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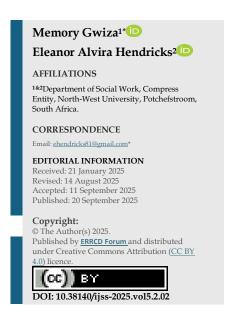Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

Unpacking Dynamics: A Systematic Literature Review on Gender-Based Violence and Its Cultural and Structural Influences in South African Universities

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Abstract: Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pressing issue in South African universities, triggered by a complex interplay of cultural and structural factors. Universities have been grappling with high rates of GBV cases, which can be attributed to various contributory factors. This systematic literature review aims to examine the dynamics of GBV within universities, specifically focusing on its cultural and structural influences. Utilising a comprehensive analysis of academic articles, institutional reports, and policy documents, this study investigates how entrenched gender norms, patriarchy, power imbalances, and institutional frameworks contribute to GBV in universities. This review employs an intersectional approach, exploring how these factors shape survivors' experiences and the effectiveness of institutional responses. The findings reveal a high prevalence of GBV within universities, associated with both cultural and structural drivers. University policies and societal attitudes were found to fail in providing adequate support for survivors, resulting in the underreporting of GBV. Cultural beliefs and systemic barriers were found to hinder the effective implementation of GBV interventions in universities. This study recommends GBV policy reforms, enhanced institutional accountability, culturally sensitive strategies, and the establishment of survivor-centred support systems to create safer campuses. Future research should assess efforts addressing GBV within South African universities.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, cultural influences, structural influences, systematic review, university.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV), the act of inflicting harm on individuals based on gender, sex, and perceived subordinate societal roles, has become a global concern (Klugman, 2017). The manifestation of GBV has extended its impact into educational settings, with South African universities among those with the highest reported cases of GBV. Within these settings, GBV is identified as a deeply entrenched issue, shaped by both cultural norms and structural influences. Moreover, GBV poses a threat to individuals across all genders (Loken & Hagen, 2022). This study aims to unpack the cultural and structural factors contributing to GBV within South African universities, focusing on understanding the deeply rooted systemic elements that sustain this crisis.

The prevalence of GBV in South African universities has become alarming, with numerous incidents reported across campuses (Dlakavu, 2022). The statistics highlight a particularly high incidence of GBV among female students, predominantly perpetrated by males (Mutinta, 2022). In 2022, statistics revealed that out of 604 students surveyed, 336 (56.5%) experienced emotional or verbal abuse, 378 (46.7%) faced sexual assault, and 102 (36.3%) suffered physical violence in public universities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (Mutinta, 2022). This stark statistical review indicates that universities are severely compromised by the pervasive issue of GBV (Brink et al., 2021; von Meullen & van der

Waldt, 2022). These figures reveal the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address this issue.

The ongoing reporting of human rights violations that inflict harm on individuals has resulted in a catastrophic situation within universities. Among the top institutions with extremely high reports of GBV, South African universities have experienced a troubling prevalence of GBV, creating an unconducive environment for the university community. The severity of GBV in these universities underscores a distressing reality that cannot be overlooked. However, it has been found that GBV is often underreported for various reasons, including a lack of knowledge, normalisation of the issue, silencing of victims, and inadequate interventions in response to GBV (Cismaru & Cismaru, 2018).

As such, this study is motivated by the severe occurrences of GBV and the underreporting of GBV cases within universities, which have been attributed to societal normalisation, victim-blaming, and institutional inadequacies in responding to GBV (Cismaru & Cismaru, 2018). The researchers argue that the higher prevalence of GBV highlights a failure in institutional response mechanisms, necessitating a systematic exploration of the cultural and structural factors fuelling GBV in South African universities. The researchers found that high GBV statistics indicate that GBV within universities has become an unbearable concern, underscoring the need for comprehensive interventions to address GBV, starting from its root causes to awareness, education, and the development of culturally and structurally informed interventions and policies in South African universities. This study unmasks the dynamics of GBV in South African universities, examining its cultural and structural influences, advocating for comprehensive societal change and international cooperation to address this human rights violation, and highlighting the need for stronger policies, cultural transformation, and robust strategies to combat the ongoing GBV tragedy in universities.

Within educational settings, GBV has become a stumbling block to the overall functioning and well-being of the university population. Universities are dominated by sexual harassment, intimate partner violence (IPV), and femicide. Sexual harassment, which involves unwelcome sexual acts, is deeply rooted in cultural norms that sustain gender inequality (Hendricks, 2022). Power imbalances between students and faculty further exacerbate this issue, making it difficult for survivors of sexual harassment to report cases or seek justice (Liddell et al., 2024). Similarly, IPV, the abuse within romantic relationships, is rampant within universities, posing significant challenges for students, particularly those residing on campus, where safe housing and security measures are often inadequate. Additionally, femicide—the intentional killing of women—represents the most extreme manifestation of GBV in universities. Cases such as the murder of Nociselo Mtebeni at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, among other cases, have caused national shock and emphasised the dangerous reality of GBV within university settings (Chiumbu, 2022; Mazibuko, 2022). It is argued that these acts of violence are fuelled by deep-rooted cultural and structural factors (Ndlovu et al., 2020).

