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Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

BRIEFING

Preventing intimate partner violence among young people

The role of comprehensive sexuality education

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Key findings

- Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) has real potential to help prevent intimate partner violence (IPV) by enabling adolescents to question dominant and harmful social norms.

- Research on the impact of a 20-hour CSE programme for secondary-school students in Mexico finds that the proportion who could identify where they could get help in cases of violence more than doubled, and participants learned to identify more types of IPV after the intervention. There were significant shifts in reported attitudes, with fewer participants seeing violence as a private matter or ruling out the possibility of having gay friends. Participants engaged in critical reflection about gender norms, sexuality and the acceptability of violence, for example questioning whether jealousy and possessive behaviors are signs of love. They also began to address controlling behavior in their own relationships and felt prepared to seek support and service in case of IPV.

- Four of the key elements in this success were: encouraging participants to reflect about relationships, sexuality and violence; helping them to communicate more freely on previously taboo subjects; challenging discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity; and showing them where and how to seek health care and other support.

- The findings reinforce the importance of schools, both as settings for violence and for its prevention, including within relationships. They suggest that this promising and potentially scalable approach should be considered for inclusion in Mexico's educational curricula, and could be adapted and tested in diverse Mexican contexts as well as other countries to assess its impact on violence fuelled by social and gender norms elsewhere.

Background

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) may help prevent intimate partner violence (IPV) among young people by addressing the harmful gender norms that perpetuate inequitable relationships and violence. Despite its potential, few evaluations of CSE interventions have measured IPV or changes in related attitudes and social norms. Instead, they tend to document reductions in HIV, sexually transmitted infection and unintended pregnancy rates (Fonner et al. 2014; Kirby, 2008).

To address this gap in the evidence base, our study examines how a CSE intervention in Mexico may help to address unequal gender norms, prevent partner violence and encourage critical thinking among students aged 14 to 17 in Mexico City. The 20-hour curriculum by Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar (Mexfam) covers a comprehensive set of topics and is implemented in full by well-trained health educators.

Our findings suggest that comprehensive sexuality education of this nature can be an effective and feasible strategy to support prevention of and response to intimate partner violence among young people, in part by contributing to a process of shifting attitudes and gendered social norms. We identified four elements of the course that seem central to the process of violence prevention.

1. Encouraging participants to reflect about romantic relationships, which helped them question whether jealousy and possessive behaviour are signs of love.
2. Helping young people develop skills to communicate about sexuality, inequitable relationships and reproductive health.
3. Demystifying sexual diversity to tackle discrimination against people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and gender-non conforming.
4. Encouraging participants to seek health care and other support.

Schools are important places for such prevention programmes because of the violence, including within relationships, that often occurs in these settings. This promising and relatively short-term intervention could be integrated into educational curricula and expanded to reach more young people in Mexico. It could also be tested elsewhere to examine whether it has an impact on beliefs and practices around violence in other settings. This brief shares key findings from the study, guiding principles for CSE programming and policy recommendations.

Introduction

The World Health Organization defines partner violence as any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm. Around the world, harmful gender norms fuel violence and inequitable relationships. Interventions that reduce gender-based violence often ask participants to question power relations between genders as a way to contribute to gender equality – referred to as a 'gender-transformative approach' (Dworkin et al., 2015; Fulu and Kerr-Wilson, 2015; Heise, 2011). Another important aspect of violence prevention is working with both men and women, whether separately or together (Jewkes et al., 2015). These and other elements that matter for violence prevention are included in international standards for CSE (UNESCO, 2018; Haberland et al., 2009), positioning sexuality education as a plausible intervention strategy to prevent IPV.

Intimate partner violence is common in Mexico. According to recent estimates, 43.9% of women aged 15 years and older in Mexico report at least one incident of partner violence in their lifetime. In 2009, the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), which provides education at high school, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, conducted a study on relationship dynamics with 14,000 students, mostly aged 14 to 17. More than half of all participants reported romantic jealousy in their relationship, while 10% of women and 13% of men reported that they had used controlling behaviour more than once in a relationship, including monitoring their partner's cell phone, email or social media. The researchers argue that such possessive behaviour is often seen as a display of caring, but may really signal or lead to violence in the relationship (Tronco Rosas and Ocaña López, 2012).

