


# Innovations for Increasing Awareness of Sexual and Gender-Related Violence

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DOI: [10.35898/ghmj-911309](https://doi.org/10.35898/ghmj-911309)

## ABSTRACT

Sexual and gender-related violence against girls and women (SGRV) has been described as “a dark stain on the fabric of life” and is rightly regarded as the most pervasive breach of human rights. While the incidence of SGRV documented by individual countries varies, the overall prevalence is unacceptably high as 1 in 3 women worldwide report suffering gender-based violence in their lifetime. Consequently, all healthcare providers and educators have a responsibility to include gender respect in the care they provide, and to raise awareness of the burden of gender-related violence in their health promotion. The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) continue to call for novel approaches to increase awareness of SGRV globally, empower societies and reduce the burden of gender-related violence; the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals also include SGRV as a target for change. The literature now includes evidence of the value of several innovative approaches that use culturally-based initiatives and the impact of music and song. These forms of health promotion are examples that we as global health providers can employ. They have particular relevance where initiatives are aimed at engaging young people and for programs delivered in a school setting, but older folk can contribute through folk tales and traditional dramas, as these continue to provide a rich foundation for traditional communication on intricate topics. We all have a responsibility to do more to counter SGRV; ideally in so doing this will contribute further to the innovative evidence-based approaches WHO, UNICEF and the UN continue to call for.

**Keywords:** *Child marriage; Gender equality; Health promotion; School-based programs; Social empowerment.*

**Published:** 30 January 2026.

## Editorial

Sexual and gender-related violence (SGRV) remains a global problem preferentially affecting girls and women. To address this issue, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls through the ending of discrimination, violence and exploitation. In addition, the aim is to eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation, promote shared domestic responsibilities, and ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making, while in parallel providing universal access to reproductive health and rights, equal rights to economic resources, property ownership and financial services, and empowering women through technology, as well as adopting and strengthening enforceable legislation for gender equality (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2024; United Nations, 2025). Despite some improvements, progress towards achieving SDG 5 is behind schedule, and the targets will not be met in the time remaining until 2030 (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2024). Therefore, more evidence-based, innovative approaches to end SGRV are needed, and all global health providers have responsibilities and opportunities in this regard.

Africa for example, cultural norms continue to perpetuate SGRV; among other things, girls are looked at as sources of wealth through payment of bride price, and girls and women are denied inheritance rights and the owning of property. This contradicts the aspirations of the SDGs, and makes Africa a particular environment where affirmative action and/or unique approaches are required to deal with SGRV. Several legislations, policies and women-empowerment approaches have been formulated and implemented, but thus far have had limited success.

The African girl child is particularly vulnerable to SGRV because of discriminatory social norms, such as the acceptability of early/forced marriages and blame for early pregnancy or premarital pregnancy (Ninsiima *et al.*, 2018). During the COVID 19 pandemic for example, early marriages among girls and child/adolescent pregnancies increased significantly. Both situations are associated with dropping out of school, being sent away from home and starting young families with very weak social and financial foundations, with the affected girls suffering chronic mental distress and becoming unable to meaningfully contribute to their communities in several ways.

National laws against SGRV have been enacted in almost all countries, and institutional policies and guidelines formulated and endorsed by relevant stakeholders (Lewington *et al.*, 2022). Despite these efforts, rates of SGRV continue to remain high with the victims suffering a spectrum of mental and physical effects in the immediate, mid and long-term.

In considering how innovation can increase awareness of SGRV, many cultures use music and song to highlight complex social contexts in ways that enable populations to understand and get motivated for behavioural change. In order to effectively deal with SGRV, a shift in attitudes and changed behaviour are key, hence, innovative approaches to minimise/end SGRV need to be implemented. Such approaches should target young people, children and youth in particular as they are at a prime stage in life to learn free of societal bias. Innovative approaches also require ethnographic understanding of the phenomenon of SGRV to appropriately guide our approaches. The understanding required can be established by engaging with different content and context experts. Public dialogue on SGRV enables contribution of the community 'voice' (Besigye & Mash, 2025). Such dialogue can be especially effective when led by local celebrities, particularly celebrity music artists given their crowd-pulling abilities.