BV within South African universities has been attributed to cultural and structural factors. Studies have found that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and values, where males occupy more dominant positions and are considered the powerful gender, have contributed to GBV, predominantly reported by female students (Yesufu, 2022). Carrigan et al. (2018) indicate that the overwhelming power and superiority of men over women, from a societal and cultural perspective, have caused inequality and form the bedrock of violence within universities. Male dominance and supremacy are viewed as societal attitudes rooted in masculinity over femininity. Consequently, males are expected to have authority and control over women. This is further reflected in traditional gender roles, where men are perceived as dominant and women as submissive. Conversely, many females are socialised to accept victimhood, limiting their ability to speak out against GBV. Historically, male superiority has been entrenched in our nation, as evidenced by cultural traditions such as lobola (bride price), virginity testing, and ukuthwala (forced marriage) (Karimakwenda,

2020). When these cultural patterns are left unchallenged, they escalate into extreme forms of violence, including femicide, which remains a tragic reality in South African universities (Yesufu, 2022). Unsurprisingly, the reinforced notions of masculinity and femininity have created an environment that condones and perpetuates GBV, which is also manifesting within universities.

GBV within universities is also the result of structural influences. Universities have adopted campus safety measures, procedures, and policies to ensure that no form of GBV is tolerated on their campuses (Mahabeer, 2021). It is believed that university policies are established to ensure that GBV cases are addressed appropriately and that preventative measures are in place to deter GBV from occurring (Mahabeer, 2021). However, Nunlall (2022) found that South African universities' policies for managing GBV were poorly implemented. Although some studies suggest that university policies aim to raise awareness of GBV and educate students and staff about it (Axemo et al., 2018), research shows that higher education institutions struggle to enforce these policies effectively due to insufficient personnel training and inadequate resources (Hendricks, 2022; Mahabeer, 2021). Additionally, survivors of GBV face challenges in reporting incidents due to a lack of adequate reporting mechanisms, while perpetrators of GBV are not effectively chastised, leaving survivors without justice. Survivors or victims of GBV also struggle to receive support due to poor resource availability within universities and ineffective policy operation (Mahabeer, 2021). This situation is exacerbated by a university culture that prioritises reputation and silences GBV-related matters (Sotirovic et al., 2024). This indicates that structural influences—including inadequate institutional policies, ineffective support systems, and a culture that prioritises reputation and silences discussions of GBV—are contributory factors to GBV within universities (Sotirovic et al., 2024; von Meullen & van der Waldt, 2022).

The widespread occurrence of GBV is recognised as a serious global issue, with South African universities facing particularly high incidences of this form of violence. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the cultural and structural factors influencing GBV in South African universities, shedding light on the complex network of elements contributing to this distressing problem. This study employs an SLR to investigate existing research, institutional reports, and scholarly articles on GBV within universities. By synthesising data from diverse sources, this review provides a comprehensive perspective on the intricate relationship between cultural norms, structural factors, and the perpetuation of GBV. The methodology follows a rigorous selection and analysis process to ensure a critical evaluation of academic and institutional literature, drawing insights from key studies from the past decade. By analysing existing scholarly works, reports, and studies, this review aims to deepen understanding of the diverse and layered nature of GBV in academic settings, with a specific focus on cultural and structural aspects. Within the South African context, the review untangles the complicated web of patriarchal systems and deeply ingrained cultural norms and practices that sustain GBV. It delves into the intersections between GBV, culture, and institutional frameworks, while also addressing the wide-reaching consequences of GBV in universities and society at large. The review identifies significant knowledge gaps, emphasising the need for further research and the creation of evidence-based policies to effectively confront GBV. Notably, the review offers a range of recommendations for interventions, policy measures, and strategies to address GBV in South African universities. Consequently, it presents essential discussions and courses of action for implementing evidence-based solutions to tackle GBV within educational settings.

While there is substantial research on GBV and its influences within higher education globally, studies specifically unpacking the cultural and structural drivers of GBV within South African universities remain limited. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the prevalence and persistence of GBV within the university context, emphasising not only the individual acts of violence but also the broader structural and cultural factors that perpetuate it. This research contributes to the growing body of literature by focusing on a university setting with high rates of

GBV and a unique sociocultural landscape that includes historical legacies of apartheid, gender inequality, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. This study distinguishes itself by critically examining the causes of GBV, extending to a thorough exploration of the existing university policies managing GBV in South African universities. Many studies have explored the institutional responses to GBV, but few have specifically scrutinised the causes of GBV and their effects on the policies adopted by South African universities. This paper bridges that gap by reviewing and assessing policy implementation and the inherent shortcomings that allow GBV to persist in universities, despite formalised frameworks designed to prevent it. Additionally, this paper relies on both the cultural and structural roots of GBV within the university environment.