Nearly 39% of Mexico's population are younger than 20 years old (United Nations, 2016), and school attendance rates are high – 98% in primary and 79% in secondary school (UNICEF, 2015). As such, school-based CSE has the potential to reach millions of adolescents across the country (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018) and could help to prevent IPV by changing mindsets at a crucial moment.

Research objectives and partners

This study examined how Mexfam's comprehensive sexuality education may help to prevent intimate partner violence and build more equitable relationships among students in Mexico City. Mexfam is a national non-governmental organization that provides general health services with a focus on sexual and reproductive health through its clinical, educational and community-based programming. In 2016 the organization revised its CSE curriculum to include content to prevent IPV. Mexfam partnered with the International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region (IPPF/WHR) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) to pilot, implement and evaluate the revised curriculum.

The intervention and study setting

The 20-hour CSE course examined in this study is delivered over one semester in weekly sessions. The course facilitators are young people employed as staff health educators for Mexfam's Gente Joven ('Young People') programme. Each educator delivers the course to a group of around 20 participants aged 14 to 17.

The course engages a gender-transformative approach, with gender and power dynamics as cross-cutting themes, and participatory activities that encourage critical reflection on violence and gendered social norms. The course spans a comprehensive set of topics that include sexuality, IPV, unintended pregnancy and equitable relationships. Participants also receive information on where and how to seek support for their sexual and reproductive health needs, how they can address IPV, and their right to seek health services.

The study took place at a state-run technical secondary school in the southern part of Mexico City, with students from lower-middle income families. School leadership signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to host the study, and Mexfam committed to provide CSE and organize a health fair.

Methods

In 2017 and 2018, we conducted a longitudinal quasi-experimental study, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. In the planning phase, programme and research staff from the three partner organizations collaborated on the development of a theory of change on how the CSE course might affect participants. We used this to inform data collection and analysis.

We studied 157 students who were receiving the CSE programme (the intervention group) and 120 students who would not receive the programme until the following semester (the comparison group). Within the intervention group, we invited 47 students to participate in focus groups and interviews. We sampled to ensure diversity in terms of self-reported age, sex, relationship status, sexual history and history of violence. All students were in their first semester of a bachillerato programme, the equivalent of high school. We also invited five teachers and five facilitators to participate in separate focus groups[1].

The data collection methods used in this study comprised observation of CSE sessions, baseline and endline questionnaires with all participants, 'case studies' consisting of monthly interviews throughout and after the intervention, one-off in-depth interviews with intervention group students conducted 2 to 3 months after the intervention ended, and focus group discussions with students, teachers and CSE facilitators after the intervention concluded.

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1   We gave all focus group and interview participants a gift card as compensation for their time and offered them subsidised services through Mexfam's network of clinics. This study was approved by the LSHTM Research Ethics Committee in the UK and Bioética y Ciencia para la Investigación (CICA) in Mexico.

As a result of unforeseen external circumstances that disrupted the school cycle, including an earthquake early in the semester that led to school closures and reduced the research timeframe, baseline and endline questionnaires could not be implemented as planned. This compromised the validity of quantitative endline data for the comparison group; we therefore excluded comparison group data from the baseline-endline quantitative analysis presented here.

Quantitative findings

Course participation and participant characteristics

There were high levels of participation in the intervention, especially among female students. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction across all areas of the course, with young women more likely than young men to report being satisfied with every aspect of the course.

Among the 240 participants who completed baseline questionnaires, 52% were in the intervention group and 48% in the comparison group. The median age was 15, with half of respondents identifying as male and half as female. Twenty two percent reported being not religious, two-thirds being slightly religious, and 10% somewhat religious. Nearly two thirds (63%) of participants reported having had a romantic relationship, 32% having engaged in sexual contact, 10% having engaged in sexual contact without wanting to, and 11% having experienced some form of relationship violence. When asked at baseline about the school environment, 19% of participants reported having seen or experienced relationship violence at school and 34% having seen or experienced sexual harassment at school.

At baseline, 71% of respondents self-reported as heterosexual, 12% as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and 17% preferred not to say. At endline, the proportion in the intervention group reporting that they identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual increased from 15% to 21%, and those who preferred not to say decreased from 9% to 5%, while the proportion reported in the comparison group did not change. This may reflect CSE participants' greater comfort in disclosing this information after the intervention, their growing trust in the research team, an increased acceptance of their own sexual orientation – or a combination of all three.

