



PILOTING A COMBINED MODEL OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND PEER SUPPORT AGAINST BULLYING IN GREEK PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE ENABLE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The ENABLE program is a European intervention designed to increase student emotional resilience and management of social relationships. The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of social and emotional learning (SEL) and a combination of SEL with peer support (SEL+peer support) in a sample of 508 Greek early adolescents, between the ages of 11 to 14 by means of anonymous self-report questionnaires. Assessments were conducted prior to and after the 3-month piloting of the intervention, and indicated that overall students had high baseline social and emotional skills, as well as prosocial attitudes regarding bullying. The intervention improved problem-solving skills, and increased school satisfaction, as well as self-control and emotional awareness. After the intervention, students were more likely to report that they would seek help or report situations of bullying. Overall, this was the first study combining SEL with peer support in Greek primary and secondary schools, with promising results for the combined effectiveness of the programs.

Key Words: *bullying, intervention, peer support, early adolescents*

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Introduction

ENABLE (European Network Against Bullying in Learning and Leisure Environments) is a European program for implementation in the whole school, developed in 2014 in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Greece and the United Kingdom. It consists of a holistic approach that aims at the achievement of resilience and wellbeing among young people between the ages of 11 to 14, through a combination of SEL and a peer support scheme. The aim of the program is the strengthening and education of young people to achieve healthier social interactions. There is a focus on early adolescence, as this marks a sensitive developmental period for social relationships and self-management. Also, considering the long-term consequences of involvement in bullying, ENABLE takes a preventative approach to reducing student risks and increasing resilience. The development of empathy, which has been found to play a protective role in bullying perpetration, and self and emotion regulation, are thus core components of ENABLE.

The present school-based study aimed to study the behaviors, attitudes and needs of students in early adolescence, participating in the piloting of ENABLE in Greece. Participants took part in SEL with or without peer support lessons in school, over the period of 3 months. Both before and after the intervention, students were primarily asked to report on behaviors and attitudes towards bullying, as well as on a series of questions on social and emotional skills and wellbeing, and finally satisfaction from different components in life.

It was expected that students participating in the SEL component of the program would present improvement in the area of social and emotional skills and wellbeing, as well as life satisfaction, following the intervention. It was also hypothesized that students participating in a combination of the SEL and peer support schemes would present differences in their reactions to bullying as bystanders, and in their general attitudes towards bullying, and that this improvement would be greater than among the students attending only the SEL component of the program.

Methods

Design and Procedure

The present paper includes baseline outcomes gathered from the piloting of the intervention in Greece. Schools were selected through the ARIADNE network of trained professionals (primarily teachers) in Internet Safety, who undertook the recruitment of teachers from fellow schools

and trained them in the delivery of the program, in line with a cascade design [1]. Each trained teacher implemented the program in his or her class, after receiving permission from the school's administration. The final sample included 17 Primary and Secondary Public and Private schools, of which 13 were in the prefecture of Attica, 1 in Peloponnese, and 3 in the island of Crete.

The present survey was conducted after obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP). In addition, active written consent was required from the parents and legal guardians for participants to be eligible, as well as adolescent's oral assent. Questionnaires were answered through a written on-line anonymous survey. The outcomes were measured before the beginning of the program (pre-intervention assessment) and again after the program completion (post-intervention assessment).

The pre-intervention assessment was carried out from February to March 2016 and the post-intervention assessment from May to June 2016. In most schools the survey was administered online on school premises under the supervision of trained research assistants and trained school staff, on classroom computer monitors. In four schools where computers were not available, a pen and paper version of the questionnaire was provided. The duration of the survey was approximately 40'. Participating adolescents were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously to help ensure confidentiality and to minimize potential response bias. To further secure anonymity, an ID was issued for each student (in the form of individualized url) at pre-assessment, which was re-used for matching questionnaires at post-assessment.