While previous research has focused on individual behaviours or victim-blaming, this study links the persistent prevalence of GBV to the wider cultural acceptance of gender inequality and the structural limitations within universities that hinder effective intervention and support for survivors. By offering a comprehensive view of GBV, the paper shifts the discourse from isolated incidents to systemic issues within academic institutions. This research makes a unique contribution by incorporating gendered lenses to understand the dynamics of violence in South African universities. By applying these perspectives to the South African context, the study brings fresh insights into how institutional power dynamics, gendered expectations, and discriminatory practices enable GBV to persist. This study adds a critical perspective to existing scholarship on GBV in higher education settings. The paper goes beyond a critique of current policies to offer actionable recommendations for reforming university policies and practices to effectively address GBV. Given this, the contributions of the paper lie in its policy-focused analysis and its emphasis on developing culturally sensitive, context-specific interventions that align with safety for universities and the unique challenges they face. The paper unpacks the intersection of cultural and structural factors that sustain GBV within universities, highlighting the weaknesses in university policies and institutional responses to GBV. From this study, advocacy for evidence-based interventions that address GBV from its root causes is offered, along with effective insights for culturally and structurally informed policies and strategies to foster safer university premises. Hence, this paper provides a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and higher education institutions to effectively tackle GBV.

The paper is structured into sections: Section 1 presents the introduction, including relevant literature on GBV, its causes, and its prevalence within South African universities and globally. Section 2 outlines the methodology followed. Section 3 presents the study's findings and discussion, while Section 4 offers recommendations. The conclusion is provided in Section 5.

2. Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to explore the cultural and structural influences on gender-based violence (GBV) in South African universities. The researcher investigated GBV in these institutions and its underlying structural and cultural causes by employing an SLR. Given the sensitive nature of GBV research, where survivors may be reluctant to participate and some victims are unable to share their experiences, the researcher found that traditional empirical data collection methods, such as interviews or surveys, were inappropriate. The SLR strategy was chosen due to the delicate nature of the subject, as survivors of GBV frequently struggle to come forward, and some victims are regrettably unable to participate in traditional research methods due to their deaths. Therefore, a thorough evaluation of the existing literature was necessary. The review followed key steps: (i) amalgamating and assessing existing studies, (ii) establishing connections among pivotal concepts, (iii) identifying areas of deficiency, and (iv) proposing directions for future research. This systematic approach allows for a rigorous examination of how cultural norms, institutional structures, and societal factors contribute to GBV while providing a structured synthesis of evidence. The review process was conducted in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which ensure transparency and replicability (Liberati et

al., 2009). Therefore, the study follows the following steps to accomplish a nuanced systematic review of the literature:

- Formulating the Research Question
- Identifying Relevant Studies
- Selection of Studies
- Data Extraction and Charting
- Data Synthesis and Summarisation

2.1. Identifying the research question

When conducting a systematic literature review, Mengist et al. (2020) emphasised that developing a clear research question is an essential initial stage. The entire review process is based on the research question, which directs the creation of the strategy for searching, selecting studies, and data analysis. Furthermore, clarifying the primary aim of the review is the first step in determining the research question (Lim et al., 2017). For this study, the key aim was to unpack the structural and cultural elements that lead to GBV in South African universities. The study focuses on identifying the intricate interactions between institutional policies, patriarchal structures, gender norms, and societal behaviours that sustain GBV in these academic contexts, thereby increasing knowledge of these variables and offering insights that can guide the creation of evidence-based interventions, policies, and strategies. As such, an understanding of the issue or problem under study is essential.

Research questions are frequently structured using different frameworks, such as PICO(S) (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Study Design) or PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome), among others (Martinez et al., 2023). For instance, PICO(S) is best suited for evaluations that concentrate on the efficacy of interventions, whereas PEO is better suited for studies that examine the connections between exposures and outcomes. For this study, a systematic review was based on GBV in South African universities, and the research question revolved around the cultural and structural factors influencing the prevalence of GBV within these universities. This indicates that the study was conducted using a narrative descriptive analysis. Understanding GBV and its determinants within educational settings is regarded as a complex social phenomenon. To effectively comprehend this phenomenon, the PEO framework was deemed suitable for this study, given its ability to construct the question from the study's variables. PEO also provides a clear understanding of complex studies and is applicable to studies that are considered impossible to conduct using traditional research methods (Martinez et al., 2023). This framework was used in this study because GBV is regarded as a sensitive matter, where victims/survivors of GBV might be unable to participate in the study. This necessitates a review of the existing literature.Therefore, the PEO was employed in this study, and the research question was: *How do cultural and structural factors contribute to gender-based violence in South African universities based on existing literature?*This question was constructed from the PEO framework, where:

