

## The Role of Bystander Intervention in Domestic Violence Situations

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### Introduction

Domestic violence is a serious social and public health concern characterized by patterns of abuse within intimate relationships. It encompasses physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse.

While law enforcement and support organizations play a vital role in addressing domestic violence, bystanders—individuals who witness abusive situations—can be instrumental in prevention and intervention.

Bystander models foreground the responsibility of community members who witness or are aware of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) to intervene in the situation and engage strategies to diffuse the violence and/or support victims to remain safe.(1)

Bystander intervention is intended to signal to perpetrators of IPV that their behavior is not acceptable and to galvanize other bystanders to prevent, interrupt, or address domestic violence and that taking the initiative to intervene is morally and socially desirable. This means that for those who witness violence or notice red flags, it is important to take any form of action instead of diffusing the responsibility on others if there are multiple people present or aware. Being an active bystander does not mean to throw oneself in the middle of the action or get completely involved every time they witness violence. (2)

The idea that bystanders have a responsibility to intervene in IPV is becoming increasingly common in policy responses across jurisdictions. Indeed, in recent years, countries such as the United States and Australia have implemented policies that include bystander intervention in IPV as a strategy for violence prevention.(3)

Studies have shown that interventions targeting intrapersonal and interpersonal factors have demonstrated more success in high-income countries than in low- and middle income countries.(4)

This may be due to such programs being poorly adapted to different contexts, lack of structured evaluations, and inconsistencies in what is considered a bystander intervention program in different settings.(5)

The effectiveness of bystander intervention programs that target communal and societal factors are harder to evaluate because bystander interventions may not be the main focus of programming and because of a lack of measurable indicators. However, Start, Awareness, Support, and Action (SASA!) in Uganda, Harass Map in Egypt, and Bell Bajao in India are a few initiatives that have shown promise in increasing positive bystander behaviors at community and social levels.

Often viewed as a continuum with three key points for action, bystander intervention can be enacted at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. The primary prevention level includes calling out disrespect before it escalates to violence. The secondary prevention level includes disrupting violence as it is occurring, and the tertiary prevention level includes providing support after the immediate threat of violence has passed.(6) Each key point for action represents an opportunity for witnesses to engage as ‘active’ or ‘prosocial’ bystanders to intervene and, ideally, create the conditions necessary for the perpetrator to stop their use of violence.(7)

This article examines how bystanders can effectively intervene, the barriers that prevent intervention, and strategies to encourage active participation in domestic violence prevention.

## **Theoretical Framework of Bystander Intervention**

The notion of bystanders originated with the study of an event in New York where a young woman, Kitty Genovese, was raped and stabbed to death over a period of half an hour. During the attack, 38 witnesses watched from their windows or heard her screaming but were unwilling or unable to effectively intervene.(8)

The clearest finding of bystander research in emergency situations is that the motives and actions of bystanders vary and are influenced by the behaviours of other bystanders. (9) While studies revealing the apathy or silence of bystanders in the face of incivility and violence have dominated empirical work in the area, more recently, this inevitability has begun to be questioned.(10)

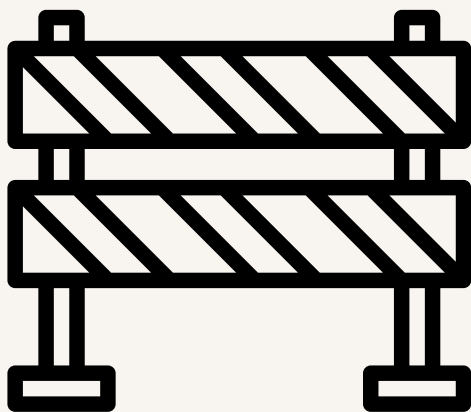
Bystander intervention is grounded in psychological theories such as the Bystander Effect, Social Learning Theory, and Diffusion of Responsibility. The Bystander Effect was first introduced by Darley and Latané (1968), this phenomenon suggests that individuals are less likely to intervene in emergencies when others are present, assuming someone else will take action. The Social Learning Theory was developed by Bandura (1977), this theory posits that individuals model behavior based on social cues. If bystanders observe others intervening in domestic violence situations, they are more likely to do the same and the Diffusion of Responsibility occurs when individuals assume that someone else will act, leading to inaction in group settings. Understanding these theories helps in designing intervention programs that encourage bystanders to take responsibility rather than remain passive.