Quantitative changes in knowledge and attitudes[2]

We detected statistically significant improvements in two of the three knowledge questions about violence. Specifically, the proportion of participants who could identify where to seek support in cases of violence increased from 27% to 69%, and the mean score indicating how many types of partner violence participants could identify correctly grew from 15.4 to 17.7 (out of 21 possible).

Among the four quantitative questions examining attitudes about violence, only one showed statistically significant change (Figure 1), with an increase in participants disagreeing with the statement 'partner violence is a private matter that should be resolved by the family.' The quantitative analysis did not detect any change overall in attitudes about the acceptability of violence.

We found statistically significant shifts in two of the eight items about gender attitudes, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Specifically, there was an increase in the proportion of respondents who agreed that they would have a gay friend and who disagreed with the statement 'Men will only go as far as women let them.' Quantitative questionnaire data for the remaining attitudinal items did not demonstrate statistically significant changes.

Without valid comparison group data, the findings presented here cannot be attributed to the intervention. However, the data can be examined alongside the qualitative findings to present a more complete picture of the potential effects of the intervention.

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2   Paired baseline-endline comparison using Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test.

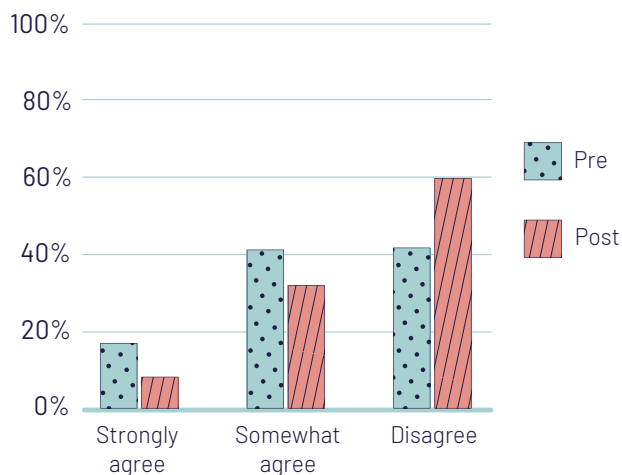Figure 1: Partner violence is a private matter that should be resolved by family

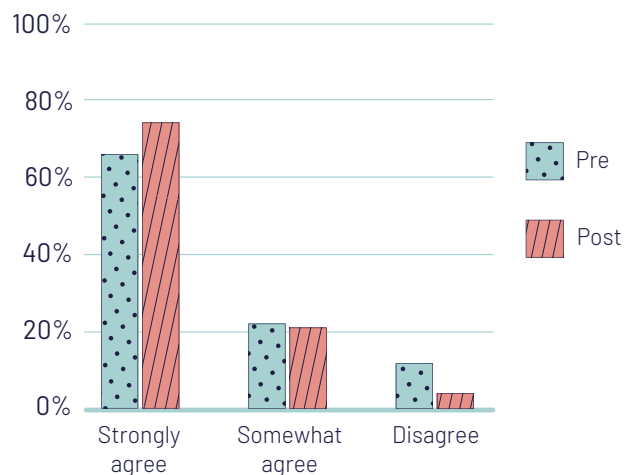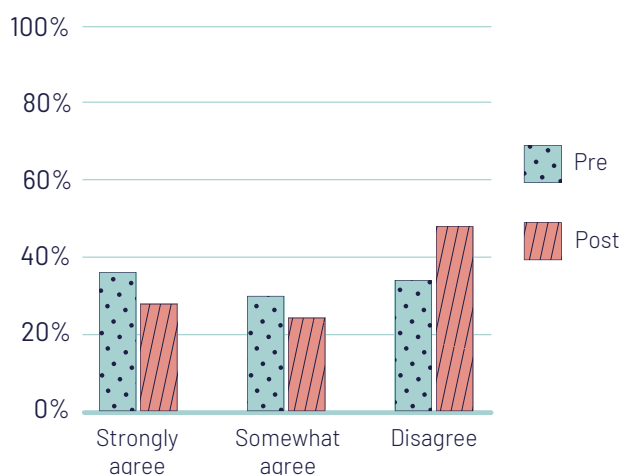Figure 2: I would have a gay friend

Figure 3: Men will only go as far as women let them

Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings identify ways in which CSE appears to contribute to the prevention of, as well as response to, IPV among young people.

