

# University Students' Perceptions of Violence Against Women: A Case of a University of Technology in Gauteng Province, South Africa.

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## ABSTRACT

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is one of the greatest pervasive ills of the South African society declared by the president of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) as a second pandemic to the COVID-19, which has worsened since March 2020. Even though the country has taken enormous steps in developing and empowering women, GBV has filtered down to university students affecting their well-being and their academic performances which has been a concern for both the country and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Therefore, the aim of this article was to investigate the perception university students have of Violence against Women (VAW). The study used the Social Learning Theory (SLT) as a theoretical framework and a Social Ecological Model (SEM) to explore these perceptions and provided the lens for the investigation on the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. The study employed a quantitative method for collecting data from a probability sample drawn from 222 undergraduate Education students at the University through a questionnaire. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0 was used for data analysis. The results of the study revealed that university students had positive perceptions regarding the GBV incidences occurring within societies. Their perceptions pointed on factors, including among others, the individual, relationship, community, and society as major contributors to VAW. From the study findings, we concluded that failure to enforce national laws pertaining to violence meted against women in South Africa, and the reluctance to implement GBV policies were the two major challenges driving the scourge of VAW. Based on the study findings and conclusions, the study recommended the need for new policies that would address the new challenges created by the GBV tendencies and that there must be national wide sensitisation and behaviour change campaigns related to the dangers of GBV.

**Key words:** Gender-based-violence, violence-against-women, perceptions, perpetrators, risk factors, Higher Education Institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of university students' perceptions of violence against women was prompted by reports of cases of violence experienced by either students themselves or members of their families. The reported cases of violence kept escalating and it became apparent that violence against women (VAW) was prevalent in their different environments. These Gender based violence (GBV) acts were reported solely as good and legitimate reasons why victims had skipped lectures or did not submit assignments on time and failed tests. The manner of reporting on these acts of violence indicated that numerous university students lack awareness of the true meaning of GBV or hold misconceptions about it other than what it really is.

Students might not have a clear understanding of what constitutes GBV and/or the South African legislation addressing and prohibiting it, and this could be the reason for why, according to Adams et al. (2013) many victims/survivors of GBV on HEIs campuses do not report their experiences to the authorities at their institution. Additionally, Elbuluk & Coker (2020), emphasizing the fact of fearing retaliation, discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes toward them in courts and law enforcement settings, distrust of health care workers, a view that violence is normal or not serious enough to report.

The lack of reporting violence meted against women within HEIs poses challenges for accurately assessing its

prevalence, mystifying it (VAW) and blinding them (HEIs) from perceiving it (VAW) as a major issue for their concern and attention. (Ssanyu, Namuhani & Nalwadda, 2022). A very concerning report released by the Department of Higher Education and Training, indicate that only 10% of rape cases in the country are reported by university students (South African Government News Agency, 2018).

In a study conducted by Dhlomo et al. (2012), on violence against women at universities reveals that a significant number of victims and survivors of GBV within HEIs choose not to disclose their experiences to institutional authorities. Ssanyu, Namuhani & Nalwadda, (2022) attribute the underreported cases of violence against women to the sensitive nature of GBV. The factors which contribute to under-reporting include a) Fear of the perpetrator finding out and the potential repercussions if he/she were to find out (Adams et al., 2013; Yee & Wu, 2019; Willis & Jorgensen, 2021; b) Lack of confidence in institutional response mechanisms (Adams et al., 2013; Drew & Bakker, 2019); c) Anxiety over how the institution and/or police would handle the case (Adams et al., 2013; Yee & Wu, 2019; Willis & Jorgensen, 2021). We intimate that the problem of not reporting, seems to be because many HEIs survivors of violence often do not receive much-needed assistance and support. It could be inferred therefore that the risk of more VAW is prevalent.

According to Safer Spaces (2017) report, GBV affects their abilities and career potentialities, could create an atmosphere of wariness within the university community, spread beyond the individual student and impact the community in which the student lives, through the results of missed opportunities or squandered potential. We argue that students who have been robbed of their rights as human beings and harassed sexually could suffer academically and even drop out of university. We contend further that students' choice of the university they learn at, displays trust in the institution and its management, and by being victims of the same universities they chose, could lead to their trust being misplaced and the reputation of the university tarnished. Sexual violence in particular can have long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological consequences for survivors, and it is a widespread problem that affects individuals of all genders and ages around the world (WHO, 2022). Gqola (2015) asserts that emotional abuse is potent as it distorts the victim's personality who could likely, as a result, blame the actions on their own shortcomings. The consequences and costs of the violence per se, and of not handling it, are considerable on individual, organizational, and societal levels (Martin-Storey & August, 2016).