Participants

Participating students in Greece were attending 5th and 6th grade of Primary School and 1st and 2nd grade of Junior High School, with the majority attending 1st grade of Junior High School (63.5%) (See Table 1). The 508 participants were aged 11-14 years and the mean age of the sample was 12.9 years, while girls made up the 53.1% of the sample. The post-intervention sample was smaller (N=321) than the pre-intervention (N=508), due to sickness, end of school obligations and exams. Finally, in a small number of cases, the post questionnaire could not be matched with certainty with the baseline measurement.

ENABLE intervention

The ENABLE program included 10 lessons on SEL, which

focused on self and social awareness, self-regulation and relationship management. These took place during school hours, and aimed at increasing emotional intelligence of students. In addition, it involved 10 lessons on peer support for a smaller number of students, in order for them to become advocates against bullying in school, to encourage positive behavior and support vulnerable students. Apart from the lessons, peer supporters were given continuous support by a trained teacher.

Quantitative Survey

In the ENABLE survey, students were asked to report on bullying-related attitudes and perceptions, social and emotional skills, self-perceived status among their peer group, as targeted in the two ENABLE training modules (i.e. SEL and Peer Support) as well as on their satisfaction with different domains in life.

Bullying experiences and behaviours: bullying others and being bullied

Bullying involvement experiences were elicited with selected self-report questions from the EU KIDS ONLINE survey (Risks and Outcomes updated section), based on a behavioral definition of “being treated in a hurtful and nasty way”, without using potentially stigmatizing terms such as “bullying” and “victimization” [2]. Specifically, children reported on their experiences of being bullied, on bullying others, and on how they would react to these experiences. The following definition was provided to the students:

“Sometimes children or teenagers say or do hurtful or nasty things to someone and this can often be quite a few times on different days over a period of time, for example. This can include teasing someone in a way this person does not like, hitting, kicking or pushing someone around, leaving someone out of things or threatening or pressuring them into doing something. When people are hurtful or nasty to someone in this way, it can happen: face to face (in person); by mobile phones (texts, calls, video clips); on the internet (e-mail, instant messaging, social networking, chatroom).”

Attitudes towards bullying

Children’s attitudes towards bullying and aggressive behavior, namely beliefs about certain bullying-related behaviors (joining in, reporting), were assessed with selected modified items from the “Attitudes towards bullying scale” (four items rephrased) previously used by Salmivalli and Voeten [3]. Questions were measured on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree), where the highest scores indicated stronger negative reactions towards bullying.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of whole sample

	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	n	%	n	%
Total sample	508	100	321	100
Gender				
Boys	238	46.9	145	45.2
Girls	269	53.1	176	54.8
Age				
11	111	22.1	21	6.5
12	217	43.1	117	36.4
13	152	30.2	161	50.2
14	23	4.6	22	6.9
Grade				
5th grade	73	14.5		
6th grade	75	14.9		
7th grade	320	63.5		
8th grade	36	7.1		

strongly agree), where the highest scores indicated stronger negative reactions towards bullying.

Social and emotional skills (SEL)

Students reported on social and emotional skills by agreeing/disagreeing to a set of statements capturing inter-personal and intra-personal skills, including self-control, emotional differentiation, empathy, problem solving and peer relations. In particular, the following constructs were explored, using 4-point Likert scales (with responses ranging from “not true” to “very true”): Self-control/self-management; Emotional reactivity awareness; Empathy (empathic cognitive concern); Differentiating emotions and verbal sharing of emotions; Problem solving; Prosocial/helping behaviors; Friendships (dyadic) and group peer relations.

Life satisfaction

Satisfaction with life was measured through questions on satisfaction with multiple domains of life using a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”.

Statistical Analysis

Paired t-tests were used to compare mean responses before and after the intervention in the total sample of students who completed both surveys. Repeated measures ANOVA, taking the two before and after measurements as the within-subjects factor, was used to compare by group (SEL/SEL+peer support), gender or age (between-subjects factor). Logistic regression was used to analyze reactions to witnessing bullying, which were answered on a yes/no scale. Internal consistency was measured for the items concerning satisfaction with life, using Cronbach's alpha analysis.