Population (P) = students and staff at South African universities
Exposure(E)= Cultural and structural factors
Outcome(O)= Gender-based violence

2.2. Identifying relevant studies

To identify relevant studies for this systematic literature review, the researcher utilised academic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. These databases were customised to retrieve articles published between 2010 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent and pertinent research on the topic. The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, books, and chapters that focused on GBV within universities, emphasising cultural and structural factors. Additionally, grey literature, such as conference proceedings and theses, was considered to capture a broad range of perspectives and data sources. The inclusion criteria were based on studies

focusing on GBV in higher education institutions in South Africa (universities), examining structural and cultural influences on GBV, and published between 2010 and 2024.

The study excluded studies that were not relevant to the area under investigation. The exclusion criteria focused on all articles addressing GBV outside the university context and those lacking empirical or theoretical contributions. Further exclusion criteria were applied to non-peer-reviewed articles (non-peer-reviewed papers, reputation of the publisher, and articles that do not include GBV). The following search keywords were employed: "gender-based violence", "cultural influences", "structural factors", and "universities". No specific research approach or place of publication was included to allow for a wide-ranging collection of studies, providing diverse insights.

2.3. Selection of studies

Predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to determine which studies were included. The selection process adhered to the PRISMA framework, involving an initial screening of titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text analysis to assess relevance. The systematic literature review aimed to capture a broad range of studies, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and grey literature. The selected studies focused on cultural and structural factors influencing GBV in university settings, GBV policies at universities and their effectiveness, and clear analyses of GBV survivors' experiences and reporting mechanisms. Conversely, studies not included were those addressing GBV outside the university context or focusing solely on the legal aspects of GBV without considering cultural and structural influences. In selecting appropriate studies for this review, the researcher employed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) technique. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Flow chart of study selection*

Identification	Screening	Exclusion	Eligibility	Inclusiveness
Records identified through Web of Science= (n=80)	Total Records screened (n = 140)	Total Records after duplicates removed (n =0)	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n =57)	Studies included (n =10)
Records identifies through Scopus= (n =40)		Records excluded (n = 83)		
		Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (n = 30) Articles did not focus clearly on GBV and its cultural and structural effects within universities causes (Unrelated results) (n=17)		

Figure 1 presents the study selection conducted for this research using the PRISMA guidelines. It includes studies identified through WoS and Scopus, the total number of records screened, the number of records excluded, the articles assessed for eligibility, and the total number of studies included. The procedure was carried out in accordance with the study identification, selection, inclusion, and exclusion criteria outlined above.

2.4 Charting and summarisation of data

The data from the selected studies were systematically extracted using a data charting form. The charting focused on variables such as study authorship, title, methodology, and findings. The charted data related to cultural and structural influences on GBV within universities. To efficiently integrate the collected data, the researchers thoroughly reviewed the primary findings of the studies to extract the themes. The data were analysed thematically, with this analysis concentrating on identifying patterns (themes) across qualitative data (Vears & Gillam, 2022). This approach enabled the researchers to identify and summarise the core themes. The integration of data charting and synthesis provided a cohesive understanding of the multifaceted nature of GBV within universities.

Table 2: Data charting- presenting all the included studies (n=10)

Source	Title	Methods	Findings
Kaufman et al. (2019)	We are responsible for the violence, and prevention is up to us": a qualitative study of perceived risk factors for gender-based violence among Ethiopian university students	Qualitative	The study found that Female students on campus often face harassment and encounter threats and intimidation from males, including threats of physical violence. The study revealed that the university's delayed or minimal response to violence leaves students more susceptible to teacher manipulation. It highlighted a need for increased campus resources, particularly psychological support for GBV-affected students.
Makhene (2022)	Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education: An Integrative Review	Integrative literature review	The study found that GBV in higher education is a societal issue rooted in patriarchal beliefs that favour male dominance over women. Gender inequality, stemming from historical patriarchy, continues to drive GBV. Patriarchal norms place men in key decision-making and leadership roles. Women's voices are often suppressed/silenced by authority figures and a culture of victim-blaming. GBV prevention programs should be comprehensive, theory-based, promote healthy relationships, and be culturally relevant. Strong policies are essential for effectively addressing GBV on campus sexual violence was found to be widespread in universities. The study found that there is limited prevention efforts are limited by cultural attitudes on gender, male-dominated academic structures, and

