but adaptable to cultural, religious, and geopolitical contexts.

Rationale for a School-Based Prevention Framework

Schools are central to prevention for three reasons. First, they are universal institutions that cut across rural, urban, private, and public systems, reaching children in fragile, transitional, and high-income contexts alike. Second, they are norm-setting environments: schools shape peer interactions, identity formation, and the values of future citizens, making them powerful sites to shift attitudes towards equity and non-violence. Third, schools provide infrastructure for protection, offering safe spaces for disclosure and pathways to services.

However, no single model can meet the needs of all contexts. A prevention framework must be tiered and culturally responsive, ensuring relevance in low-resource rural schools as well as urban private institutions. It must engage with cultural and religious narratives without compromising universal human rights. To address this challenge, we propose the ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework, a ten-step model adaptable across regions and resource settings.

Theoretical Underpinning

The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework (Figure 1) is grounded in three complementary theoretical traditions. First, **ecological systems theory** positions schools at the centre of a multilayered environment, linking children to families, communities, and broader sociopolitical systems; interventions within schools can therefore influence both immediate peer interactions and wider cultural and policy contexts. Second, **social norms theory** highlights how violence is sustained through beliefs about what is typical and acceptable; adolescence is a critical window for shifting these norms, and school-based curricula, peer-led initiatives, and engagement with families and faith leaders provide opportunities to realign them towards equity and non-violence. Third, drawing on **resilience and protection frameworks** and the WHO RESPECT strategies, the model emphasises that pedagogy must be inseparable from safeguarding: confidential reporting systems, safe facilities, and referral pathways create environments where young people can disclose safely and develop

resilience. Collectively, these theories underpin ANULA as a **multi-level, norm-transforming, resilience-promoting approach** that positions schools as both educational and protective institutions capable of catalysing generational change, as indicated in Table-1.

Table 1. The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework for prevention of VAWG in schools.

Step	Title	Brief Description
1	Secure commitment	Establish political mandates, cross-ministerial steering groups, and civil society participation.
2	Co-produce context analysis	Map local drivers of violence with youth, parents, teachers, and faith/community leaders.
3	Define tiered packages	Develop Essential, Enhanced, and Full interventions to suit resource levels and school types.
4	Build spiral curriculum	Deliver age-appropriate content from empathy and respect in early primary to rights, consent, and healthy relationships in upper secondary. Beyond life skills, integrate gender-sensitive content into language, social sciences, STEM, and vocational training.
5	Invest in teachers	Provide trauma-informed training, supervised practice, and wellbeing supports.
6	Make schools protective	Establish safeguarding policies, safe facilities, reporting systems, and referral pathways.
7	Engage families and faith leaders	Partner with parents and religious leaders to reinforce shared values and prevent backlash.
8	Address inclusion	Ensure accessibility and responsiveness to disability, ethnicity, LGBTQ+, migrant and minority groups.
9	Integrate digital safety	Embed media literacy, cyber-safety, and policies to prevent technology-facilitated violence.
10	Monitor and adapt	Collect and review indicators on knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and incidents to inform improvements.
11	Encourage male engagement	Develop initiatives for boys and young men that challenge harmful masculinities and promote positive role models
12	Support survivors within schools	Provide confidential counseling, psychosocial support, flexible learning options, and reintegration plans for affected students.
13	Build resilience and life skills	Teach coping strategies, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and negotiation to reduce vulnerability and build protective factors.

Summary of Framework

The acronym SAFE stands for 4 pillars of *Safeguard, Act, Foster, and Empower*. It aligns with the 10 steps (supplement-1) based on the four pillars (Table 2) that are easy to use in training, policy, and advocacy.

Table 2. indicates the pillars of the ANULA-School SAFE framework.

SAFE Pillar	Core Areas	Linked ANULA Steps
Safeguard	Policies, safe facilities, DSOs, digital safety	Steps 6, 9 (Supplement 1)
Act	Context analysis, tiered packages, reporting, monitoring	Steps 2, 3, 10 (Supplement 1)
Foster	Spiral curriculum, teacher training, family engagement, inclusion	Steps 4, 5, 7, 8 (Supplement 1)
Empower	Life skills, teacher capacity, peer mentors, M&E	Steps 1, 5, 10 (Supplement 1)

SAFE Pillar 1: Safeguard

Creating protective school environments is the foundation of prevention. Safeguarding means more than drafting policies which require embedding safety into daily school life. For girls-only schools, safeguarding focuses on protection from sexual harassment, pressure of early marriage, and provision of menstrual hygiene facilities such as lockable toilets. Boys-only schools must prioritise preventing initiation violence, bullying, and the reinforcement of toxic masculinities. In mixed-gender schools, safeguarding is centred on addressing harassment between genders and ensuring safe, equitable participation for all. Across all settings, safeguarding must be supported by well-trained Designated Safeguarding Officers (DSOs) who provide confidential, trusted pathways for disclosures. Infrastructure also plays a role: secure toilets, supervised playgrounds, and accessible facilities for students with disabilities signal that schools are serious about protection. In the digital age, safeguarding must also extend to the online environment, with ICT codes of conduct and anti-cyberbullying measures woven into school practice.