Prevention of intimate partner violence

Prevention efforts aim to prevent violence, in part by addressing the harmful gender norms that underlie inequitable relationships and violence. Programmes that aim to shift gendered social norms are often referred to as having a 'gender-transformative' approach. In this study, students, teachers and facilitators credited Mexfam's CSE course with influencing a range of attitudes and practices compatible with the objectives of gender-transformative programming and violence prevention efforts.

CSE participants learned to identify types of violence that can occur in relationships

Participatory activities such as group discussions based on vignettes relevant to participants' lives seemed particularly useful in encouraging reflection on different types of violence. A visual tool called the Violentómetro[3] ['Violence Thermometer'] also appeared to help participants learn about and identify different types of IPV.

'Two or three times I examined it [the 'Violence Thermometer'], and I read each one [of the types of violence listed there] to see [...] if any of them had happened to me.' (Young man, 15)

CSE participants questioned whether jealousy and possessive behaviour were signs of love

Students, facilitators and teachers told us that during the course many participants reconsidered their perceptions of jealous and possessive behaviour in relationships, such as monitoring a partner's social media. They said the CSE course encouraged reflection and debate about the types of violence that can occur in relationships and the characteristics of more equitable relationships such as trust and communication.

'[The facilitator] made it very clear to us that if [your partner] really loved you they would accept you as you are and wouldn't be telling you 'don't dress that way' [or] "I don't want you to talk to him." [...] [That] is a type of violence.' (Young woman, 16)

'I used to say, if you are jealous it is a part of love, or that if they weren't jealous then they didn't love you, things like that. But I think this was my ideology, that you have to be jealous because it is like a form of protection, so that they know that you love her. [...] [Now I think] that [jealousy] is bad, because if you have trust in your partner, why are you going to be jealous over them?' (Young man, 15)

CSE participants reflected on gender roles and norms

Some participants said the course encouraged them to reflect on their beliefs about gender, describing activities where the group engaged with and questioned prevailing gender norms. Participants said that hearing what classmates said during the group discussion sometimes helped them reflect on their own individual beliefs.

'In some of the comments [shared during the course activities], well, one of the things my classmate said stayed with me. He said that the man has to work and the woman [should stay] in the house [...]. He said that, and it made me, like, think. [...]. [I disagree] because, well, I think that a woman doesn't need to always be at home... um, as if it were a prison [...]. I think you need to give freedom to both people in a relationship.' (Young man, 15)

CSE participants began to accept their own sexuality or reduce homophobic behaviour in class

Some participants said they changed their personal attitudes about gender and sexuality during the course, and several said that CSE helped them accept their own sexuality and feel more confident talking about it.

'The course helped me reflect and realize whether I was [bisexual] or not, that I was born this way, and this is who I am.' (Young woman, 15)

Several participants mentioned observing a reduction in sexist and homophobic commentary and behaviour in class.

'A classmate used to say that gay people disgusted him [...]. After the course [...] he didn't think that way anymore [...]. He said to me [a bisexual man], 'that's fine, you're all right' [...]. He changed his way of thinking.' (Young man, 15)

It is noteworthy that these qualitative findings appear to align with our quantitative data that suggest that CSE participants became more willing to have homosexual friends after the course.

CSE participants became more comfortable talking about sexuality, relationships and violence

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3   The Violentómetro (Violence Thermometer) is a visual tool developed by the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) in Mexico. It shows different types of violent behaviors, from subtle to severe, that can occur in relationships. It was developed based on the results of the Study on the Dynamics in the Relationships among the Student Community of IPN (Tronco Rosas and Ocaña López, 2012). http://www.genero.ipn.mx/Test/Paginas/Violentómetro.aspx.

Students, teachers, and facilitators said that participants became more comfortable talking about relationships and sexuality as the course progressed.

'Before the course, it made us [...] a bit embarrassed to talk about [sexual and reproductive health]. But afterwards we understood, with the course, that it was, like, very natural to talk about it. It's like any other thing, and so I now feel fine talking about it.' (Young man, 15)

One teacher said that she thought the course prepared young people for their future interpersonal and romantic relationships.