			conservative gender norms in university leadership
Nowrouzi-Kia et al., (2024)	Examining the Prevalence and Effects of Gender-based Violence in Academic Settings: A Systematic Review and Meta-analyses	Mixed methods	The study found a higher prevalence of GBV in females compared to males. Academia was found to be a gendered organization with a prominent hegemonic masculine characteristic. The prevalence of GBV within universities has far-reaching consequences, affecting the well-being, mental health, and career trajectories of staff and students. The findings underscore the urgent need for institutions to address various forms of harassment and cultivate a culture of respect and equality in academic settings. GBV has an impact of GBV on mental health, job satisfaction, and career progression calls for targeted interventions and robust policies within universities.
von Meullen and van der Waldt (2022)	A Model for Gender-based Violence Awareness: The Case of Student Representative Councils in Selected South African Universities	Qualitative	University policies and support systems are insufficient for addressing GBV effectively. Males and LGBTQIA+ individuals lack equal support in GBV initiatives. GBV awareness efforts on campus often fall short of achieving positive outcomes, and GBV keeps on occurring within the university campus.
Keratiloe et al., (2022).	Are men victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV)? Why the deafening silence among men in institutions of higher learning?	Qualitative	silence was found the tool used to combat GBV. Women go through GBV at the hands of their intimate partners. Male victims who reported their matter to campus security and were told to deal with it like 'men. Masculinity as a God-given power and gender that makes them superior to women. The masculinity pretext makes men who become victims of GBV silent, as reporting the crime and following the ends of justice can be viewed as men being weak. Cultural prejudices of masculinity make men keep silent victims of GBV due to fear of stigmatisation because of culture. Most students ended up abusing alcohol and substances to drown their sorrows due to poor responses to GBV matters within tertiary education settings. Tertiary institutions fail to ensure effective interventions to address GBV on campus. university programs have to come up with effective preventative measures rather than

			focusing on males as perpetrators and females as victims.
de Andrade et al., (2024)	University Women Victims of Violence in Academic Space	Qualitative	The study's findings revealed that university students recognise how gender issues and power dynamics fuel violence against women, and these dynamics reinforce harmful stereotypes.
Sotirovic et al., (2024)	You Can Knock on the Doors and Windows of the University, but Nobody Will Care: How Universities Benefit from Network Silence around Gender-Based Violence	Qualitative	The study found that dependency on university hierarchies often deters victims and bystanders from reporting incidents. Gender and intersectional inequalities contribute to victim-blaming and the normalisation of GBV. Universities remain male-dominated, with men leading in most areas. Male leadership styles and toxic masculinity reinforce gender inequalities and dominance in universities. Institutional silencing, where victims and bystanders are discouraged from reporting, is a common response to GBV.
Matope and Muchabaiwa (2022)	Redefining the gender narrative: sexual harassment and intimate partner violence in selected institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe's tertiary institutions	Qualitative	The study identified key challenges in addressing GBV in higher education institutions, stipulating that various forms of Sexual and GBV impacting students stem from gender inequalities. The study indicated poor operation of interventions and poor enactment of preventative strategies for GBV. The study recommended that strategies must target the root causes of gender oppression, patriarchy, and discrimination in higher education.
Bozkurt et al., (2015).	Masculinity and Violence: Sex Roles and Violence Endorsement among University Students	Mixed methods	The study found that gender significantly influences violence. Social roles of femininity and masculinity contribute to the acceptance of violence. Males often display traits like self-reliance, assertiveness, analytical thinking, protectiveness, dominance, aggression, fearlessness, respect, and risk-taking. There is a strong connection between sex, masculinity, and violence.
Salazar et al., (2024)	Cyberbullying of university faculty: An examination of prevalence, coping, gender, and personality factors	Qualitative	The study revealed gender disparities in cyberbullying experiences, with females more likely to encounter cyberbullying across various relationship types than their male faculty counterparts.

Table 2 outlines all the included studies, presenting the source/author and year, title, methodology, key findings, and journal. The selected articles have been analysed in a similar manner. The findings of the study are discussed in the section below, where thematic analysis was employed.

3. Discussion of Findings

The researchers found that GBV is a destructive act committed against someone because of their gender and sex, frequently affecting women and girls. The study noted that such acts manifest in different forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse. It revealed that GBV within university settings is driven by multiple influences, with cultural and structural factors being central. Regarding cultural influences, GBV was identified as stemming from social norms and attitudes that support gender inequality, such as behaviours that oppress women or uphold traditional gender roles. Male dominance, believed to be rooted in historical patriarchal beliefs, was a major reason why most female students reported more cases of GBV inflicted on them by male perpetrators. In contrast, structural GBV was found to be ingrained in institutional frameworks, where policies, regulations, and university structures failed to prevent or address GBV, thereby creating a vicious cycle of violence.

From the analysed and summarised data, the researchers used text analysis (the use of databases) to develop patterns and trends. The findings were summarised into three main themes:

- The prevalence and rampant forms of GBV within universities.
- Cultural Drivers of Gender-Based Violence within universities.
- Structural Barriers and Institutional Inaction.