Results

Reactions to witnessing bullying episodes

Students reported on how they would react to witnessing bullying episodes. Logistic regression was used for each one of the sub-questions, except for "joining in" and "doing nothing" due to their low frequency (see Table 2). At pre-assessment, the most common reaction for both groups (SEL and SEL+Peer support), was to "tell an adult", (54.8% and 51.8% respectively) and second to "talk to the person who is being harmed/targeted" (34.8% and 44.5% respectively). "Tell an adult" remained the most common reaction at post assessment (54.5% and 56.9% respectively). The response "to tell a Peer Supporter" showed an increase in both groups at post assessment compared to pre-assessment, which did not reach statistical significance, either for SEL, $p=.82$, or for SEL and peer support, $p=0.45$. The reaction "to tell a third person" showed a statistically significant decrease in the SEL and peer support group (pre 21.8% vs post 8.3%, $p=0.004$). For the same response, a decrease was also reported in the SEL group, but was not statistically significant (pre 11.9% vs 9%, $p=0.36$),

Attitudes towards Bullying

At the beginning of the program, most students in both groups (SEL and SEL and peer support) held anti-bullying (pro-social attitudes): the majority of participating students agreed that joining in when someone is attacked is wrong (50%), believed that children who fall victims of bullying should be supported and that bullying should be reported (78%). Consistent with these anti-bullying attitudes, very low endorsement rates (4-8%) were reported for anti-social/pro-bullying attitudes on teasing others with nasty intent (item of negative valence). Repeated measures ANOVA was used to compare participants' attitudinal response means after the program to those before. No significant changes were found in attitudes towards bullying, with the exception

of the question "One should report behaviors that are meant to hurt others", for which the interaction between group and time was significant ($F(1,312)=0.51$, $p=0.012$). This means that the pre/post difference varied between groups. A statistically significant increase in the degree of endorsement of reporting behaviors was shown across assessment points. In the SEL group, there was an increase from the pre-intervention assessment ($M=2.96$, $SD=1.02$) (see table 3) to the post-intervention assessment ($M=3.20$, $SD=.96$) (see table 4) while a decrease was recorded within the SEL and peer support group, from the pre-intervention assessment ($M=3.14$, $SD=1.01$) (see table 3) to the post-intervention assessment ($M=3.01$, $SD=1.09$) (see table 4).

Socioemotional skills

Responses to items measuring SEL skills elicited at Pre vs Post assessment are shown in Table 5. More specifically, there was no statistically significant change in self-control against negative emotions (question 17) at post assessment between pre and post intervention, $p=0.34$, while self-control when aware of one's own mistake (question 18) showed marginally statistically significant improvement from pre ($M=2.29$, $SD=.81$) to post ($M=2.19$, $SD=.85$), $p=0.062$. A slight improvement was recorded at post assessment ($M=2.53$, $SD=.97$) compared to pre intervention levels ($M=2.61$, $SD=.92$) in the ability to differentiate one's own emotions (question 19), but did not reach statistical significance, $p=0.22$. Empathy (question 20), on the other hand, seems to remain positively stable at a consistently high level, at both pre ($M=1.56$, $SD=.76$) and post-assessment ($M=1.50$, $SD=.72$), $p=0.25$. Furthermore, while at pre-assessment most students responded that they strongly wish to help people who are upset (question 22) before the intervention ($M=3.41$, $SD=.65$), a statistically significant decrease was recorded following the intervention ($M=3.28$, $SD=.76$) in participants' "urge" to actively help others ($p=0.009$). A significant improvement was observed, in problem solving skills (question 26) from before ($M=2.72$, $SD=.78$) to after the intervention ($M=2.85$, $SD=.71$), $p=.013$. The rest of the SEL skills exhibited stability across assessment points, with the exception of a trend for positive change in self-perceptions of peer acceptance (question 27), which was however not statistically significant, $p=.10$. The t-test analyses of all the above changes for gender and age differentiations showed no differences across genders and age groups.

Life Satisfaction

Paired t-tests were performed for all six "aspects of life"

Table 2. Responses to “If you saw someone acting in a nasty or hurtful way would you....”