'From what I observed during the CSE sessions, it seems to me that for the participants it was a watershed moment, it created a different vision for their own lives, their family life, their relationship with school, and friends, and above all to help them rethink – as young people – the sexual and emotional direction of their lives.' (Teacher)

Response to intimate partner violence

This section presents some ways that Mexfam's CSE course appears to prepare young people to address any IPV that they or their peers may experience, mitigate its negative consequences and prevent future perpetration or victimization.

CSE participants learned how to support each other to address violence

Several young people talked about supporting friends and family who were experiencing controlling or violent relationships.

'We told [our friend] that she should leave [her emotionally abusive boyfriend]. That she should tell his mother [about his threats]. Because of the [CSE] course I already knew how I could help.' (Young woman, 14)

Some participants told us that hearing the views of other young people helped them identify peers they could talk to about course topics.

'[The most important thing in the course was learning] who we could also trust. That is, I know that all the women in my class have the same ideas or think the same as me, and I know that if anything ever, well, happens to me, I know I can talk to any of them about it.' (Young woman, focus group discussion)

CSE participants addressed controlling behavior in their own relationships

One young man said the course prompted him to talk with his girlfriend about how she treated him.

'You know the information they told us about relationships [during CSE]? I was thinking about that, and then I decided to talk to her [my girlfriend] about her controlling behaviour.' (Young man, 15)

Some participants said they noticed some of their classmates reducing possessive behaviour in their relationships, and that others left controlling relationships.

'[The CSE course] left them [my classmates] with a clear idea of what was really going on in their relationship, so they decided [to leave their relationship] saying 'it's true, it's not that he loves me. This [being possessive over me] is a type of violence.'' (Young woman, 16)

CSE participants were prepared to seek information, support and services

The Mexfam facilitators said that the CSE participants contacted them in various ways, both during and after the course. Some students approached them in person, often towards the end of the semester, and others contacted them by phone or Whatsapp. As one student said:

'[The facilitators] are people you can trust. As time passed, they gave me confidence [...] that if at any moment [...] I need something or want to know something [...] I can ask them for help, it won't be a problem.' (Young man, 15)

A few participants mentioned asking Mexfam for help communicating with their parents about their gender or sexuality. For example:

'I asked for information [from Mexfam] for my mother, to see if they would help... so that my mother would understand and accept me [my sexuality].' (Young woman, 14)

When the CSE course ended, Mexfam organized a health fair at the school, during which they provided free health services to a number of CSE participants in the organization's mobile health unit. In addition, the course facilitators provided referrals to care at Mexfam as well as public sector clinics, and in one case accompanied a CSE participant to receive services at a clinic.

Conclusions from qualitative analysis: key elements supporting violence prevention

Based on a collaborative data analysis and interpretation process, we identified key elements of CSE that likely contributed to shifts in beliefs, intentions and behaviours related to gender, violence and sexuality among participants.

Engaging in critical reflection about gendered social norms and violence

Mexfam's CSE course used a range of strategies to encourage critical reflection about gendered social norms. Participatory activities were designed to engage with topics relevant to participants' lives. Open dialogue between participants and facilitators provided a space to share personal beliefs and experiences in the group, discuss any contradictions, and engage critically with dilemmas related to the course topics. Facilitators also used the closing of each activity to reinforce key points and help participants consolidate their ideas. Based on the qualitative findings, these approaches appear to trigger changes in beliefs, intentions and behaviours among participants, and may have created opportunities for young people to renegotiate norms within their group and later diffuse these shifts in ideas and norms within their community – a strategy for social norms change also reported elsewhere (Cislaghi and Heise, 2018; Miller and Prentice, 2016).

In interviews and focus groups, participants talked about assessing their relationships based on course learnings and questioning certain beliefs, such as whether jealousy or possessive behaviour are signs of love and how they should respond to partner violence. These findings seem to align with some of the quantitative findings: that CSE participants were able to identify a wider range of types of partner violence after the intervention, and the decrease in participants reporting that they saw partner violence as a private matter.

Promoting assertive communication skills and peer support

During the course, facilitators encouraged participants to discuss sexual and reproductive health and relationships. They focused on developing trust with participants over time, for example by sharing relevant personal experiences from their own lives during the course when they felt comfortable doing so. As participants became more comfortable talking openly within the course, it appeared to prepare them to discuss these topics outside the course. It seems likely that this helped them build tools for assertive communication to address violence in their own relationships or intervene when they saw violence around them.