3.1 Theme 1: The prevalence and rampant forms of GBV within universities

The review unpacked the prevalence of GBV within universities. The reviewed scholarly works covered the forms of GBV, its occurrence in diverse university settings, and its consequences. From the reviewed literature, the study found that there is a high prevalence of GBV in universities. High rates of GBV were reported within universities, manifesting in different forms. However, GBV was found to be affecting different genders, though the frequency varies. More females reported GBV than males, making them more susceptible to being victims/survivors of male perpetrators (Salazar et al., 2024). Keratiloe et al. (2022) also found that, mostly, female students experience GBV at the hands of their male partners within higher education. The ongoing reports of GBV within universities were discovered to be driven more by structural and cultural determinants. Shockingly, there are high statistical reports of GBV occurring within South African universities, as depicted by previous research.

According to Mutinta (2022), of the 604 students at a public university in South Africa, 56.5% suffered emotional or verbal abuse, 46.7% experienced sexual assault, 36.3% endured physical violence, 36.7% encountered attempted rape, and 28.9% confirmed rape incidents. However, GBV has been found to be a prevalent and widely under-reported issue to both law enforcement and institutional structures across different geographical contexts. The study by Keratiloe et al. (2022), conducted at Seke College in Zimbabwe, found that, mostly, male survivors of GBV do not report such incidents, and silence is often used as a tool to combat GBV. These authors further revealed that most males reported their GBV cases to campus security and were told to deal with it like 'men'. Literature also pointed out that there is a lack of trust in the response mechanisms, fear of re-victimisation and stigma, a lack of clear procedures for reporting and support, and a lack of broader comprehension about GBV, which leads to underreporting (Brink et al., 2021). This indicates that the reported GBV cases that made headlines within universities are merely a snapshot of the larger cases that have occurred. The researcher opines that GBV within universities has become a stumbling block to the overall well-being of the university populace. As such, this study extends the existing literature on GBV within

universities and its determinants, providing a path towards effective interventions in curbing GBV within universities.

GBV attacks have become a matter of critical concern within universities. Mofokeng and Tlou (2022) found that higher educational settings have become terrifying due to GBV. The authors further mentioned that GBV attacks impacted higher education institutions, resulting in a tragic loss of life, physical harm, and psychological distress. GBV has impacted mental health, job satisfaction, and career progression of students and employees within universities (Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2024). South African universities reported experiencing a rife of cases of GBV, with prevalent cases reported on sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, and femicide (Hendricks 2022; Ndlovu et al., 2020). Hendricks (2022) further found that sexual harassment against women is the most prevalent form of GBV in institutions of higher learning, encompassing unwanted sexual propositions, appeals for sexual favours, and any form of verbal or physical behaviour with a sexual undertone that disrupts an individual's academic or professional productivity or establishes an environment that is hostile or intimidating. On the other hand, Ndlovu et al. (2020) found that femicide became severe in public settings like campuses in South Africa. This was further exemplified in a study by Chiumbu (2022) articulating that in August 2021, a female student, Nocisclo Mtebeni, was brutally killed by her boyfriend at the University of Fort Hare, and this made national headlines. As such, the media in South Africa have extensively covered incidents of femicide on university campuses, shedding light on the gravity of the killing of female students. Nowrouzi-Kia et al. (2024) found that the prevalence of GBV within universities has far-reaching consequences, affecting the well-being, mental health, and occupational trajectories of staff and students. These authors underscored the urgent need for institutions to address various forms of harassment, cultivate a culture of respect and equality in academic settings, and implement effective policies within universities. Researchers noted that the rampant manifestation of GBV within universities marks a clear indication of affected and unconducive educational settings, disturbed by GBV, calling for robust intervention.

3.2 Theme 2: Cultural drivers of gender-based violence within universities

The cultural influences of GBV within universities were unmasked in this section. Based on the scholarly review of literature, the study found that several cultural influences are causing GBV within South African universities, including deeply ingrained cultural norms and patriarchal beliefs (Makhene, 2022). Universities have been discovered to be battling GBV, affecting all genders. However, several cases of GBV are reported among female students, with mostly males being the perpetrators. The study found that GBV is rooted in societal gender norms that reinforce male dominance and subjugate women. Patriarchal beliefs, toxic masculinity, and gendered power dynamics place males in positions of authority and decision-making, whilst silencing female voices and perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Bozkurt et al., 2015). An article by Nowrouzi-Kia et al. (2024) found a higher prevalence of GBV in females compared to males within universities, and academia was found to be a gendered organisation with prominent hegemonic masculine characteristics. Keratiloe et al. (2022) also support that masculinity was discovered as a God-given power and that the male gender is regarded as superior to women. The authors further found that the context of masculinity makes men who become victims of GBV silent, as reporting the crime and seeking justice can be viewed as a sign of weakness. As such, cultural prejudices concerning masculinity emerged as some of the reasons why men are silent victims of GBV and do not report the violence due to fear of stigmatisation because of culture.

