

Addressing Gender-Based Violence Among Foundation Phase Learners: Strategies for Early Prevention and School-Based Support

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Abstract. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive concern in schooling environments and significantly affects learners' emotional, social, and cognitive development. Although GBV is commonly examined in the context of older learners, early encounters with gendered aggression in the Foundation Phase are often overlooked, despite their potential long-term consequences for children's behaviour, relationships, and self-worth. This article explores strategies for preventing GBV and supporting young learners who may experience or witness such violence in schools. Guided by the social-ecological model, the study emphasises how individual, relational, school, and community influences shape learners' experiences of safety and vulnerability. The findings indicate that early intervention plays a crucial role in fostering safe and supportive learning environments. Effective strategies include integrating age-appropriate awareness and social-emotional learning activities into daily classroom practice, along with strengthening school-based support systems through teacher capacity-building, clear reporting procedures, and meaningful caregiver engagement. These approaches encourage respectful peer interactions and contribute to a secure school climate. The study suggests that prioritising GBV prevention in the early years can disrupt patterns of violence and cultivate more inclusive and nurturing educational spaces. Schools and policymakers are encouraged to embed proactive, developmentally sensitive GBV prevention within broader learner support programmes.

Keywords: gender-based-violence; school learners; prevention strategies; support systems; safe learning environments

1. Introduction and Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is a pervasive issue that significantly undermines the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments. GBV refers to harmful actions directed at individuals based on their gender; it not only violates learners' fundamental right to education but also impedes their physical,

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emotional, and social well-being (UNESCO, 2019). Instead of being safe spaces for learning and personal growth, schools often reflect broader societal inequalities, becoming sites where violence, harassment, and discrimination take place. This reflects deep-seated cultural norms that reinforce gender power imbalances, further perpetuating the cycle of violence (Parkes et al., 2020). Particularly concerning is the disproportionate impact GBV has on girls and marginalised groups, who are more likely to experience such harmful behaviours (Jewkes et al., 2015).

GBV in schools can manifest in various forms, including physical violence, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and emotional bullying. These behaviours have detrimental effects on learners' mental health, self-esteem, and academic success. They also hinder learners' ability to form positive relationships and thrive in the educational environment (Leach et al., 2014). When GBV becomes normalised in schools, it perpetuates gender inequality across generations, creating a cycle that extends far beyond the school walls (Devries et al., 2018). To address this issue effectively, a comprehensive approach is necessary—one that integrates prevention programmes and robust support mechanisms for those affected. Awareness campaigns and educational initiatives are essential tools in challenging harmful gender norms and promoting respect and equity among learners (UNICEF, 2021). Schools must also establish support systems such as counselling services and peer networks to help learners who experience GBV manage its consequences and begin the healing process (World Bank, 2018).

This article seeks to explore strategies for preventing GBV and providing support for affected learners in schools. By utilising the social-ecological model as a framework, the research examines how individual, relational, community, and societal factors contribute to the prevalence of GBV and its solutions. It aims to understand the experiences of learners and educators better to develop practical strategies that can help foster safer, more inclusive educational environments. Gender-based violence in schools is not just a problem isolated within the school environment; it reflects societal attitudes and practices that must be addressed holistically. This research builds on existing work to examine the factors driving GBV in schools and to offer evidence-based recommendations for creating an environment where all learners can thrive without fear of violence or discrimination (UNESCO, 2021; Lyons & Bhagwande, 2023).

Problem Statement

Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is a significant issue that disrupts the learning environment and undermines educational goals. It negatively affects learners' academic performance, contributes to high dropout rates, and causes long-term psychological harm. Victims of GBV often suffer from anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, making it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies and participate fully in school life. These impacts extend beyond individual learners, perpetuating cycles of inequality and violence within communities (Parkes et al., 2020). Regardless of the introduction of policies and interventions to prevent GBV, many efforts fail owing to insufficient resources, poor enforcement, and weak integration into school systems. Schools often lack

effective prevention strategies and support structures, leaving learners exposed to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Societal attitudes and cultural norms that tolerate or normalise GBV also present further obstacles to addressing this issue. The gap between policy design and practical implementation underscores the urgent need for evidence-based approaches that tackle the root causes of GBV. Holistic strategies involving all stakeholders, learners, educators, families, and policymakers are essential to creating safer and more inclusive educational environments.

Aim

The primary aim of this article was to investigate effective strategies for preventing gender-based violence (GBV) and supporting learners affected by it within school environments. The goal was to contribute to the creation of safer, more inclusive educational settings that promote equality and well-being for all learners.

