

Students' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Violence Against Women: A Case of One University in the Gauteng Province of South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Gender Based Violence (GBV) has scourged South Africa, taken over societies, communities, and families, and filtered down to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This has become a concern in the country. Therefore, the study aimed to investigate university students' perceptions of Violence Against Women (VAW). Social Learning Theory (SLT) and the Social Ecological Model (SEM) informed this study. The study employed a qualitative case study based on the interpretive paradigm. The sample for this study was 10 postgraduate female university students. The findings revealed that students perceived factors, such as young age at marriage, level of education and family background, poverty, unemployment, the isolation of women and culture as responsible for VAW. Based on the research findings and conclusions, it is recommended that new policies be formulated to tackle the emerging challenges arising from GBV tendencies. Additionally, nationwide sensitization and behavior change campaigns should be implemented to raise awareness about the dangers of GBV. This study has facilitated the empowerment and heightened awareness among the populace, enabling the recognition and challenge of harmful behaviors and perceptions related to GBV. The findings also enhanced understanding of GBV on university campuses and provided scientific data that could help university decision-makers evaluate, learn from, and act on the issues identified. The research results could be replicated in other areas and are expected to improve public trust in higher institution's management by demonstrating active safety measures to eradicate GBV on campuses.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender based violence (GBV) is a pervasive issue that impacts people of all genders and ages globally.¹ Emotional abuse is potent as it distorts the victim's personality who could likely, as a result, blame the actions on his or her own shortcomings.² GBV not only violates human rights, but also results in negative

¹ World Health Organisation, "Violence against Women," 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

² Pumla Dineo Gqola, "Rape: A South African Nightmare," 2015.

social, economic, and health outcomes for those affected by it.³ The consequences and costs of violence per se, and of not handling it, are considerable on individual, organizational, and societal levels.⁴

GBV definitions vary across different contexts and perspectives and are often influenced by cultural, political, and social factors.⁵ GBV is defined as, “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or private.”⁶ This definition was adopted in this study. VAW, specifically denotes domestic violence directed at women and encompasses any form of violence enacted against an individual based on their gender or perceived gender.⁷ Drawing from these definitions, this study is of the view that GBV is an act of relational ferocity that links both men and women, in which the latter are typically the receivers of the actions of violence.

GBV has scourged South Africa, taken over societies, communities, and families, and filtered down to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and has been a concern in the country. A survey conducted by the Higher Education Programme in South Africa concluded that 62% of the adult male and female students who participated in a study postulated that adult female students are more likely to be sexually harassed on campus.⁸ This research underscores the pressing necessity to confront and eliminate sexual victimization experienced by female university students. The study further indicates that incapacitated rape, often associated with alcohol and drug use, is more prevalent on campuses than forcible rape, which involves threats and physical force. These incidents have the potential to hinder the academic and professional trajectories of prospective students on university campuses. Addressing sexual harassment remains crucial, and proactive measures are essential for fostering a safer educational environment for all students.

GBV statistics of the reported rape cases do not reflect the true intensity of the problem, as many victims/survivors on HEIs campuses do not report their experiences to the authorities in their institutions.⁹ According to a report by the Department of Higher Education and Training, university students report only 10% of rape cases.¹⁰ Several factors, including the fear of the perpetrator discovering the report and the potential consequences,¹¹ distrust in how institutions handle or address certain issues,¹² and apprehension about how the institution or law enforcement would manage the situation, contribute to under-reporting.¹³ This research intimates that this problem of not reporting or underreporting makes it difficult for institutions to gauge its extent of prevalence, mystifying it (VAW) and blinding them (HEIs) from perceiving it (VAW) as a major issue for their concern and attention, through the loss of potential

³ National Institute of Justice, “Domestic Violence,” 2022, <https://nij.ojp.gov/taxonomy/term/domestic-violence>.

⁴ Alexa Martin-Storey and Elana G August, “Harassment Due to Gender Nonconformity Mediates the Association between Sexual Minority Identity and Depressive Symptoms,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 1 (2016): 85–97.

⁵ K. Rimsza, “Defining Violence against Women and Girls in the Context of Femicide: A Discourse Analysis of United Nations Reports,” *International Journal of Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 11, no. 2 (2022): 74–89.