	SEL & peer support (n=110)			SEL (n=210)		
	PRE	POST	P	PRE	POST	P
Intervene	36.4% (40)	42.2% (46)	0.32	51.0% (107)	51.2% (108)	0.99
Tell an adult	51.8% (57)	56.9% (62)	0.42	54.8% (115)	54.5% (115)	.99
Tell a peer supporter	17.3% (19)	27.5% (30)	.045	16.7% (35)	23.2% (49)	.082
Talk to the person who is being harmed/targeted	44.5% (49)	35.8% (39)	.18	34.8% (73)	36.0% (76)	.80
Talk to the person who is being nasty	31.8% (35)	37.6% (41)	.31	31.0% (65)	29.4% (62)	.80
Talk to someone else	21.8% (24)	8.3% (9)	0.004	11.9% (25)	9% (19)	0.36
Join in	4.5% (5)	0.9% (1)	.22	0.0% (0)	0.5% (1)	0.99
Do nothing	3.6% (4)	1.8% (2)	.63	1.0% (2)	1.9% (4)	.69

Table 3. Differences of participation in the peer support group pre-intervention

	SEL & peer support		SEL	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Being involved when someone is attacked is wrong	2.51	1.17	2.44	1.14
It is fun when someone repeatedly teases a classmate in a bad way	1.22	.50	1.25	.63
We ought to support students who are attacked or badly teased	3.50	.79	3.51	.69
We must report behaviors designed to hurt or harm someone	3.14	1.01	2.96	1.02

Table 4. Differences of participation in the peer support group post- intervention

	SEL & peer support		SEL	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Being involved when someone is attacked is wrong	2.56	1.14	2.49	1.21
It is fun when someone repeatedly teases a classmate in a bad way	1.25	.60	1.23	.51
We ought to support students who are attacked or badly teased	3.50	.80	3.56	.72
We must report behaviors designed to hurt or harm someone	3.01	1.09	3.20	.96

Table 5. Responses to “How much do you agree with the following statements?” on a scale from 1 “Strongly disagree” to 4 “Strongly agree” compared between assessments Pre and Post intervention.

	PRE		POST		<i>p</i> *
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
I can control my behavior when I am upset.	2.74	.79	2.79	.79	0.34
I can't stop myself from doing something, even if I know it is wrong.	2.29	.81	2.19	.85	0.062
When I am upset, I do not know if I'm sad, scared or angry.	2.61	.92	2.53	.97	0.22
I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.	1.56	.76	1.50	.72	0.25
I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me.	3.13	.74	3.14	.76	0.85
I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.	3.41	.65	3.28	.76	0.009
My emotions influence my reactions.	2.93	.83	2.84	.90	0.11
I often talk to others about what upsets me.	2.85	.82	2.79	.88	0.32
I try to talk out a problem instead of fighting.	3.25	.82	3.20	.79	0.25
I am good at finding solutions to everyday problems.	2.72	.78	2.85	.71	0.013
I get along with kids my age.	3.36	.65	3.43	.65	0.10
It is easy for me to make new friends.	3.22	.75	3.25	.80	0.49
I have at least one close friend.	3.67	.64	3.72	.59	0.17

* P value from paired t test

(see Table 6). The scale indicated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.67). A statistically significant improvement in the perceived subjective feeling of satisfaction from school performance was observed at post-assessment (M=1.84, SD=.87) compared to pre-assessment (M=2.08, SD=.99), ($p<0.001$). No other aspect of life showed a statistically significant change. Repeated measures ANOVA were performed for gender, with measurement point being the within-subjects factor, and gender being the between-subjects factor. The scale had lower scores (i.e. higher satisfaction) among boys (M=1.57, SD=.43) than girls (M=1.75, SD= 0.62) at baseline, and among boys (M= 1.53, SD=.58) than girls (M=.173, SD=.69) following the intervention, $p=0.002$. There was a difference between boys and girls ($F(1,315)=10.2$, $p=.002$), but not between the two assessment points ($F(1,315)=0.49$, $p=0.49$). No association was observed with age.

Table 6. Responses to "How satisfied are you currently with the following aspects of your life?"