Objectives

This article was guided by the following objectives:

- To identify the various forms and prevalence of GBV in schools, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue.
- To analyse the underlying factors contributing to GBV in school settings, with a focus on societal, institutional, and individual influences.
- To explore the effectiveness of existing strategies aimed at preventing and addressing GBV within schools' and
- To propose evidence-based, actionable interventions designed to enhance prevention efforts and provide holistic support for affected learners, thereby fostering safer learning environments.

Conceptualising Gender-Based Violence in Schools

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful actions directed at individuals based on their gender, and rooted in societal norms and unequal power dynamics. It is a violation of human rights and a significant barrier to equitable education. In schools, GBV manifests in bullying, harassment, physical abuse, and sexual violence, often perpetrated by peers, educators, or other school community members. These actions threaten learners' physical safety, emotional well-being, and academic success (UNESCO, 2019). GBV in schools is linked to gender norms and power imbalances. Bullying and harassment, especially targeting female learners or those who deviate from traditional gender expectations, are common. Verbal harassment, including gendered slurs, undermines victims' self-esteem and academic participation (UNICEF, 2021). Physical abuse, such as corporal punishment, is often gendered, with girls more frequently subjected to it, reflecting societal beliefs about female subordination, particularly in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa (Parkes et al., 2020). Sexual violence, including unwanted advances and assault, is one of the most severe forms of GBV, with lasting physical and psychological consequences. The involvement of educators in these cases further complicates trust and hinders victims' access to justice (Jewkes et al., 2020).

The persistence of GBV in schools is influenced by broader societal and institutional factors. Patriarchal structures that normalise male dominance and female subordination contribute to the acceptance of violence. Societal attitudes that trivialise or blame victims exacerbate the problem, making it less likely for GBV to be reported or addressed (Leach et al., 2020). At the institutional level, schools lacking anti-GBV policies or adequate educator training enable harmful behaviours to persist. The absence of gender-sensitive curricula further perpetuates stereotypes and discriminatory practices (UNESCO, 2022). The effects of GBV extend beyond individual victims, impacting the school community and society. Victims often experience psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD, which negatively affects their academic performance and social development. The fear of violence leads to higher dropout rates, particularly among girls, limiting their educational opportunities (UNICEF, 2021). Societally, GBV in schools reinforces cycles of violence and inequality, perpetuating harmful norms (Parkes et al., 2020).

Addressing GBV in schools requires a comprehensive approach that targets societal attitudes and institutional practices. Shifting societal norms and promoting gender equality are essential to reducing the acceptance of violence. In schools, comprehensive sexuality education programmes emphasising consent, respect, and equality can foster positive attitudes (UNESCO, 2022). Strengthening institutional frameworks, such as implementing anti-GBV policies, training educators, and ensuring accessible reporting mechanisms, is crucial. These measures should be culturally and contextually adapted to each community (Jewkes et al., 2020). Understanding GBV as both a societal and institutional issue highlights the need for integrated strategies to address its root causes while supporting affected learners. Such efforts are vital for creating safe, inclusive educational environments that promote equality and protect learners' well-being.

2. Literature Review

Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is a serious issue that negatively impacts learners' well-being and academic performance. It can take many forms, including verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and physical punishment, and is more common in schools with fewer resources. Research identifies several factors that contribute to GBV, such as deep-rooted gender stereotypes, harmful cultural norms, and the absence of strong school policies. Socioeconomic challenges and violence within the community can also exacerbate the problem. This review examines existing studies on the different/various forms and prevalence of GBV in schools, the factors that contribute to its occurrence, effective strategies for prevention, and the support systems needed to assist learners affected by GBV (Abdullahi et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). By understanding these factors, this review aims to help develop effective strategies to reduce GBV in schools and create safer, more supportive learning environments for all learners.