Consequently, universities are encountering gendered inequalities, coupled with a victim-blaming culture, that normalise GBV and undermine the safety and well-being of women on campus. To bring about meaningful change, this study found that it is crucial to address these cultural drivers of GBV within universities through culturally sensitive interventions.

The literature reviewed indicates that the cultural drivers of GBV within universities are deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms, toxic masculinity, and gendered power dynamics, which perpetuate male superiority and women's inferiority. The first article by Makhene (2022) examined Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education in South Africa. The author conducted a systematic review, and three key themes were presented by this study: Contributing Factors to GBV; Effects of GBV; and How to Prevent GBV. This study found that the patriarchal belief that still regards males as superior is one of the key causes of GBV within universities, mostly committed by males towards females. The study found that patriarchal beliefs favouring male authority are ingrained in societal and institutional structures, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that oppress women. It highlights how extreme social and economic inequality, entrenched patriarchal norms, and the legacy of apartheid contribute to GBV in higher education. Consequently, the study suggests that GBV prevention frameworks should focus on identifying the contextual norms and structures that uphold gender bias and discrimination. Another study by Afolabi (2019) was drawn from four tertiary institutions in Ekiti State. Female students were frequently victims/survivors of GBV, including harassment, threats, and physical violence. Perpetrators of GBV were identified as male students and teachers in this study. The article implies that female students were not safe with their male lecturers. Ordinarily, the study mentioned that lecturers were expected to protect students against any harm; however, this is not what obtains nowadays in academic institutions.

A study by Machisa et al. (2022) found that female students' experiences of childhood trauma, intimate partner violence (IPV), and non-partner rape are partly driven by inequitable gender beliefs and negatively affect their mental health. It also noted that some female students' partners are young men in higher education, indicating that GBV is perpetrated by males against their female partners. However, the authors noted that there is a gap in addressing GBV in educational environments, indicating a need for innovative, culturally relevant interventions to address the intersection of GBV and mental health among students in South Africa. Mutinta (2022), conducted in universities in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, found that GBV against female students is increasing in higher education institutions. This study found that 344 (57.8%) cases of gender-based violence were reported experienced by female students. The study presented that the belief in male dominance causes more cases of GBV committed by males towards females. The statistical reports from this article indicated that patriarchal norms, toxic masculinity, and gendered power dynamics exacerbate violence, creating an environment that fosters harassment and intimidation of females. In this reviewed article, the authors suggested effective interventions that should be enacted to curb GBV in universities. The researchers noted that the cultural normalisation of male dominance leads to GBV within universities, based on power imbalances and gendered inequalities that cause violence against women. Henceforth, cultural norms, endorsed by traditional gender roles, perpetuate gendered inequalities within university settings, making women submissive and males dominant.

3.3 Theme 3: Structural barriers and institutional inaction

The study's reflection expressed how structural factors contribute to GBV within universities. The reviewed literature presented that GBV within universities is a result of structural causes, deeply rooted in systemic inequalities and institutional frameworks that fail to adequately address or prevent violence. The study discovered key structural factors of GBV within universities, such as male-dominated leadership and decision-making, inadequate institutional policies, ineffective support systems, and a victim-blaming culture coupled with institutional silencing of GBV (Sotirovic et al., 2024; von Meullen & van der Waldt, 2022). The study highlights that institutional responses to GBV, including poorly implemented policies and the silencing of victims within universities, contribute to a culture of impunity. Students face discrimination, unequal support mechanisms, and insufficient resources, which leave them vulnerable to further harm. This is coupled with male-dominated leadership and decision-making, which perpetuates unequal power structures that hinder the reporting and response to GBV cases. The researchers, therefore, found a need for urgent

structural reforms, implementation of effective policies, support systems, and interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral approaches to addressing GBV within universities.

An article by Keratiloe et al. (2022), conducted at Seke tertiary education in Zimbabwe, found that most male survivors of GBV ended up abusing alcohol and substances to drown their sorrows due to poor responses within tertiary education settings. This study found that there is a poor response to GBV within colleges and universities. The authors further found that tertiary institutions fail to ensure effective interventions to address GBV on campus, meaning university programmes have to develop preventative measures that recognise and intervene before, during, and after violence has occurred, rather than focusing on males as perpetrators and females as victims. Based on these findings, the researcher argues that poor interventions to GBV within universities represent inadequate structural responses to GBV. As such, survivors of GBV may suffer from GBV and face unresponsive procedures, limited support, or even a complete absence of appropriate support.