Encouraging health care-seeking behaviour

The facilitators aimed to encourage access to health services by emphasising the right of young people to receive care, providing frequent referrals to trusted providers at Mexfam and in the public sector, and being accessible by phone, social media and text message applications such as Whatsapp during the course. The fact that CSE participants sought information, support, referrals and health services suggests the course addressed some of the barriers often encountered by young people in need of sexual and reproductive health and IPV services and support.

Guiding principles and recommendations for CSE implementation

Based on data collected from research participants and the observations of the CSE programme implementers and research team, we compiled a set of guiding principles and recommendations gleaned from the three-year process of piloting, implementing and evaluating Mexfam's CSE intervention.

Comprehensive sexuality education implementation

- The results of this study reflect implementation of a 20-hour curriculum facilitated in full. Partial implementation of a CSE curriculum would not include all intervention components and may not achieve the desired results.

- Facilitators need adequate training and support if they are to be effective, a consideration noted in international CSE guidelines (UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO, 2018). As well as having expertise on course topics, they must also be prepared to resolve conflicts among participants, encourage critical reflection, and create a safe space for sensitive discussion in which participants can express themselves freely without fearing ridicule or breaches in confidentiality. Programmes expecting teachers to deliver a CSE curriculum should consider how to train and support them to ensure these competencies.

- After CSE ends, open channels of communication with participants can be maintained through text, phone or social media if this is possible without over-burdening the facilitators. In addition, programmes can conduct school-wide activities such as health fairs that create opportunities for young people to seek support and services. Organizations providing CSE can also consider strategies for community engagement beyond schools, such as health services promotion and information campaigns.

- CSE programming with young people could benefit from complementary efforts to engage families and teachers in information and awareness-raising activities to address sexuality, gender and violence. This can contribute to a supportive environment where young people can engage in egalitarian and violence-free relationships.

Comprehensive sexuality education contents

- CSE should offer information on where and how to access youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, including support services for cases of partner violence, and on the right of young people to access these types of services. It should also teach strategies to address IPV and equip participants to address such cases.

- CSE should engage paedagogical techniques and participatory activities relevant to participants' lives, encouraging critical reflection as a strategy to contribute to changes in beliefs and attitudes.

- Gender and power relations should be incorporated as cross-cutting themes throughout the CSE course, based on evidence that programmes are more effective when these issues are included (Haberland, 2015). In addition, violence, gender and sexual and reproductive health should be presented as interrelated, rather than as stand-alone subjects.

- It is important to highlight non-violent behaviour that is a part of any equitable and satisfactory relationship, as well as the elements of violent relationships.

- CSE should avoid heteronormative bias in the course contents and incorporate the topic of sexual diversity.

Policy recommendations

- **CSE implementers should build linkages with, and provide referrals, to trusted youth-friendly clinical service providers** that are prepared to address young people's sexual and reproductive health needs, including for IPV and gender-based violence (GBV). If an organization providing CSE does not offer clinical services, prior community mapping can ensure that CSE facilitators are able to refer young people for care.

- **Teachers and other school staff should be trained to address violence at the school level**, including IPV and homophobic discrimination. This work could create avenues within the school context to support young people who are particularly vulnerable to violence.

- **Formal support from school authorities through signed collaboration agreements is essential** for the delivery of such courses in a school context. Buy-in from leadership is necessary to address logistical challenges such as ensuring that facilitators have enough time to deliver the curriculum. School authorities committed to violence prevention can intervene in ways that support school-wide efforts, such as implementing and enforcing policies and ensuring that teachers and other school staff are trained and supported to address violence.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a four-year project aimed at establishing a digital platform for the Community of Practice (CoP) centred on gendered norms affecting adolescents and young adults. Project ALIGN seeks to advance understanding and challenge and change harmful gender norms by connecting a global community of researchers and thought leaders committed to gender justice and equality for adolescents and young adults. Through the sharing of information and the facilitation of mutual learning, ALIGN aims to ensure knowledge on norm change contributes to sustainable gender justice.

ALIGN's Research Fund

ALIGN's Research Fund supports small-scale action research or research translation projects which advance knowledge and evidence on gender norms across a wide range of contexts.

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