Gender-Based Violence in Schools

Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is a pervasive issue affecting learners' physical, psychological, and social well-being, as well as their academic performance. GBV encompasses harmful acts directed at individuals based on

their gender, reflecting broader societal inequalities and power imbalances (UNESCO, 2021). In educational settings, it manifests in verbal abuse, sexual harassment, bullying, and corporal punishment. Verbal abuse frequently targets learners who do not conform to traditional gender expectations, while sexual harassment ranges from inappropriate comments to coercion and unwanted physical contact, often influenced by power imbalances between teachers and learners or among peers (Parkes et al., 2020). Corporal punishment, though officially banned in many countries, continues in some schools, disproportionately affecting girls and reinforcing harmful gender hierarchies (Leach et al., 2020). Schools with limited resources are particularly vulnerable to GBV owing to inadequate oversight, insufficient staff training, and weak enforcement of protective policies (UNESCO, 2021). The effects of GBV are severe, including emotional distress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and reduced academic engagement (Leach et al., 2020; Parkes et al., 2020). Early exposure can negatively influence social behaviour, self-esteem, and peer relationships, sometimes leading to aggression, social withdrawal, or the perpetuation of violence in adulthood. When GBV is not addressed, the school environment, which should be safe and supportive, becomes a source of fear and insecurity.

Factors Contributing to GBV

Several factors contribute to the persistence of GBV in schools. Gender stereotypes, which assign power to boys and limit girls' autonomy, increase girls' vulnerability to abuse. Cultural norms may normalise violence and discourage victims from reporting incidents owing to fear of stigmatisation or retaliation (UNICEF, 2021). Schools often reflect these societal patterns when curricula fail to promote gender equality or when discriminatory behaviours are tolerated (UNESCO, 2022). Lack of awareness about GBV and insufficient education on consent, respect, and healthy relationships exacerbates the problem. Learners, educators, and staff who are uninformed may fail to identify or respond to abuse, allowing GBV to persist. Weak policies and poor implementation further undermine protection, as incidents may go unreported or unresolved without clear reporting structures, support services, and accountability mechanisms (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Socioeconomic challenges also increase learners' susceptibility. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to encounter violence in their communities or homes, which can influence behaviour at school. Resource constraints limit schools' ability to provide anti-GBV programmes, counselling, or safe spaces, further perpetuating vulnerability (Parkes et al., 2020). The interplay between social norms, economic limitations, and institutional weaknesses underscores the need for holistic, context-specific interventions.

Prevention Strategies

Preventing GBV requires a multi-layered approach addressing both school-level and societal factors. Awareness campaigns educate learners, educators, and the community about GBV, its impact, and the importance of reporting incidents. These initiatives aim to challenge harmful gender norms, foster respect, and promote equality (UNICEF, 2021). Policy reforms are crucial to ensure accountability and protection. Schools with clear reporting procedures, disciplinary measures, and victim support mechanisms are better positioned to

address GBV effectively (Leach et al., 2020). Such policies also signal the institution's commitment to safety and inclusivity, fostering an environment where learners feel valued and protected.

Educator training is another critical intervention. Teachers and staff require skills to identify, respond to, and prevent GBV. Training includes recognising signs of abuse, understanding gender dynamics, supporting victims, and promoting inclusive classroom practices (UNESCO, 2022). Well-trained educators can intervene early, provide support, and cultivate a culture of respect that deters violence. Community engagement strengthens prevention by linking schools with parents, local organisations, and leaders. Collaborations extend resources, such as healthcare, legal support, and counselling, while promoting shared responsibility for learner safety. Engagement also challenges societal norms that perpetuate GBV, fostering a broader culture of accountability and protection (Parkes et al., 2020). Integrating awareness, policy, educator training, and community engagement creates safer, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.

Support Systems for Affected Learners

Support systems are essential for learners recovering from GBV. Counselling services provide safe spaces to process trauma, develop coping strategies, and improve mental health outcomes (Leach et al., 2020). Peer support groups promote understanding, reduce stigma, and foster resilience and empathy, particularly important for young learners developing self-concept and social skills (UNICEF, 2021). Partnerships with community organisations provide specialised resources, such as legal advocacy, healthcare, and emergency support, ensuring comprehensive assistance for affected learners. Collaboration between schools and community organisations facilitates holistic care and addresses both immediate and long-term recovery needs (Parkes et al., 2020). Effective support systems help learners regain confidence, reduce long-term harm, and foster safe and inclusive school environments.

Combining prevention and support strategies is critical. Prevention reduces the incidence of GBV, while support systems ensure affected learners can recover and continue their education safely. Schools that integrate both approaches foster inclusive, nurturing environments that promote academic success, healthy peer relationships, and overall learner well-being. The literature highlights the complexity of GBV in schools, shaped by societal, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Addressing GBV requires comprehensive strategies, including awareness campaigns, policy implementation, educator training, community engagement, and robust support systems. Early intervention and sustained prevention efforts are crucial for creating safe and inclusive educational environments. Understanding the forms, causes, and consequences of GBV provides a foundation for developing evidence-based interventions that protect learners, promote equality, and foster holistic development (Leach et al., 2020; Parkes et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).)