⁶ R Carrillo, “Overview of International Human Rights Standards and Other Agreements and Responses of the Judicial System to Violence against Women,” *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics* 78 (2002): S15–20.

⁷ World Health Organisation, “Global and Regional Estimates of Violence against Women,” 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789241564625>.

⁸ South African Government News Agency, “Policy on Gender Based Violence at Higher Education Institutions Pending,” SAnews, July 26, 2018, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/policy-gender-based-violence-higher-education-institutions-pending>.

⁹ Thelma Dhlomo et al., “Perceived Sexual Harassment among Female Students at a Zimbabwean Institution of Higher Learning,” *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 22, no. 2 (2012): 269–72; J D Adams, M S Mabusela, and E T Dlamini, “Sexual Harassment: The ‘silent Killer’ of Female Students at the University of Ayoba in South Africa,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 27, no. 5 (2013): 1149–63; N. Drew and L. Bakker, “Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions: Promising Practices and Lessons Learned,” *Global Health: Science and Practice* 7, no. 1 (2019): 40–54..

¹⁰ South African Government News Agency, “Policy on Gender Based Violence at Higher Education Institutions Pending | SAnews”.

¹¹ Adams, Mabusela, and Dlamini, “Sexual Harassment: The ‘silent Killer’ of Female Students at the University of Ayoba in South Africa”; S.L.L Yee and S.C. Wu, “Investigating Bystander Intervention Efficacy for Gender-Based Violence Prevention in College,” *Student Populations: A Systematic Review. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 20, no. 1 (2019): 93–108; B. Willis and L.K Jorgensen, “A Critical Analysis of Reporting Mechanisms for Gender-Based Violence on College Campuses,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 5/6 (2021): 2657–83.

¹² Adams, Mabusela, and Dlamini, “Sexual Harassment: The ‘silent Killer’ of Female Students at the University of Ayoba in South Africa”; Drew and Bakker, “Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions: Promising Practices and Lessons Learned.”

¹³ Adams, Mabusela, and Dlamini, “Sexual Harassment: The ‘silent Killer’ of Female Students at the University of Ayoba in South Africa”; Yee and Wu, “Investigating Bystander Intervention Efficacy for Gender-Based Violence Prevention in College”; Willis and Jorgensen, “A Critical Analysis of Reporting Mechanisms for Gender-Based Violence on College Campuses.”

as it were. It could also be due to the insufficient assistance and support provided to survivors of violence within HEIs, which contribute to this phenomenon. The study further intimates that sexual harassment and GBV within HEIs serve as indicators of institutional shortcomings.

The researchers observed a lack of research on VAW within HEIs in South Africa, so existing studies have less exploration of university students' perspectives on VAW. Therefore, this study investigated university students' perceptions of factors contributing to VAW in one university in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. It is hoped that this contributes to a base of empirical knowledge about GBV in general, and further both academic work and activist interventions against VAW particularly in South Africa. The outcome of this study could provide major insight on the perceptions of VAW in general, and challenges related to it for decision-makers. This study will provide an opportunity to review the existing policies on GBV.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Based Violence in South African Higher Education Institutions

In their study, Shefer et al. investigated transactional sex among female university students.¹⁴ The study revealed that these students engage in sexual relationships with older men to cover for expenses such as photocopies, and study fees, or to improve their social standing. A study carried out at a South African university revealed that gender disparities among both students and staff contribute to a harmful culture where GBV is normalized.¹⁵ Some instances of GBV on university campuses in South Africa sparked widespread protests, with a significant focus on sexual violence. The #EndRapeCulture movement, for example, gained momentum at Rhodes University, where students rallied against sexual violence and harassment on campus. In response to these protests, the University established a task team to investigate the sexual violence faced by women on their campus, whose mission was to address the pervasive issue of rape culture and recommend ways to improve the safety and well-being of students. The task team's report, compiled in 2016, shed light on the challenges faced by students and provided recommendations for change.¹⁶ It highlighted the chronic underreporting of incidents due to low conviction rates and the reluctance of victims to come forward. Both the state and universities had been slow to respond to this crisis though the protests prompted action.