Many students are at risk of experiencing GBV and all its consequences, as they lack a strong support network and the capacity to report GBV on their campuses. On a university level, GBV could lower the quality of the work environment and conditions, thus affecting the excellence of research, teaching and learning. Put succinctly, GBV on HEIs simply could hinder research and both teaching and learning. GBV not only violates human rights, but also results in negative social, economic, and health outcomes for those affected by it (National Institute of Justice, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022). On a societal level, societies are likely to have fewer girls graduating and ploughing back to the communities they come from as the nurturers of the society and the nation at large and end up dependent on men financially and later falling victims of violence and abuse. We argue firmly that the intentional use of violence in South African HEIs is a matter that denies victims the enjoyment of their rights and contravenes the principles in the Bill of Rights of the South African constitutional laws. For these reasons, perceptions of GBV in general and those of VAW, particularly in HEIs, came more into focus of this article.

GBV on university campuses in South Africa has been a longstanding issue. Collins et al. (2011) note that, the domination of hegemonic masculinity play a role in shaping the occurrence of GBV on university campuses and impact how institutions address such violence. We perceive that the nature of the campus space relates to the environmental design of institutions where incidents of GBV occur more frequently. A survey conducted by the Higher Education Programme in South Africa concluded that 62% of the men and women students who took part in the research suggested that their peers of the same gender face a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment while on campus (South African Government News Agency, 2018). The study findings speak to the vulnerability of female students at South African HE is. In a parallel investigation, Gordon and Collins (2013) examined students at a South African university. Their findings align with Shefer et al.'s (2012) study, revealing that gender disparities among students and staff within universities foster a detrimental environment where GBV becomes normalised. This underscores the profound impact of gender inequalities on this normalisation, leading to South Africa being referred to as 'the rape capital of the world' (Gordon & Collins, 2013). This moniker paints a

gloomy picture of the country.

In the context of male lecturer/female student relationships for example, male dominance and inequality are perpetuated through the intimidation of female students, either to comply with the perpetrator's demands or to fail the subject. Adams et al. (2013) in their scholarly work, observe that male lecturers employ a disturbing tactic to suppress victims and survivors by imposing a coercive condition stating 'you must engage in sexual activity with me, or else you will fail the module'. We note that this reprehensible behavior perpetuates a culture of silence and fear, as rightly put by Adams et al (2013) that these male lecturers seem to have mastered the art of silencing and hindering survivors from seeking help and justice. Wrongdoers use threats of punishment to coerce students into engaging in sexual acts or to prevent them from revealing such incidents.

Some universities have good monitoring systems, which are regrettably weakened by unprofessional administration, to the detriment of female students. Studies on the prevalence of GBV put emphasis on the reporting of the acts of violence for two reasons, firstly; to access medical, psychosocial, and legal services they need to minimize the impact of the scourge of GBV on their health. Secondly, the perpetrators of violence need to be held accountable and finally be prosecuted, if need be. There seems not to be enough supportive and survivor-centred policies and structures on university campuses.

Many researchers through their concern on this epidemic have defined GBV in different ways. Though many of the definitions would be relevant for any individual or group of persons, we preferred to focus on only those that we thought affect university students most, which include, though not limited to, physical violence, sexual harassment, emotional violence, harassment and femicide that our students mentioned in their essay. However, we are privy of the fact that both definitions pose many challenges because of their different meanings, depending on the area concerned and from which various theoretical perspectives and disciplines are derived. It should be noted that both GBV and VAW will be used interchangeably in this article as they connote same.

WHO (2021) refers to VAW as, any form of violence that is perpetrated against an individual because of their gender or perceived gender. The different forms of GBV at HEIs in South Africa include, but are not limited to: domestic violence; intimate partner violence; sexual harassment; emotional violence; socio-economic violence; and femicide (Vetten, 2014).

### **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence encompasses physical violence that includes hitting, punching, pushing, pulling, kicking, biting, slapping, choking or using weapons to assault someone (WHO, 2017; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2020.).

### **Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)**

WHO (2021) defines Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) as behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. This includes acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors.