SAFE Pillar 2: Act

Prevention demands proactive and decisive action. Schools must first understand their context by co-producing analysis with students, parents, teachers, and faith leaders, identifying drivers of violence and protective factors. This ensures interventions are grounded in local realities, whether in rural, resource-limited settings or urban, better-resourced environments. Reporting and referral systems must then link children to external services such as health care, social protection, and justice essential when disclosures involve abuse beyond the school. For instance, a girl reporting harassment in a girls-only school must be swiftly referred to counselling and protection services, while boys-only schools may require pathways that emphasise mental health and behavioural interventions. Mixed schools must offer confidential reporting options sensitive to both genders. To ensure equity, interventions should be tiered into Essential, Enhanced, and Full packages, allowing all schools to participate at the level their resources allow. Monitoring of incidents bullying, harassment, and violence ensures accountability and strengthens the culture of safety.

SAFE Pillar 3: Foster

Beyond protection and action, schools must actively foster positive relationships and cultures. The spiral curriculum provides an age-appropriate roadmap, beginning with empathy and kindness in early primary years, progressing to gender norms and fairness in upper primary, and expanding to rights, consent, and healthy relationships in secondary school. Teachers are pivotal in delivering this change, yet many lack training in handling sensitive issues. Trauma-informed professional development, peer learning groups, and wellbeing supports enable teachers to model respectful behaviours and confidently respond to student needs. Crucially, families and faith leaders must be engaged, since their influence often outweighs school messages. Constructive dialogue prevents backlash and builds shared ownership. Fostering inclusion is equally important: in girls-only schools, this means recognising the intersecting challenges of disability and minority backgrounds; in boys-only schools, it means tackling stereotypes of masculinity and supporting LGBTQ+ boys; in mixed

schools, it requires building genuinely inclusive classrooms where all students feel represented. By fostering respect, schools transform from sites of risk into sites of resilience.

SAFE Pillar 4: Empower

The ultimate goal of ANULA's SAFE framework is empowerment. Schools must equip students with the skills and confidence to thrive in safe, equal, and respectful environments. Life skills, critical thinking, media literacy, and cyber-safety training enable children to navigate risks in both physical and digital spaces. Girls-only schools may use empowerment strategies such as peer mentorship, connecting younger students with older role models who exemplify leadership and resilience. Boys-only schools can nurture peer champions who challenge harmful norms and promote positive masculinities. In mixed schools, joint peer mentoring initiatives can strengthen gender equality and foster collaboration. Teachers too must be empowered as agents of change, supported through continuing professional development and recognition as role models. Finally, empowerment is institutional: schools must embed robust monitoring and evaluation systems that inform adaptive learning and policy reform, ensuring programmes grow stronger over time. By embedding empowerment, schools move beyond protection into creating generations of young people who can lead cultural and structural change.

The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework rests on three principles: curriculum, protection, and cultural adaptation. Its spiral curriculum builds knowledge and skills progressively across age groups, while safeguarding protocols ensure that disclosure leads to support, not further harm. Its tiered design of Essential, Enhanced, and Full enables adaptation to resource levels: a rural school may focus on six core lessons and simple safeguarding measures, whereas an urban private school may integrate counselling, digital monitoring, and structured community outreach. Co-production with communities and faith leaders enhances legitimacy, while inclusion safeguards the needs of disabled, marginalised, and minority learners.

Discussion

The framework advances four critical arguments. First, schools are the most effective lever for primary prevention. By embedding prevention in curricula, societies move beyond temporary pilots towards universal reach, ensuring every child acquires tools to recognise, resist, and reject violence. Second, cultural and geopolitical responsiveness is indispensable. Interventions must resonate with local traditions and religious values drawing on positive concepts such as dignity, compassion, and justice while naming harmful practices such as child marriage, FGM/C, or femicide. In fragile states, schools may be among the few stable institutions, while in high-income countries, they are frontline sites against digital and dating violence. This makes prevention in schools both a local and geopolitical necessity. Third, protection must underpin pedagogy. Without safeguarding, curricula risk surfacing disclosures that cannot be addressed, exposing children to retaliation. Whole-school protective environments including safe facilities, codes of conduct, and staff accountability are therefore non-negotiable. Fourth, measurement drives accountability and policy alignment. Tracking changes in knowledge, attitudes, and reporting enables iterative improvement, strengthens national education systems, and provides evidence to meet international commitments such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the SDGs. Transparent data, communicated back to communities, sustains trust and legitimises reform.