Another article by Mahabeer (2021) conducted at a South African university on the experiences and perspectives of GBV of a first-year student at a university in South Africa discovered that students are let down by university structures. The findings of this study revealed that there is a lack of support for the victims of GBV. The study further presented that the institutional framework fails to protect, respond to, and support GBV matters; the slow and inadequate institutional responses to GBV contribute to a culture of impunity and the protection of the university's reputation, leaving victims silenced and discouraged from reporting their experiences. This reviewed article further indicated that the students were disappointed regarding the reporting of the GBV incident, the disciplinary process, and the outcome thereof. As a result, the study indicated that victims of GBV opt not to report GBV cases due to a lack of support from the institution. The researchers found that students struggle to access support mechanisms and resources to overcome their GBV encounters. Therefore, the researchers found gaps in institutional support, which often leave GBV survivors more vulnerable to ongoing harm.

The article by Bhana (2021) revealed that the SRC structure at the university was patriarchal, with little commitment to gender equality. Males were found to outnumber women in leadership roles. The article found that females were subjected to stereotypical behaviour. As such, this article indicated that there is a gap that needs to be filled by promoting female student leadership, whereby policy and constitutional changes are required to facilitate gender equality and the implementation of quotas. The researchers hence argue that the male-dominated leadership and decision-making structures within universities reinforce unequal power dynamics, and male dominance in leadership roles not only limits female participation in decision-making but also perpetuates gender stereotypes that undermine efforts to address GBV effectively. Besides that, the literature also indicated that university policies themselves present structural challenges in addressing GBV within universities. In an article by Mahlori et al. (2018), a pilot study was conducted at the University of South Africa (Unisa) to ascertain perceptions of GBV among university staff. The key findings in this pilot study expressed that the universities lack comprehensive, gender-sensitive policies that provide clear guidelines for reporting and responding to GBV cases. In addition, this reviewed article disclosed that the existing university policies often fail to account for the intersectional nature of GBV, neglecting the unique vulnerabilities faced by marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ students. Such policies were found to be frequently implemented inconsistently, leaving gaps in the effective addressing of GBV. The authors argued that universities ought to revise their GBV policies and ensure that they are inclusive, transparent, and enforceable (Mahlori et al., 2018).

4. Recommendations

To address gender-based violence (GBV) within South African universities, this study advocates a multi-faceted approach that integrates cultural transformation, institutional reform, and national-level collaboration. Universities should initiate sustained, culturally relevant educational

programmes that challenge patriarchal norms, toxic masculinity, and gender stereotypes, thereby promoting gender equality and countering victim-blaming. Institutional policies must be reinforced through efficient reporting mechanisms, gender-sensitive frameworks, and decentralised leadership structures that ensure inclusivity and accountability. Comprehensive support services should be made available to survivors of GBV, while prevention programmes must be designed to reach all groups, including marginalised communities. Intersectional policies are also essential, as they acknowledge the diverse experiences of GBV victims, while continuous evaluation and collaborative research can assist in refining and improving existing strategies. Furthermore, universities are encouraged to adopt multi-sectoral approaches, drawing on interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations to address GBV holistically. At the national level, the South African government should implement more robust strategies and engage in partnerships with other nations to develop effective preventive measures within educational systems. Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity for interventions that challenge harmful cultural influences while embedding robust structural policies to counter the persistent occurrence of GBV across universities.

5. Conclusion

The study reveals that GBV within South African universities is deeply entrenched in cultural and structural factors. Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy and toxic masculinity contribute to a campus environment where harassment, violence, and victim-blaming are normalised. On the other hand, structural factors are based on institutional barriers and weaknesses. Slow responses, inadequate support, and male-dominated leadership further exacerbate the issue. Existing prevention and support programmes, though present, often lack the necessary scope and relevance to bring about meaningful change.

To address these challenges, universities must adopt comprehensive and culturally informed strategies that challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender equality, and ensure swift, gender-sensitive responses to GBV cases. Structural reforms, including decentralised leadership and intersectional policies, are critical to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students. Additionally, ongoing evaluation of interventions and collaboration between universities, government, other non-governmental sectors, and nations is essential for effective GBV intervention. By implementing these proposed recommendations, a zero tolerance for GBV can be established. Thus, our educational sites, societies, and nation will be safe and conducive for all.

The study reveals a significant gap in addressing GBV in South African universities, stemming from cultural norms and structural weaknesses. As depicted up to date, universities are still battling with the scourge of GBV. In this study, existing prevention and support programmes were found to be ineffective in addressing GBV. Given this, future research should further evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes, investigate the impact of decentralised leadership and intersectional policies, assess cultural attitudes toward gender equality, and explore collaboration between universities, government, and NGOs to enhance GBV intervention strategies for the university community.

6. Declarations

2. Declarations

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