Adams *et al.* highlight the disturbing power dynamics and exploitation faced by students in HEIs, particularly when it comes to GBV.¹⁷ Moreover, gender equality can impact the occurrence of GBV on campus and shape how educational institutions respond to such incidents.¹⁸ It underscores the urgent need for addressing such issues and creating safer environments on campuses. Notably, some HEIs may perceive sexual violence as a less significant issue, leading them to argue that it does not require significant attention.

The researchers have noted that in a South African context, some university residences are often unregulated, serving as a fertile location for sexual harassment. However, other universities have good monitoring systems, which are regrettably weakened by unprofessional administration. It is also observed that Universities do not seem to have interventions to prevent and respond to GBV. The University of the Witwatersrand's Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) for example, conducted a comprehensive report highlighting the absence of institutional mechanisms to address GBV within the university. According to their findings, students who encounter GBV may experience adverse effects on both their well-being and academic performance.¹⁹

¹⁴ Tamara Shefer, Lindsay Clowes, and Tania Vergnani, "Narratives of Transactional Sex on a University Campus," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 14, no. 4 (2012): 435–47.

¹⁵ Sarah Frances Gordon and Anthony Collins, "'We Face Rape. We Face All Things': Understandings of Gender-Based Violence amongst Female Students at a South African University," *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 11, no. 2 (2013): 93–106.

¹⁶ Sexual Violence Task Team, "'We Will Not Be Silenced': Rape Culture, #RURreferencelist, and the University Currently Known as Rhodes," 2016.

¹⁷ Adams, Mabusela, and Dlamini, "Sexual Harassment: The 'silent Killer' of Female Students at the University of Ayoba in South Africa."

¹⁸ Anthony Collins et al., "Nobody's Business: Proposals for Reducing Gender-Based Violence at a South African University," *Agenda* 23, no. 80 (2009): 33–41.

¹⁹ Centre for Applied Legal Studies - Wits University, "Sexual Harassment Inquiry. University of the Witwatersrand," 2013, <https://www.wits.ac.za/cals/our-programmes/gender/sexual-harrassment-linquiry>.

Female students also have a high dependency ratio and thus remain vulnerable to GBV. Their poor backgrounds seem to affect them more than their well to do counterparts, predisposing them to insufficient money which impinges on their survival and decision to resort to commercial sex work and its other dimensions. This study contends that gender-based economic disparities persistently reinforce inequalities and contribute negatively to circumstances that heighten the vulnerability of young girls and women, exposing them to violence. This is likely to continue forever, if there is no advocacy for university policies and practices to promote gender equity and the treatment of women and girls in their relationships, families, and the communities in which they live.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by Bandura's 1977 Social Learning Theory (SLT) and employed a Social Ecological Model (SEM).²⁰ SLT suggests that people acquire behaviors by observing, imitating, and receiving reinforcement. SLT posits that exposure to violence, such as witnessing violent incidents within the family, can significantly impact an individual's behavior. This theory emphasizes how learned aggressive or violent behaviors may contribute to the perpetuation of GBV. Interventions informed by SLT could target the disruption of this cycle by promoting positive role models and actively challenging harmful norms.

SEM recognizes that individual behavior is influenced by multiple interconnected levels: individual, relationship, community, and society. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding GBV more so that it acknowledges that GBV is not solely an individual issue but is shaped by broader social, cultural, and environmental factors. Its levels of influence are claimed to be Individual Level, which includes personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors; Relationship Level, which entails interactions within families, intimate partnerships, and peer networks; Community Level, which details community norms, resources, and support systems; Societal Level, which embraces Sociocultural norms, laws, policies, and historical context.²¹ SEM considers multiple levels of influence, from individual to societal, and emphasizes that behaviors are shaped by interactions within these levels.

By examining GBV through the lenses of these two theories, this study explored how these different levels intersect and impact perceptions of violence. Arguably, these could be prevented through interventions based on the SEM to address GBV rather at multiple levels. There also could be a need to recognize that the responsibility to prevent GBV should extend beyond survivors to include those who cause harm, to communities and societies as a whole. Finally, structural factors could be addressed by promoting gender equality, and fostering community engagement the model aims to prevent. The SLT emphasizes the individual through observation and reinforcement, while SEM considers the broader context and interconnected levels of influence in preventing GBV.