Theoretical Framework

The article is guided by the social-ecological model (SEM) developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, which examines gender-based violence (GBV) through multiple levels of influence: individual, relational, community, and societal (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The SEM highlights how these layers interact and contribute to GBV, supporting multi-level interventions for long-term change. At the individual level, factors such as attitudes, knowledge, and personal experiences influence the likelihood of GBV. Education and awareness programmes are crucial for promoting gender equality and non-violence (Heise, 2011). The relational level focuses on dynamics in families, peer groups, and intimate relationships, where power imbalances and gender inequality often lead to GBV. Interventions at this level promote healthy communication and conflict resolution (Jewkes et al., 2015).

The community level examines social networks and local norms, where GBV can be normalised. Community-based interventions, such as awareness campaigns and support groups, help address GBV and support survivors (Parkes et al., 2020). At the societal level, broader cultural, political, and economic factors such as policies and media, shape GBV. Societal-level interventions focus on legal reforms, public education, and policy changes to challenge harmful norms (Heise, 2011). The SEM provides a comprehensive framework for understanding GBV and underscores the importance of multi-level interventions to prevent violence and support survivors, fostering a safer and more equitable environment.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore participants' experiences and understand the impact of GBV in educational settings. This approach was appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of learners' and educators' lived experiences, capturing the social, emotional, and academic consequences of GBV that cannot be measured through quantitative methods. The primary objective was to investigate how GBV impacts learners' well-being, safety, and academic performance, and to identify effective strategies for prevention and support. A case study research design was employed, focusing on selected public high schools to examine the contexts in which GBV occurs and its impact on learners and school staff. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews of school policies. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share personal experiences, while FGDs encouraged interactive discussion and reflection. Document reviews evaluated the effectiveness of existing policies in preventing and addressing GBV.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure relevant insights. The sample included 20 participants: 10 learners aged 14–18 years and 10 educators with three to 15 years of experience. A balanced representation of males and females was ensured across both groups. Data collection procedures involved obtaining informed consent, conducting private interviews, guiding FGDs using a discussion guide, and audio-recording all sessions with permission. Document reviews were conducted systematically to

identify policy strengths and gaps. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes across all sources.

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, triangulation of data sources, and maintaining an audit trail. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and adhering to guidelines for research on sensitive topics, prioritizing the safety and well-being of all participants. The study had several limitations, including a small purposive sample that limits generalisability, reliance on self-reported data prone to bias, a case study design that prevents causal inferences, and document reviews confined to selected schools' policies. These constraints suggest that future research could use larger, more representative samples, mixed-methods approaches, or longitudinal designs to deepen understanding of GBV in diverse school contexts.

4. Presentations of Findings and Discussion

The findings of this article reveal the complex nature of GBV in schools, shedding light on its various forms, contributing factors, and significant impacts on learners. Participants identified verbal abuse, bullying, and sexual harassment as the most prevalent forms of GBV within the school environment, with cultural norms and inadequate school policies being major contributors to the persistence of this violence. The article also uncovered the limitations of current interventions, which were found to be insufficient in addressing the scale and scope of the problem. The impact of GBV on learners was profound, affecting their academic performance, mental health, and social interactions. These findings emphasise the urgency for more comprehensive and effective strategies to address GBV in schools and create safer learning environments for all learners.

Theme 1: Forms of GBV in Schools

The findings from this article highlighted that the most common forms of GBV in the schools were verbal abuse, bullying, and sexual harassment. These forms of violence were frequently reported by both learners and educators, providing a comprehensive understanding of how they manifest in the school environment and the underlying power dynamics involved. The findings suggest that GBV is a pervasive issue in schools, which is both ingrained in the school culture and influenced by broader societal norms.