## **Types of Bystander Intervention Programs**

Bystander intervention programs are emerging as a promising approach to prevent and respond to SGBV. Bystanders can intervene at various times, including before, during, and after SGBV occurs. Examples of the different opportunities for bystander interventions include: (11)

Opportunity	Time of Intervention	Illustrative Interventions
Proactive	When there is no GBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about different types of GBV and bystander interventions</li> <li>• Joining a youth group working to raise awareness about GBV</li> <li>• Volunteering at a community organization supporting survivors</li> </ul>
Primary Prevention	Before GBV occurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correcting peers who think women “deserve to be raped” because of their appearance, occupation, or for any other reason</li> <li>• Ensuring a friend is able to reach their car or home safely, for instance after dark or while intoxicated or otherwise impaired</li> <li>• Contacting the appropriate authority if you learn of a planned child marriage in your village</li> </ul>
Secondary Prevention	During GBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling out a friend or colleague when they make a sexist joke</li> <li>• Telephoning the police for help upon witnessing an assault</li> <li>• Ringing a neighbor’s doorbell to interrupt an assault</li> </ul>
Tertiary Prevention	After GBV occurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referring a neighbor you witnessed being assaulted to a community organization providing comprehensive GBV care and support</li> <li>• Accompanying a friend who discloses experiencing sexual abuse to a health clinic, police station, and/or other resources for survivors</li> <li>• Reporting a case of child abuse that you learn of to the authorities</li> </ul>

Public awareness and training programs can empower bystanders to intervene effectively. Key components of effective bystander training include: recognizing signs of domestic violence; learning safe intervention techniques; understanding the legal framework around intervention; and encouraging a culture of accountability and support.



## Barriers to Bystander Intervention

Despite the potential impact of bystander intervention, several factors hinder individuals from stepping in:

- **Fear of Retaliation:** Concerns over personal safety or potential harm from the abuser.
- **Uncertainty About the Situation:** Lack of clarity about whether the observed behavior constitutes domestic violence.
- **Social Norms and Cultural Beliefs:** Some communities normalize domestic violence, discouraging external intervention.
- **Lack of Knowledge:** Bystanders may not know how to intervene safely or where victims can seek help.
- **Legal Implications:** Concerns about whether intervention is legally permissible or could result in legal consequences for the bystander.

## Legal and Ethical Considerations

Bystanders must navigate various legal and ethical issues when intervening. Some jurisdictions have Good Samaritan laws that protect individuals who intervene in emergencies, while others may have mandatory reporting laws for certain professionals, such as healthcare workers and educators.

Ethically, bystanders must consider:

victim autonomy: ensuring that intervention does not further endanger the victim;

personal safety: avoiding direct confrontation in high-risk situations; and

confidentiality: reporting abuse to appropriate channels without violating privacy laws.

## Why Bystander Intervention is Critical in Nigeria

1. **Cultural Barriers to Reporting:** In Nigeria, domestic violence is often seen as a private matter, and survivors face stigma, blame, and even retaliation for speaking out. Bystanders, who are often family members, neighbors, or friends, are uniquely positioned to intervene without the fear of cultural backlash.

2. **Weak Law Enforcement:** Despite the VAPP Act, many survivors struggle to access justice due to corruption, lack of awareness, and inadequate resources. Bystanders can provide immediate support and help survivors navigate the legal system.

3. **Community-Based Solutions:** Nigeria's strong sense of community makes it an ideal environment for bystander intervention. By mobilizing communities to take collective action, we can create a protective network for survivors.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Bystander intervention is a powerful tool in preventing and addressing domestic violence. However, societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and awareness levels influence its effectiveness. It has been successfully implemented in various countries, offering valuable lessons for Nigeria:

- **Australia:** The "Do Something!" campaign trained over 10,000 bystanders, leading to a significant increase in reporting and support for survivors. (12)
- **South Africa:** The "1st for Women Foundation" launched a bystander intervention program that reduced domestic violence incidents by 30% in targeted communities. (13)

These examples demonstrate that bystander intervention is not only effective but also adaptable to different cultural contexts. To enhance bystander intervention in Nigeria we need to:

1. **Increase Public Awareness:** National campaigns should encourage active intervention.
2. **Provide Training Programs:** Schools, workplaces, and communities should offer bystander intervention training.
3. **Strengthen Legal Protections:** Governments should ensure that laws protect bystanders who intervene in good faith.
4. **Strengthen Support Systems:** Provide bystanders with access to hotlines, shelters, and legal aid services to ensure survivors receive comprehensive support.
5. **Collaborate with Civil Society Organizations:** Partner with NGOs and women's rights groups to design and implement bystander intervention programs.
6. **Encourage Safe Reporting Mechanisms:** Hotlines and anonymous reporting systems should be widely available.

By empowering bystanders with knowledge and confidence, society can move towards breaking the cycle of domestic violence and creating safer communities.



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