### **Sexual harassment**

Human Rights Watch outlines it as, any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise direct against women's sexuality, using coercion (i.e. psychological intimidation, physical force or threats of harm), by a person, regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including, but not limited to, home and work (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

### **Emotional violence/ verbal violence**

It is an array of actions in which a person insults, humiliates and generally instils fear in an individual to control him or her (Gqola, 2015). Burrill et al. (2010: 4) state that emotional abuse includes "...being insulted or made to feel bad about oneself, being belittled or humiliated in front of others, being scared of the male perpetrator, by

the way the male partner looks at the female partner, yelling, smashing things, having the male partner threaten to hurt someone the female partner cares about, harassment, degrading comments, and threatening”.

### **Socio-economic violence**

It refers to the use of power or control through economic means to oppress or harm individuals or groups. It takes many forms, including economic exploitation, financial abuse, discriminatory lending and hiring practices, unequal pay and the denial of economic opportunities based on social identity factors such as race, gender, or class (Bhattacharya, 2022).

### **Femicide**

Femicide is understood to be the killing of women and girls based on their gender identity. Femicide can take many forms, including intimate partner violence, honour killings, dowry related killings and murder as a result of gender-based discrimination (Guzmán-González & Boira-Segura, 2022.).

Following such definitions of GBV as mentioned above, we claim that GBV is an act of relational ferocity that links both men and women, where the latter are typically the receivers of the actions of violence.

We observe that there are many factors cited as the driving causes of GBV and among them are patriarchy, gender equality, culture, societal structure, biological history, role model, individual issues, education level and socio-economic factors among others. We discussed these factors briefly to provide the foundation of the perceptions of GBV engraved in the minds of societies with the university students as their microcosms.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a social system, in which men hold primary power and authority and women are subordinate to men in power, status and economic resources (Johnson, 2022). We avers that it acts as a trigger for diverse forms of violence, ranging from physical assault to emotional manipulation and perpetuates violations against women. We also avow that it permeates all societal structures, including even the justice system. Mahlori (2016) also opines that the oppressive patriarchal norms that restrict women and the gendered inequalities in education and employment are the contributing factors to GBV.

### **Gender equality**

Drew & Bakker (2019) state that gender equality and dominant male behaviours can affect the probability of GBV on campus and shape the institution’s response to such violence. We therefore contend that it is important to address GBV comprehensively, considering risk and protective factors, consequences, and entry points for intervention. We assert that by adopting a multi-faceted approach that tackles both individual and institutional factors, GBV could be effectively addressed at HEIs.

### **Culture**

Cultural gender stereotypes are major contributors to the marginalisation of women. South Africa is a multicultural society, in which different cultures have their own norms, values and beliefs. Many types of violence are identified by the literature as being caused by different cultural and social norms. In a study conducted in South Africa and Nigeria, it was found out that “ males hold onto the headship role with cultural acceptance of violence, including its use in conflict resolution for dating violence perpetration and victimisation” (Aguanunu,2014; Boladaleet al., 2015; Radzilani-Makatu & Mahlalela, 2015).

### **Societal structures**

Feminists posit that GBV is understood as a form of systematic violence against women that is deeply rooted in societal power structures that perpetuate gender inequalities and discrimination (Sumner, 2022; Pilrczyk, 2022).



GBV is characterised by complicated interconnected factors that contribute to its persistence and is influenced by societal structures that grant certain advantages to some individuals [men], while marginalising others [women] (Menjívar & Salcido, 2019).

### **Biological history**

According to Beneria et al. (2015), the higher incidences of VAW can be attributed to individual and biological factors that shape an individual's behaviour towards others. These factors include a history of the perpetrator being abused during childhood, exposure to marital violence within the household, an absent or rejecting father and frequent alcohol use.

### **Role Models**

Role models play a significant role in shaping societal norms and behaviours, since they can inadvertently perpetuate GBV through their actions, attitudes and influence. When the same role models exhibit aggressive and disrespectful behaviour, they normalise violence, and further perpetuate traditional gender norms and stereotypes. When role models refrain from addressing gender-based violence and exhibit aggressive masculinity, that devalues women and downplays abuse this may ultimately contribute to the perpetuation of violence. Finally, when male role models assert authority over women, that can lead to abusive behaviour.