Learners were particularly vocal about the prevalence of verbal abuse in their daily experiences. Learner B described how boys would frequently call girls derogatory names such as "slut" or "bitch" when they felt disrespected by them. This form of verbal abuse was normalised to the extent that it was seen as an expected part of school life. Learner D echoed similar sentiments, saying, "*Boys think it's okay to insult girls if they don't like them or if a girl rejects them. It's just part of the school culture.*" This repeated use of harmful language not only perpetuates the stigmatisation of girls but also reinforces gender inequalities by upholding the idea that girls are to be submissive and deferential to boys. Educators also confirmed that verbal abuse is common, with many reporting incidents where girls, particularly those who do not conform to gender norms, are ridiculed. As

Educator A noted, *"Girls who speak up in class or show leadership are often labelled negatively, and boys who cry or show emotion are teased for being 'weak'."* This points to how verbal abuse is closely tied to rigid gender norms, where behaviours outside of expected roles (such as assertiveness in girls or emotional expression in boys) are seen as threats to traditional gender roles. According to Jewkes et al. (2015), verbal abuse in schools plays a critical role in perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, which in turn reinforces the power dynamics and inequalities that underpin GBV.

Bullying emerged as another significant form of GBV, particularly in relation to gendered expectations. Participants highlighted that bullying was frequently targeted at girls who violated conventional gender norms, such as speaking up in class, dressing in a non-conventional way, or behaving assertively. Learner C shared, *"If a girl wears something different or acts too confidently, she gets bullied by boys. It's like they want to put her down to make sure she doesn't get too 'out of place'."* This statement reflects the way bullying is often used as a tool to enforce conformity to traditional gender expectations, especially for girls who challenge the status quo. It also highlights how girls are expected to adhere to passive, obedient roles, while those who resist these roles face social punishment. This type of bullying contributes to an environment in which girls learn to fear the consequences of deviating from gender norms, perpetuating the cycle of GBV in schools.

Sexual harassment was another common form of GBV reported by participants. Learners recounted disturbing incidents of unwanted sexual comments or physical advances, often occurring in hallways or other less supervised areas of the school. Learner F shared that, *"Boys touch girls without asking and say inappropriate things. It's uncomfortable and scary. Sometimes, we don't know how to respond."* Educators confirmed that sexual harassment was a recurring issue; however, they also pointed out that learners were often unwilling to report these incidents owing to fear of retaliation or social stigma. Educator D noted, *"Learners rarely report it because they don't want to be labelled as troublemakers, or they fear the boy will hurt them more."* This silence surrounding sexual harassment in schools is a critical concern, as it allows the behaviour to persist and go unchecked. Parkes et al. (2020) discuss how the underreporting of sexual harassment is a significant barrier to addressing this form of violence in schools. The fear of retaliation, combined with the normalisation of sexual harassment in certain environments, results in an atmosphere where victims feel powerless to speak out.

The discussion of these forms of GBV reveals that they are not isolated incidents but rather symptoms of a larger, systemic issue rooted in societal norms and power structures. The normalisation of verbal abuse, bullying, and sexual harassment in schools reflects broader gender inequalities that are reinforced through cultural expectations and institutional practices. These forms of GBV are deeply embedded in the school culture and are perpetuated by the silence and complicity of both learners and educators. As the findings suggest, addressing GBV in schools requires more than just individual behavioural change; it necessitates a systemic shift in how gender and power are understood and enacted within the school environment.

This systemic nature of GBV calls for comprehensive and multi-level interventions that address the root causes of violence, including the challenging of harmful gender norms, the promotion of respectful relationships, and the creation of safer school environments for all learners. Interventions must focus not only on educating learners about the harms of GBV but also on creating an institutional culture that does not tolerate any form of violence, be it verbal, physical, or sexual. Educators must also be trained to recognise and respond effectively to incidents of GBV, while support systems should be established to encourage reporting and help victims.

Verbal abuse, bullying, and sexual harassment were found to be common and pervasive forms of GBV in the schools studied. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive interventions that address both the immediate impacts of GBV and the underlying cultural and societal factors that contribute to its persistence. By challenging harmful gender norms, promoting positive behaviours, and ensuring a safer and more supportive school environment, it is possible to reduce the prevalence of GBV in schools and foster an atmosphere of respect and equality.

Theme 2: Contributing Factors

The findings of this article highlight that cultural norms and inadequate school policies play significant roles in contributing to gender-based violence (GBV) in the schools involved. Both learners and educators frequently identified these factors as central to the persistence of GBV in the school environment. Cultural norms around gender roles, combined with the lack of comprehensive school policies to address GBV, created a space where violence was either normalised or not properly addressed.