Combining these two theories allowed the researchers to explore how social learning processes operate within the broader socio-ecological context. At the Individual Level, for example, the researchers explored how personal experiences and social learning influence an individual's perception of GBV. At the relationship level, they examined how observed behaviors within relationships contribute to learned perceptions of violence. At the community level, they evaluated how community norms reinforce social learning related to GBV and at societal level, they investigated how cultural factors shape social learning processes around violence.

Although women have equal rights of recourse as men and recognized as full persons before the law in South Africa, they find themselves at a disadvantage of ossified cultural traditions. The way cultural ideals and meanings regarding gender are interpreted in South Africa is a matter of concern for this study. Leaving the situation unattended can have dire consequences for young women in both higher education institutions and society in general. Hence the study examined students' perceptions of factors contributing to violence against women.

METHODOLOGY

²⁰ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1977).

²¹ Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Models of Human Development," *International Encyclopedia of Education* 3, no. 2 (1994): 37-43.

The qualitative approach encompasses distinct methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation proposed by researchers for their studies.²² The study employed a qualitative case study approach through which the researchers engaged in an in-depth examination and analysis of a single case of university students' perceptions of VAW. Given that the study aimed to capture the complexity and depth of the participants' encounters with violence and provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of VAW in HEI, a purposeful sampling technique was adopted. The purposeful sampling method was used because it is generally inclined to provide an in-depth investigation into phenomena (perceptions of GBV of university students),²³ and is generally aligned with qualitative research.²⁴

The study sample comprised 10 self-selected-volunteering female postgraduate students from the Tshwane University of Technology, in the North Gauteng area of South Africa. The age of the study participants ranged from 26 to 46 years characterised as follows: 46(n=1), 28(n=3), 29(n=3) and 30(n=3). The participants varied with regard to their academic qualifications as follows: a Bachelor of Education degree with a Mathematics major (n=3), a Bachelor of Education degree with an English major (n=4), and a Bachelor of Education degree with a communication major (n=3). All (n= 10) participants were employees of South African schools as educators.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide which is used to acquire a thorough picture of participants' thoughts and perceptions.²⁵ According to the guidelines by Cohen et al., pseudonyms in the form of alphabetical letters "P" were assigned to each participant, along with a unique number for differentiation.²⁶ All ten participants were designated as P1 through P10. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis in Atlas.ti 8. Responses were organised to each question, cleaned, and coded in Atlas-ti 8. The data was meticulously analyzed, and systematically revisited multiple times to extract its deeper significance and comprehension. Through this process, potential emerging patterns and relationships were identified and were documented and color-coded. Furthermore, permission to conduct the study was sought from and was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the university under study. The participants also gave their informed written consent.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

The findings of the study were discussed based on the respondents' perceptions of individual, relationship, community and societal level factors contributing towards GBV in HEIs in South Africa.

Perceptions on individual-level factors

The study identified several themes, including young age at marriage, level of education, and family background. The results suggested the respondents' consensus that getting married at a younger age, lower educational level, and a family background and poverty characterized by the incidence of childhood abuse, trauma, and marital violence at home, increased their exposure to GBV. Early marriage was associated with heightened vulnerability to violence, stemming from a husband's perceived dominance over women as P3 stated,

"...when the woman is married at an early age, the man will think he is superior and control and abuse a woman, because if they are older than there is going be like a difference in mindset. That will lead to conflict and the conflict leads to the fight."

Another factor identified in the context of VAW was lower level of education. Women with limited educational opportunities are at a higher risk of experiencing violence. This vulnerability arises from their dependence on male support and their diminished influence within the family due to their lack of

²² J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2018).

²³ Charles Teddlie and Fen Yu, "Mixed Methods Sampling: A Typology with Examples," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 1 (2007): 77–100.

²⁴ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

²⁵ Yvonne Botma et al., *Research in Health Sciences* (Heinemann Cape Town, 2010).

²⁶ Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539>.

education. This educational disparity contributes significantly to the challenges faced by women in such situations as P4 aptly stated,

"If you are not educated men will control and abuse you."