	PRE		POST		P*
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Your school performance	2.08	0.99	1.84	0.87	< 0.001
How much fun you have	1.49	0.76	1.54	0.86	0.24
Your family relationships	1.50	0.85	1.51	0.87	0.94
Your friends	1.48	0.80	1.53	0.85	0.35
Your spare time activities/hobbies	1.72	0.99	1.75	1.04	0.62
Life in general	1.72	0.98	1.70	0.99	0.70
Total scale score	1.66	0.55	1.64	0.65	0.51

* P values from paired t-tests.

Discussion

The following social and emotional skills of the students were investigated in this school-based study: self-control and awareness of emotional reactions, differentiation of emotions, aspects of empathy and pre-social behavior, problem solving and relations with peers. Students' responses indicated a trend towards improved self-control, especially when they were aware of their mistakes, which was however only marginally statistically significant. In addition, a very small, also statistically insignificant improvement was observed in the ability to recognize emotions (self-awareness). As previously described, the majority of children involved in bullying, especially those having an active role, such as bullies and victims, have some form of emotional deficits. This may include a lack of self-control [4], low tolerance of frustration [5] and a difficulty accurately recognizing negative emotions, often leading to negative reactions.

With regards to the degree of empathy before and after the intervention, contrary to the results of previous investigations that have examined the different roles separately and recorded very low levels of empathy among perpetrators [6, 7, 8,9], in the present study the degree of empathy recorded at baseline was quite high across participants, and was maintained at the same levels after the intervention. An important outcome of the intervention was the statistically significant improvement seen in the problem-solving abilities of students. As mentioned by Andreou [10], bullying perpetrators and victims lack problem-solving skills. The difficulty of managing problems often leads the perpetrators to bursts of aggressive behaviors, fueling the imbalance of power present in bullying.

In the baseline assessment, the whole sample seemed to have functional social relationships, as the students reported they had very good relationships with their peers, made new friends easily and had at least one close friend. Following the implementation of the program, a slight tendency to improve social skills was recorded, notably in terms of their self-perceived acceptance by peers, which was not however statistically significant. Since loneliness, isolation and poor interpersonal relationships are positively linked to victimization

[11], it is positive that across the sample students seemed to have consistently good relationships with their peers. No gender or age relationship was observed before or after the intervention in the experiences of social relationships.

Elements of everyday schooling can affect the degree of satisfaction with both school and life, either positively or negatively [12]. Higher levels of academic performance have also been associated with higher levels of school satisfaction among teenagers [13, 14]. This demonstrates the value of the present study's finding that there was a significant improvement of the subjective feelings of satisfaction from school performance among students. This finding is also consistent with meta-analytic findings on the value of Social and Emotional Learning programs, which showed an 11-17% improvement in the academic performance of participating students [15, 16]. As for the other areas of life satisfaction examined, pupil's responses did not show any particular fluctuations between the two measurement points, and no differences were observed with age. In contrast, there was a difference between boys and girls in both measurements, with boys experiencing greater satisfaction with life. This finding can be explained by a variety of factors, including the better developed emotional awareness often documented between boys and girls, but also earlier maturational changes which may be associated with increased emotional sensitivity.

Observers' Reactions to Bullying Incidents

The second objective of this research was to examine: (a) the reactions of observers to bullying incidents and (b) the perceptions of students about victimization. More specifically, a comparative analysis of the responses of the students who attended only one of the Program's axes, (i.e. the SEL courses) was carried out with the answers of the students who attended both axes (SEL+peer support), before and after the implementation of the ENABLE program. The role of observers is key in preventing, interrupting or continuing bullying. According to Bistrong, Bottiani & Bradshaw [17], the different reaction patterns have the potential to influence the future appearance and persistence of intimidation, as well as its consequences. The reactions described in the investigations have been divided into three main categories: helping the perpetrator (e.g. by engaging in bullying or ridiculing the victim), defending the victim (e.g. interfering, using compassionate words to the victim) and maintaining neutrality (e.g. non-involvement in the incident) [18]. Previous studies have shown that while peers often witness such situations, they appear reluctant to intervene or inform an adult [5]. The first response in both groups was "I would talk to an adult," which shows the need for children

to "involve" adults in dealing with the problem.