Participants consistently pointed to cultural norms as powerful influences on how gender roles were understood and acted upon within the school. Educator A shared, *"In our community, there is a strong expectation for girls to be quiet, obedient, and submissive, while boys are encouraged to be dominant and aggressive. These norms influence how learners behave toward one another, and it often results in boys treating girls with disrespect."* This statement highlights how societal expectations about gender roles are transferred into schools, where boys may assert dominance over girls, and girls are expected to tolerate this behaviour. Learner G further supported this by saying, *"Boys think it's okay to make fun of girls who speak up or act confidently. It's like society says girls should stay in the background."* These comments illustrate how cultural beliefs around gender can reinforce power imbalances and make gender-based violence a part of daily life in schools. According to Parkes et al. (2020), cultural norms that promote male dominance and female subordination contribute to environments where violence is normalised, and learners may feel that certain behaviours are acceptable.

Lack of adequate school policies was identified as another key factor contributing to GBV in schools. Many educators explained that while there were general school discipline guidelines, there were no clear, specific policies addressing GBV. Educator C explained, *"We have a school code of conduct, but it doesn't explicitly mention how to deal with gender-based violence. When incidents occur, there's confusion"*

about what actions to take, and often, nothing is done." This statement reflects the absence of clear guidelines for dealing with GBV, making it difficult for educators to respond effectively. Learners also expressed frustration with the lack of action, with Learner C commenting, *"Sometimes we report incidents of bullying or harassment, but the educators just ignore it or say it's part of growing up."* The absence of a strong policy framework meant that learners felt unsupported when they experienced or witnessed GBV. This lack of intervention not only fails to protect the learners but also perpetuates the idea that GBV is not a serious issue within the school. Heise (2011) notes that the failure of institutions to provide a comprehensive response to GBV makes it more difficult to address the problem effectively, allowing the cycle of violence to continue.

The failure to address GBV, both within the context of cultural norms and inadequate policies, can have lasting consequences. As Learner H mentioned, *"When educators don't intervene or take action, it sends a message that this kind of behaviour is acceptable."* This lack of accountability allows GBV to continue unchecked, affecting not just the victims but also creating a hostile environment for the entire learner body. Heise (2011) further argues that when institutions fail to intervene or offer support, it reinforces a cycle of violence that becomes increasingly difficult to break.

The findings indicate that cultural norms and inadequate school policies are critical factors in the persistence of GBV in schools. Cultural expectations that enforce gender inequality create an environment where GBV is normalised, while the lack of clear school policies leaves both educators and learners unprepared to handle such incidents. These findings emphasise the need for schools to challenge harmful cultural norms and to adopt robust policies that specifically address GBV, ensuring that all learners can learn in a safe, supportive environment.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of Existing Strategies

The findings of this article reveal that existing strategies to address gender-based violence (GBV) in schools are limited in both scope and effectiveness. Both learners and educators expressed concerns that current interventions are inadequate in preventing or responding to GBV. While some schools have basic programmes or guidelines, participants noted that these efforts often lack clear structure, comprehensive approaches, and sufficient resources, which ultimately diminish their effectiveness. This theme highlights the need for more comprehensive and robust programmes that can better address GBV in schools.

A key finding is the limited nature of current interventions. Educator B explained, *"We have some workshops on bullying and respect, but they are one-off sessions. After that, there's little follow-up or support for learners who may still be experiencing issues."* This reflects a common issue: interventions tend to be isolated events, such as one-time workshops, rather than ongoing programmes. As a result, learners may not retain the information, nor feel supported after the event, making it difficult for the school to establish a lasting culture of respect and safety. The lack of continuity means that interventions are more reactive, addressing problems only when they escalate. Learner J also shared that, *"We had a talk about bullying in assembly, but after that, nothing changed. The bullying continued, and it felt like no one cared."* This

highlights the frustration felt by learners when they perceive that the school's efforts are superficial and do not lead to meaningful change.

Many participants pointed out that existing strategies often fail to address the full range of GBV in schools. Educator F stated, *"The programmes focus mainly on bullying and neglect other forms of GBV, like sexual harassment. We need a broader approach that addresses all types of violence equally."* This comment suggests that current interventions are too narrow, leaving important forms of GBV, such as sexual harassment and verbal abuse, unaddressed. While bullying is an important issue, the broader spectrum of GBV requires more targeted and varied responses. Failure to address all forms of GBV results in an incomplete approach that does not fully protect learners.

Many participants also noted that the involvement of key stakeholders, such as parents and community members, is often lacking in the existing strategies. Learner G expressed, *"We talk about these issues at school, but it's like the educators are the only ones trying to change things. Our parents don't talk about these issues at home, so it's hard to make a difference."* The absence of parental and community involvement limits the overall effectiveness of the interventions. Engaging parents and the wider community is essential to creating a supportive environment that reinforces messages of respect and equality, both at school and at home. As Heise (2011) emphasises, involving families and communities is key to sustaining long-term changes in addressing GBV.