Another factor identified as a key contributor to women's GBV was family background as stated by both P1 and P2 respectively.

"He was telling me the stories that happened years back when they were still young boys so you could see that this person has anger." P1

"But then again, the background plays a role. How you were brought up and the society that brought you up to become the tough adult that you are" P2.

Respondent P1 highlighted that the violence started when her husband lost his job, which is an indication that some of the VAW is the result of poverty and unemployment:

"After he lost his job, his friends were no longer close to him, so he started feeling somehow... I could see that this thing, it has caused anger in him... "Some people are violated because they do not have anything (poor) and

P6 added, *"...that is why you find that in poor communities much of these incidents occur."*

Perceptions of relationship-level factors

Within this thematic analysis, a predominant observation emerged as most participants highlighted that the causes of VAW stemmed from a deficiency in support from both the perpetrator and victim's families. This was articulated by P7 who stated,

"Also, they should take you seriously and notice that honestly but sometimes families they take it lightly maybe because they are not in the shoes."

Another fact identified was lack of support from friends. P4 alleged,

"Friends sometimes they support but others just laugh. They don't support. They won't even give you advice."

A low socio-economic status and stress was yet another factor identified. P9 said,

"Honestly speaking this guy, I had taken him as my saviour... Personally, in my situation, I was not independent and everything was being done by him."

Some of the respondents indicated that strained relationships caused extensive emotional, psychological and physical abuse:

"He was like you are cheating because I'm no longer working. For him, to be honest, his anger started after losing the job" (P1).

Perception of community-level factors

The research findings highlighted that normalization of violence, patriarchy, and religion were regarded as some of the key enhancers of VAW. The following extracts indicate the respondents' concerns at the community level. It emerged that some of the respondents felt that the communities they live in, have normalized violence as stated by P4,

"They (community) have normalized it. Because they see the problem, but they do not even take action."

P7 alleged,

"The problem with the community now is that they have normalized this GBV. They take it as normal and if you cry for help people will just watch you through their walls... they talk in general but when they have a real GBV case everyone shuts doors and you don't have anyone to turn to

in the community. There was a time when I was running down the street after being beaten, no one helped me. I was crying out for help. People just peeped through their windows.”

The issue of patriarchy also emerged as P7 mentioned,

“Also, they have made us feel we are less powerful than men so men can always treat us the way they want to treat us because they are more powerful. I remember when I told my landlord that this is what was happening, she said, “remember he is a man, don’t step on his feet. Do what he is telling you to do.”

One member of the Focus Group Discussions had this to say about the community’s perception of violence:

“In some way people think that it’s okay for men to hit women but it’s not ok for the other way round.” (FG)

Another member added,

“I think religion and tradition. The fine line between religion and tradition is also a factor that contributes to GBV.” (FG)

Perception of the societal level factors

The study results indicated that culture is one of the key factors that stimulate VAW as stated by one of the respondents

“We’ve got culture. We have got tradition certain rules that as a woman you are supposed to abide by.” (P2)

Another respondent added.

“And also, this issue of saying if you are married stay, persevere. It’s very difficult. There are some situations in which you can’t keep on persevering but because that word comes from the elders as advice you will be trying to take it and use it later. The community there is wrong.” (P9)

It was noted that apart from the cultural beliefs, such as the view that men are superior to women, men are always right and women are the backbone of the home, hence they must endure whatever stone is thrown at them to sustain the marriage.

The study revealed that acceptance and tolerance of violence are significant factors that contribute to GBV. Society has unfortunately accepted the notion that male violence is inherent, leading to a harmful perspective through which women who experience abuse are often blamed and seen as having provoked it. This acceptance by society has reinforced VAW by encouraging women to be victims of male chauvinism. The findings showed that this perpetuates a cycle of victim-blaming and minimizes accountability for perpetrators. Because of this societal inbuilt opinion, it has become easy for men to justify VAW in societies and its ignorance by society.