The ENABLE Program, recognizing the important role of adults in the bio-ecological model of bullying, is addressed to both educators and parents through educational supportive material. The option "I would speak to a supporter" took small percentages in both groups prior to the intervention but showed slight improvement after the intervention. The small percentage is explained by the fact that this is a completely new idea given to students through the implementation of the Peer Support Program, and it is likely that the three-month implementation of the Program was not sufficient. Instead, higher percentages were recorded in both groups for the reaction "I would speak to the the child harmed/targeted" indicating high levels of empathic concern.

Attitudes Regarding Reactions to Bullying

Participating students reported on their perceptions of bullying, through their agreement or disagreement with a range of statements measuring attitudes towards bullying. Few studies have explored pupils' perceptions of the perpetrators or victims of bullying [19]. In the present study the answers of the students of both groups prior to the intervention were predominantly pro-social and opposed to the act of bullying. The students' reactions to the statement "Participating when someone is attacked is wrong" was an exception, where, in both groups, positive and negative answers were found to be equally shared. This is not consistent with the other pro-social perceptions recorded, nor with the extremely low percentage recorded in the question "I would participate in bullying". The most likely explanation is that there was confusion among students on the definition of "participating", which in Greek could be interpreted as intervening. As observed by Salmivalli [20], the paradox is that while most students declare being against bullying and express their support for victims, they do not actually intervene to stop bullying at that moment [21]. Regarding differences in the perceptions of bullying with age, no correlation was found in the present study. This is contrary to findings by Rigby and colleagues [22], who reported that students tend to adopt less compassionate perceptions of victims as they grow older. Similarly, no gender differences were observed in this study, corroborating past findings which found no differences between sexes in relation to their perceptions of bullying.

In general, the comparison of the two groups before and after the implementation of the Program, showed differences in the question "We have to report behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm someone". Specifically, the SEL group showed a significant increase after the inter-

-vention. Reporting of bullying is a very important factor in preventing and addressing the phenomenon in schools, as only one in two victims report bullying to teachers [23, 24]. In a study by Unnever and Cornell [25], students were particularly reluctant to seek help because they believed teachers were either indifferent or tolerant towards bullying. Other reasons for which students are reluctant to report bullying may be fear of retaliation, a sense of inferiority, insecurity or guilt.

The implementation of the ENABLE Program in Greece was innovative, as it was first of its kind to combine a component of SEL with a peer support intervention. However, certain limitations in the implementation of the program need to be acknowledged. Primarily, the teachers who participated in the ENABLE Program were trained and implemented the Program in the classes they were teaching on a voluntary basis. As a result, no randomization process was applied for the participating classes and the school population that participated is not a representative sample at national level. In addition, the duration of the implementation of the program in Greek schools was extremely short, about three months. Also, the second measurement point took place a few days before the students started their annual exams. This may have affected their responses as they were very stressed before the examinations, and this may have reduced the self-reported positive impact of the intervention. Finally, the loss of students at the second measurement point is an important limitation, as the sample substantially decreased between the two points.

Future research would benefit from carrying out surveys in a larger sample of the population, in order to accurately capture the extent and intensity of the problem, and to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of SEL and peer support programs. Besides the frequency and scope of research, it is very important to employ a combination of research tools and a triangulation of sources, such as behavioral observation, teacher and peer reports and focus groups to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

This preliminary study aimed, among other things, at exploring the feasibility of applying a combined model of SEL and peer support in Greek schools, by evaluating the first quantitative results. Despite certain limitations of this research, the positive trends recorded are particularly encouraging and indicate the need for a more systematic, universal and longer-term implementation of this model in the future. In particular, international research findings indicate that both the SEL and the peer support scheme have excellent results, which, with appropriate adaptations to

Greek reality, could make a decisive contribution to tackling bullying through changes in school culture, school climate, attitudes and behaviors. Importantly, this implementation should take place with the involvement of educators, parents and other members of society actively involved in adolescent development. Particular emphasis has been placed on the value of parental involvement, and the need to re-educate parents in order to improve parent-child relationships and to more effectively tackle violence or victimization.

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