Participants pointed out the need for better training for educators to handle GBV situations effectively. Educator E shared, *"We don't receive enough training on how to manage these situations. We know how to enforce discipline, but when it comes to GBV, we're not always sure how to intervene in a way that is supportive and effective."* This highlights a significant gap in professional development. Without adequate training, educators may struggle to respond to GBV incidents appropriately, which can lead to ineffective interventions. Providing educators with practical strategies and training on how to handle GBV is critical to ensure that they can support learners sensitively and effectively.

Despite these challenges, some participants noted small but promising improvements. For instance, Educator B highlighted, *"The introduction of peer counselling has helped some learners, but it's still in its early stages. We need to expand these efforts and make them more widely accessible."* Peer counselling, where learners are trained to offer support to their peers, has shown potential in some schools for creating safe spaces and increasing the reporting of GBV incidents. However, as this educator pointed out, these efforts need to be expanded and institutionalised to have a meaningful impact.

Therefore, the findings suggest that existing strategies to address GBV in schools are not sufficiently broad or effective. Many schools have basic programmes in place, but these are often limited in duration, focus, and stakeholder involvement. There is a clear need for more comprehensive, long-term strategies that include all members of the school community – learners, educators, parents, and the wider community. Enhancing educator training and expanding peer counselling

programmes could also improve the effectiveness of current interventions. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for a coordinated, inclusive approach to address GBV in schools, ensuring that all learners have access to a safe and supportive learning environment.

Theme 4: Impact of GBV on learners

The findings of this study underscore the profound impact of GBV on learners, particularly in relation to their academic performance, mental health, and social relationships. Both learners and educators highlighted that exposure to GBV disrupts the learning environment, causes emotional distress, and affects learners' ability to engage meaningfully in school activities. These impacts were reported consistently across participants, reflecting the pervasive and multi-dimensional nature of GBV in the school context.

One of the most evident effects of GBV is its influence on academic performance. Learners affected by violence often struggle to concentrate in class, leading to reduced engagement and lower academic outcomes. Educator I noted, *"Many learners who are affected by violence at home or in the school environment find it difficult to concentrate in class. Their grades drop because they can't focus on learning when they are dealing with emotional trauma."* Learners expressed similar experiences. Learner H shared, *"I just can't concentrate in class. My mind is always on the things that are happening at home. I can't focus on my studies when I'm stressed."* These narratives illustrate how exposure to GBV impairs cognitive functioning and academic engagement, highlighting the link between emotional trauma and educational outcomes. Educators further observed that learners affected by GBV often require additional support to keep pace with classroom expectations, and some may even exhibit declining motivation or absenteeism, which compounds academic challenges.

The study also revealed significant impacts on learners' mental and emotional health. Exposure to GBV often leads to feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. Learner E expressed, *"I feel sad and scared all the time. Sometimes I just feel like giving up."* Educators corroborated these observations, noting that learners often internalize their trauma and may not openly express distress. Educator C stated, *"Learners who are dealing with GBV often show signs of depression or anxiety, but they don't always express their feelings. They become withdrawn or act out in class."* Such internalized trauma can manifest in behavioural changes, social withdrawal, or aggression, indicating the extensive psychological toll that GBV exerts on learners.

In addition to academic and mental health consequences, GBV significantly affects learners' social relationships. Participants reported that learners who experience GBV often struggle to trust others and to form healthy social connections. Educator F explained, *"GBV makes it hard for some learners to trust others. They may isolate themselves from their peers or lash out at others because they're struggling with anger or hurt."* Learners confirmed this observation, with Learner B noting, *"I don't want to talk to anyone. I feel like no one understands what I'm going through, so I just keep to myself."* The social withdrawal described by participants increases feelings of isolation and loneliness, which may further exacerbate

emotional distress and hinder learners' ability to engage in collaborative learning or peer support activities. Social alienation can also reduce learners' sense of belonging in the school environment, which is critical for both academic and psychosocial development.

The study further highlighted that the impacts of GBV are cumulative, with learners often experiencing overlapping effects on academics, mental health, and social functioning. For instance, a learner struggling with anxiety due to domestic or school-based violence may find it difficult to concentrate on lessons, which in turn affects academic performance. At the same time, the learner may withdraw socially, limiting access to peer support that could otherwise mitigate the negative effects of trauma. Educators emphasized that these interconnected challenges illustrate the complex nature of GBV and the need for schools to recognize its wide-ranging impact on learners' holistic development.