Therefore, the following extracts are evidence of the respondents’ perceptions of society’s contribution to VAW:

“They are afraid to go back home because they will be laughed at, some of us at home they told us that there is no coming back here. If you say you love this man you need to know that there is no coming back.” (P1)

Another respondent said,

“They don’t speak against the perpetrator and try to address the problem... usually, the family just tried to subconsciously protect him, I think. So, nothing changes if he is not being called out for his action.” (P3)

Another respondent mentioned,

“That one it’s too deeply rooted in our customs especially, where women are just tools to stay with their men no matter what they do. And you grow up being told men are like that. Men are violent or men are going to do these things or but you have to persevere in these things because you the one who keeps your home together and...” (P5)

This respondent sounded absurd about the situation as it were, as he continued,

“And so, the community will turn a blind eye or the family will definitely turn a blind eye to the abuse because they say at the end of the day, you are the woman to persevere and you have to keep the family together because you are the home. So, you stick around and just stick because that’s how it’s supposed to be.” (P5)

DISCUSSION

The study examined perceptions of GBV in South Africa, specifically looking at individual, relationship, community, and societal factors contributing to VAW. These findings reinforced the idea that VAW is predominantly influenced by these factors. The study findings are congruent with the tenets of the ecological approach to GBV. According to this perspective, violence is not attributable to a singular factor; rather, it emerges from the interplay of multiple factors. Specifically, the ecological approach posits that men’s violent behavior toward women is influenced by a combination of contextual, social, and individual elements. These factors collectively contribute to a climate where such behavior is excused and tolerated.²⁷ The researchers contend that, in addition to the SEM constructs, inadequate enforcement and the absence of national laws and regulations pose significant challenges that exacerbate VAW. These deficiencies provide perpetrators with an incentive to engage in and persistently commit GBV, as they are aware that their actions will go unpunished.

According to Beneria *et al.*, VAW is common due to personal and biological histories that can influence an individual’s behavior toward others.²⁸ On an individual level, these factors encompass the perpetrator's history of childhood abuse, exposure to domestic violence in their family environment, lack of a present or supportive father figure, and a pattern of alcohol misuse. These experiences contribute to the normalization of violent behavior, as individuals come to view such actions as socially acceptable. Also, multiple levels of influence exist though these levels are interactive and reinforcing.²⁹ Therefore, if one was once exposed to trauma, or sexual abuse and/or saw it happening to their loved ones, they would be prone to conducting the same behaviors since it would be internalized by the individual.

The research findings indicate that individual-level factors play a significant role in the promotion of GBV.³⁰ Factors such as lower levels of education, early marriage, and family background were found to be significant contributors to VAW. The study also highlighted the extreme subordination of women, with traditional beliefs often overshadowing their rights and voices for human rights. Jayasinghe and Ezpeleta suggest that women with lower levels of education tend to exhibit more tolerant attitudes toward violence.³¹ Furthermore, Alesina *et.al.* highlight those individuals who grow up in environments characterized by violence are more likely to adopt tolerant attitudes towards violence in adulthood.³² Additionally, the research findings support earlier studies' assertions. For example, Mwale discovered a strong connection between GBV and women's socio-economic status, which is closely intertwined with

²⁷ Mary Ellsberg *et al.*, “Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls: What Does the Evidence Say?,” *The Lancet* 385, no. 9977 (April 2015): 1555–66, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61703-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61703-7).

²⁸ Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics as If All People Mattered* (Routledge, 2015).

²⁹ Urie Bronfenbrenner, “Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development.,” *American Psychologist* 32, no. 7 (1977): 513-31.

³⁰ G. Lamprell and J. Braithwaite, “Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting Intersectionality in Papua New Guinea’s Health Policy: A Triangulated Analysis Applying Data-Mining and Content Analytic Techniques,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 16 (2017): 1–10.

³¹ Namalie Jayasinghe and Maria Ezpeleta, “Ensuring Women Follow the Money: Gender Barriers in Extractive Industry Revenue Accountability: The Dominican Republic and Zambia,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 2 (2020): 428–34.