Historically music has been part of human evolution, and is a common channel through which folk communicate and propagate ideas across generations. In Africa music and song have traditionally been used to innovatively communicate oral tradition, and as culturally appropriate means of communication around stigmatising disease conditions. Philly Bongole Lutaaya was a Ugandan musician in the 1980s who opened up about his HIV status and sang to raise awareness (New Vision TV, 2022). In the recent times, Brass for Africa, a UK registered charity operating as a Non-Governmental Organisation in Uganda has used brass band music to raise HIV awareness in Kalangala, a rural and remote island district in Lake Victoria (Brass for Africa, 2022b). They also use music to tackle gender inequality in Uganda (Brass for Africa, 2022a). In South Africa, music has also been used to increase HIV awareness among the Venda, a minority tribal group (McNeill & James, 2008). These precedents exemplify how music can be used to promote awareness about disease and behavioural conditions.

A renowned gospel singer in South Africa, Rebecca Malope metaphorically uses the actions of the hand to raise awareness on Sexual and Gender-Based violence (SGBV) through music (Thwala & Nokutywa, 2025). Music was also used in Nigeria to raise awareness on SGBV during the COVID 19 pandemic. Assessment of the use of local songs in Nigeria to raise SGBV was found impactful through highlighting issues of rape, femicide and women empowerment (Ayinla & Amenaghawon, 2021).

Recently, a music video was professionally planned, recorded and developed in Uganda to raise awareness on SGRV against girls and young women. The video was professionally recorded by renowned celebrity Ugandan musicians, with the words of the song and the video highlighting issues identified by girls who were pupils at Stand Tall School. The music video was uploaded on YouTube for easy nationwide access by youth (Talent Africa Group, 2023). The views and comments on the video posted on social media were tracked for 6 months to evaluate its effect on SGRV awareness (Macnab et al., 2024). To further understand the perspectives of adolescents, teachers, non-teaching staff (matrons) and parents towards this form of health promotion about SGRV, focus group discussions were conducted to assess the effect of the music video.

Still photographs were also taken during the recording, promotion and evaluation of the music video; the resulting library of photographs was used to publish a photo essay for further dissemination of the project. Photo essays are brief, impactful reports available in open access; by telling the story of a project visually these essays enable the methodology and 'what works and why' to be easily understood, which makes it straightforward for other researchers and policy-makers to make use of the model and reproduce the intervention in other settings (Macnab et al., 2024).

Pupils saw the use of a music video as an acceptable and informative approach to raising their awareness of SGRV, and an effective way of providing youth with links to support services. They also saw this model as a good way to learn the causes and effects of SGRV on victims, and how these can be prevented. The instructions on what victims of SRGV should do included a captions in the video were seen as valuable and important, as was inclusion of the role of parents, fellow youth and the community in the fight against SGRV. Most of the respondents were girls, and as they are the most common victims, it is likely that this sub-group of the population is now more knowledgeable and aware about SGRV and what to do when they are impacted.

The other school stakeholders applauded the video. They perceived it to be educative and helpful to the girls and young women at risk, and recommended the use of other music videos to promote moral conduct. They also saw uploading the video on YouTube and the use of social media to generate dialogue as innovative, because this allowed widespread sharing among the nation's youth and provided feedback and discussion from individual and social media groups, thereby increased the reach of its messaging.

Lessons relevant to global efforts to increase awareness of sexual and gender-related violence include the evidence that music, drama and folk tales can be powerful tools. Because they are a traditional part of communication for intricate topics/subjects in African cultures and many other parts of the world, these mediums offer a rich foundation for health promotion.

Engaging young people using music videos is a validated means of raising awareness on SGRV that also generates important perspectives for global health providers. Schools are a logical and appropriate location in the community to access and engage young people. However, an important key to successful engagement is to involve the school administration and communicate with parents, as most young people in school are still below the age of consent.

Schools are receptive to efforts aimed at promoting the health and welfare of the youth (Porter, 2015). Teachers and youth representatives should be involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of the project. This ensures consideration of the local school context, for example the planned term activities, and contributes 'youth wisdom' on appropriate content, focus and language.

Always include an evaluation component as part of any intervention. Being able to share 'what works and why' with others is a valuable way to for good ideas to benefit others. Short reports in journals or use of photos to tell the story in an essay are always valuable; this element is part of our responsibility as global health providers.

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### Cite this article as:

Besigye, I., Kabona, A., & Tusubira, B. (2026). Innovations for Increasing Awareness of Sexual and Gender-Related Violence. *GHMJ (Global Health Management Journal)*, 9(1), 04–07. <https://doi.org/10.35898/ghmj-911309>