The findings demonstrate that GBV has wide-ranging and interconnected consequences for learners in schools. It negatively affects academic performance by reducing focus, engagement, and motivation; compromises mental health through anxiety, depression, and emotional distress; and disrupts social relationships by fostering mistrust, isolation, and withdrawal. Participants' accounts highlight that GBV is not a problem confined to isolated incidents but a pervasive issue with ongoing implications for learners' well-being and educational outcomes.

Understanding these impacts is critical for educational stakeholders to appreciate the urgency of addressing GBV in schools. By documenting the ways in which GBV affects learners, this study provides evidence that the consequences extend beyond individual incidents, influencing overall school climate, peer interactions, and academic achievement. Recognizing the severity and breadth of GBV's impact sets the stage for subsequent sections of the study, particularly the recommendations, which focus on developing targeted interventions and support systems aimed at mitigating these negative effects.

The study establishes that GBV profoundly disrupts learners' academic, emotional, and social functioning. Learners exposed to GBV face challenges in concentrating on studies, experience heightened emotional distress, and struggle with peer interactions. These findings underscore the crucial importance of schools recognizing the profound impact of GBV on learners' overall development, as well as the necessity of providing a vital foundation for designing effective strategies to support affected learners.

5. Recommendations

It is essential to implement comprehensive GBV prevention programmes in schools, focusing not just on raising awareness but also on fostering long-term behavioural change. These programmes should be well-rounded, addressing topics such as respect, consent, and gender equality. They should engage learners, educators, and the broader school community. By cultivating a culture of understanding and respect, schools can prevent GBV and effectively address it

when it occurs. Ongoing training for educators is also vital in helping them develop the necessary skills to identify and respond to GBV. Educators play a critical role in noticing signs of abuse and offering support to affected learners. Training programmes should include identifying GBV, providing appropriate interventions, offering emotional support, and creating a safe classroom environment. This ensures that educators can handle GBV incidents sensitively and responsibly, promoting a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for all learners. Strengthening support services, such as counselling and peer support networks, is another important step. Learners who experience GBV need safe spaces to express their emotions and receive help. Schools should provide access to professional counsellors who can support these learners. Peer support programmes, where learners are trained to help their peers, can also create a sense of community and understanding. Peer counsellors can offer immediate support to learners who may be hesitant to approach an adult.

Collaboration with community organisations is also crucial in addressing the cultural norms that contribute to GBV. Cultural beliefs and practices can shape attitudes toward violence, and these norms are often difficult to change. Schools should partner with local community groups, NGOs, and other stakeholders to challenge these deep-rooted beliefs. Engaging with parents, religious leaders, and community members can help spread messages of respect, gender equality, and non-violence, creating a broader support system that reinforces the need to eliminate GBV. These collaborations are key in driving community-wide change and creating an environment where GBV is no longer tolerated. Together, these recommendations emphasise the importance of a multidimensional approach to addressing GBV in schools, one that encompasses prevention, support, education, and community engagement. Only through a coordinated effort can we hope to create safer, more inclusive learning environments for all learners.

Suggestions For Future Research

Future researchers could focus on examining the effectiveness of specific GBV prevention and support programmes in schools, such as peer counselling initiatives, awareness campaigns, or teacher training interventions, to determine which strategies yield the most measurable improvements in learners' well-being and academic outcomes. Studies could also explore GBV in rural versus urban Foundation Phase schools, identifying contextual factors that influence prevalence and impact. Longitudinal research is recommended to track the long-term psychological, social, and educational effects of GBV on learners over several years, providing insight into the sustained consequences and recovery trajectories. Further studies could also investigate the role of parents and community members in reinforcing or mitigating GBV, highlighting how collaborative approaches between schools, families, and communities can strengthen protective measures.

6. Conclusion

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is essential to fostering an environment where all learners feel safe, supported, and able to focus on their education. This article has provided important, evidence-based insights into the

widespread prevalence of GBV in schools, its root causes, and the impact it has on learners' academic, social, and emotional well-being. It underscores the need for comprehensive and multifaceted interventions, such as prevention programmes that educate learners and staff on gender equality, consent, and respect, as well as continuous professional development for educators to identify and address GBV effectively. The article highlights the significance of support services, such as counselling and peer support networks, in helping learners cope with the effects of violence.

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