³² Alberto Alesina, Benedetta Brioschi, and Eliana La Ferrara, “Violence against Women: A Cross-Cultural Analysis for Africa” (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016).

their educational attainment.³³ Previous research has highlighted women's reliance on men for financial support as a risk factor for various forms of dating and intimate violence.³⁴

Additionally, parents and guardians sometimes prioritize obtaining monetary compensation for girls who have experienced sexual abuse over seeking justice.³⁵ When a child is a victim of rape or defilement, these caregivers may choose to find the perpetrator rather than fully understand the traumatic impact of the violated actions on the victim. Importantly, these attitudes toward GBV cases are often influenced by poverty levels and are not always recognized as serious issues. Moreover, GBV could be associated with patriarchal beliefs that accentuate men's and boys' control over women and girls.³⁶ The report highlights that cultural practices may stem from specific beliefs related to male superiority, such as the assumption of gender roles by either men or women. Unfortunately, these beliefs lead women to remain submissive and obedient even in the face of physical, sexual, and mental abuse. A study conducted in South Africa revealed that males uphold the notion of headship with cultural acceptance of violence, viewing it as permissible even in conflict resolution for instances of dating violence perpetration and victimization.³⁷

The study argues that women endure profoundly harmful relationships, often unable to envision an alternative way of life. It asserts that their continued experience of GBV results from their tolerance of these harmful actions. It further avers that ideological and cultural factors significantly influence women's decisions on how to address the abuse they face. Additionally, the field study revealed instances of GBV within households, a behavioral pattern that has become assimilated as a type of marital relationship. The study asserts that due to existing biases against intervening in the privacy of married and family life, society sometimes covers up these incidents, and victims themselves may also remain silent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that HEIs in South Africa should formulate evidence-based policies and programs. These initiatives should incorporate topics like dating violence and gender equality into the university curriculum across all educational levels. This proactive approach could prevent dating violence and address other forms of GBV effectively within the university environment. Additionally, accessibility to the GBV desk services should be enhanced for the university community to utilise without difficulties, all university students across faculties and departments must be trained to be better equipped in addressing GBV, and periodic in-service education should be conducted to update university community about the latest developments in GBV. Moreover, the GBV pocket manual should be developed and made available to all university community for quick access when confronted with the GBV activities, staff working with students should be empowered in handling GBV cases, line of authority should be clear for reporting GBV cases and students should be informed about the process of reporting cases of GBV.

CONCLUSION

The study findings revealed that university students had a positive perception regarding the individual factors contributing to GBV against women in South Africa such as young age at marriage, unemployment, substance abuse, childhood traumas and abuse and lack of education as the key individual factors contributing to VAW in South Africa. When examining the perceptions of university students regarding GBV and its relationship factors in South Africa, it was that the respondents perceived multiple sexual partnerships, low relationship satisfaction; the traditional involvement of family members and low socio-economic status and stress as some of the key relationship factors that provoke GBV against women

³³ Ackson Tyson Mwale, "Women's Empowerment and Use of Maternal Health Services in Zambia in 2010s," 2018, <https://www.ru.ac.za/perspective/2016archives/deborahseddon.html>.

³⁴ Zubairu Iliyasu et al., "Prevalence and Correlates of Gender-Based Violence among Female University Students in Northern Nigeria," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 15, no. 3 (2011): 123–33.

³⁵ Alesina, Brioschi, and La Ferrara, "Violence against Women: A Cross-Cultural Analysis for Africa."

³⁶ Mwale, "Women's Empowerment and Use of Maternal Health Services in Zambia in 2010s."

³⁷ Makondelele Radzilani-Makatu and Risuna Mahlalela, "Perceptions of Dating Violence by Undergraduate Students at a South African University," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 25–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2015.1007598>.

in South Africa. The research also noted that community-level factors, such as women living in poverty, lack of social support from their own family and their removal from the social networks, limited employment opportunities and challenging gender roles increase the risk of women's exposure to GBV. As a result, it was concluded that university students perceived the community-level factors as the driving factors for GBV against women in South Africa. In sum, societal level factors, namely, women growing up in a culture that normalises men's superiority over women, the attitudes and social norms regarding the acceptance or approval of violence, perpetrators of violence not being prosecuted and the cultural practices were perceived as key factors that enhance GBV against women in South Africa. Therefore, it was concluded that societal level factors contribute positively to VAW and that poor enforcement and lack of national laws and regulations in the country were some of the challenges exacerbating VAW and need to be addressed by stakeholders.

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