Collectively, these imperatives demonstrate that the ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework is not merely educational but also a policy instrument with global resonance. It can align with WHO's RESPECT framework, UN Women's prevention strategies, and national women's health policies, while addressing the geopolitical reality that without prevention, VAWG undermines security, economic productivity, and democratic stability.

The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework represents an important step towards creating safer, more equitable school environments by addressing VAWG through a structured yet adaptable approach. Built on the four pillars of Safeguard, Act, Foster, and Empower, it aligns closely with

global evidence supporting the whole-school approach to preventing school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). This approach, endorsed by UNESCO and UN Women, emphasizes policies, teacher training, child participation, reporting systems, and engagement with communities as central strategies [4]. Similarly, evidence from child-friendly schools demonstrates that holistic interventions combining safety, inclusion, and wellbeing significantly reduce risks of violence and discrimination [9].

A key strength of the framework lies in its holistic and tiered design. By organizing interventions into four accessible pillars and developing Essential, Enhanced, and Full packages, it allows schools across diverse resource settings to participate meaningfully. This flexibility ensures that rural, under-resourced schools can implement core protective measures, while urban or private schools can scale up to include counselling, digital monitoring, and structured community outreach. Such adaptability is essential for ensuring both equity and sustainability of interventions.

The framework also highlights the importance of co-production and cultural adaptation. Involving students, parents, teachers, and faith leaders in context analysis fosters legitimacy and shared ownership, making interventions more responsive to local drivers of violence. This aligns with broader evidence that community engagement is crucial in preventing backlash and ensuring lasting cultural change [10].

The spiral curriculum and emphasis on teacher capacity building further strengthen the framework. By progressively teaching empathy, fairness, gender norms, rights, consent, and healthy relationships, the curriculum offers a developmentally appropriate roadmap for prevention. Teachers are recognized as pivotal agents of change, yet they often lack training in handling sensitive issues. Trauma-informed professional development, peer learning, and wellbeing supports equip teachers to model respectful behaviours and respond effectively to disclosures, echoing best practices identified in international research [11].

Safeguarding measures are also given a broad and inclusive scope. Physical safety through secure toilets, supervised playgrounds, and disability-friendly facilities is integrated with digital safety protocols, such as ICT codes of conduct and anti-cyberbullying strategies. This dual emphasis acknowledges the reality that risks to young people occur in both physical and online environments, where exposure to harmful content and cyber-violence is increasing [12].

Perhaps the most innovative element of the framework is its focus on empowerment. Moving beyond protection, it equips students with life skills, media literacy, and peer mentorship opportunities to build agency. Girls-only schools may use peer role models, boys-only schools may cultivate positive masculinities, and mixed schools may adopt joint mentoring approaches. Teachers are also empowered as role models and leaders through professional development and recognition. By embedding robust monitoring and evaluation systems, the framework ensures continuous learning and adaptation, positioning empowerment not only at the individual level but also at the institutional and systemic levels.

Despite these strengths, there are areas where the framework could be enhanced. For example, international guidance underscores the importance of school leadership and governance structures in sustaining safe school climates [13]. Explicit mechanisms for accountability, such as designated safeguarding or VAWG leads, would strengthen implementation. Additionally, while the framework promotes community engagement, it could go further by incorporating student and survivor voices into design and monitoring processes, ensuring that lived experiences directly inform interventions [10]. Another emerging area is digital regulation. With growing evidence of online violence and normalization of harmful behaviors, schools may need clearer smartphone and online safety policies to complement safeguarding efforts [14].

Conclusions

VAWG is not inevitable. It is preventable when education systems move beyond rhetoric and embed prevention into their very foundations. The ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework provides a strategic pathway adaptable across Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, and North America,

spanning public and private systems in rural, semi-rural, and urban settings. By uniting curriculum, culture, and care, it offers a generational opportunity to shift norms and protect rights. The challenge is implementation: securing political will, resourcing safeguarding, and scaling interventions with fidelity. If acted upon, schools can become the frontline of a global movement to end violence against women and girls, an investment in equity, stability, and peace for future generations.

Overall, the ANULA SCHOOL-SAFE framework is well aligned with global best practices and provides a clear, adaptable roadmap for preventing VAWG in schools. Its strength lies in its comprehensive design, emphasis on co-production, and focus on empowerment. With additional integration of governance mechanisms, survivor engagement, and digital policies, the framework has strong potential to transform schools into protective, empowering spaces that not only prevent violence but also foster resilience and equity for future generations.

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