### **Individual issues**

We profess that individual level issues are at the centre of GBV. The study findings about individual level factors fuelling GBV ranged from young age at marriage, substance abuse, level of education and family background. We observe that in the absence of educational background, individuals prioritise their cultural traditions within society. Again, we argue early marriage, family background and alcohol consumption all play significant roles in contributing to VAW.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the quantitative research approach which Creswell (2018: 41) defines as “a plan for doing research that is focused on data collection, quantification and analysing numerical data and relationships”. The study employed Bandura's 1977 Social Learning Theory (SLT) the Social Ecological Model (SEM) in its investigation of university students' perceptions of GBV. The former is grounded in the belief that people learn by interacting with others in a social context. According to Bandura (1977), a person learns through observation, imitation and modelling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes and emotions to show their permanent change in their knowledge or behaviour. This theory recognizes the interplay between environmental and cognitive factors in shaping human learning and behaviour. It emphasises that observers must pay attention to the behaviour they are exposed to. This theory emphasizes the significance of the role models in reinforcing behaviour and further asserts that learned behaviours such as violence, through different psychological, relational and environmental processes could be internalised. This learning theory also argues that [domestic] violence is linked to the child's upbringing, a series of learned associations within a specific social context and behaviors learnt from role models (Bandura, 1977).

Social Ecological Model was adopted where Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintains that human development takes place through complex interactions with five environments: microsystems, mesosystems, exco-systems, macro-systems, and chrono-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

### **The micro-system**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994) structures in the microsystem include different environments emphasizing the immediate environment with which a child interacts, exemplified by family, school, health services, religious organisations, day-care facility, neighbourhood playgrounds and peers. These interactions are understood to be building blocks of a child's personality, and essential for their normal social and emotional development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This level, because of its immediate interaction, could be inferred to be the most influential in a child's development, as it is the most direct and intimate, where most time is spent and permanent relationships are developed, even more so, is the fact that, by nature at this age, a child knows no other relationships. It is where the child learns socialisation skills, develops a sense of self, and forms his or her first relationship (Shelton, 2018). In a family environment, children interact with their family members, unlike at the "school" where their relationships would have solid bi-directional influences (Shelton, 2018) that have the highest impact on them, although according to him, interactions at outer levels could still impact the inner structures.

### **The meso-system**

According to Newman and Newman (2020), a meso-system entails a combination of various micro-systems settings, where, according to Swart and Pettipher (2011: 11), "[they] make contact or overlap, in which a developing child interacts". Bronfenbrenner (1994) notes that the greater the number links between numerous microsystems within mesosystems, the better the development outcomes will be for the child. It could be deduced from this statement that at this level, the child's development is shaped by the interactions between various microsystems within the mesosystem. Thus, the university and the university students' family are two microsystems that interact continuously, thereby influencing each other and the development of the student. In relation to this study, the meso-system could be the relationship between the university students and the university staff members and other support staff, the context of which, the university becomes an important part of a student's life. In this regard, Swart and Pettipher (2011) assert that the experience in the microsystem of the [university] can protect [the student] from the psychological effects of an unsupportive environment at home.

### **The exco-system**

This exco-system incorporates the "links between the child's immediate environment and the social settings, in which the child does not have an active role, indirectly affecting development by acting on the [their] micro and meso-systems" (Chinhara, 2015).

### **The macro-system**

Bronfenbrenner (1994) defines a macro-system as a particular culture or subculture that comprises the values, law, customs, resources, lifestyles and opportunities structures potent in shaping the development of a child. Individual identities for example, implying their nationality could be fundamental. In this article, many of the university students are South Africans, although they have different cultures from which they learn. These students, coming from different macro-systems, rural and suburbs, could be shaped differently.

### **The chrono-system**

The chrono-system connotes the influences of the timeframes of a child's development, which goes through the interactions among all five systems suggested by Shelton (2018), implying that systems change uninterruptedly over time. The author implies that the lifetime changes of environments influence the child's development, the main changes and even historical events. The chrono-system level of Bronfenbrenner plays a significant role in shaping an individual's development, perceptions of GBV/VAW in the case of this study, by facilitating interactions between different micro-systems and influencing their outcomes.

GBV is a complex matter that can have a significant impact on children's development. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, we postulate that GBV/VAW in this study could be regarded as an exo-system factor that affects university students' development indirectly. The macro-system would include their broader cultural perceptions towards gender roles. Furthermore, their perceptions of GBV/VAW could be influenced by many factors beyond the macro-system. In sum, according to Bronfenbrenner (1994) the micro-system is the most influential of the ecological system theory. The influence of childhood experiences in the five systems levels suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and the dynamic perspective suggest that influence of early childhood and upbringing are factors in GBV.

The Social-Ecological Model (SEM) was employed to provide a valuable framework for understanding and addressing the perceptions of GBV in this article. We considered the Individual Level to identify biological and personal history factors such as age, education, socio-economy, substance use and history of abuse that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence that would assist us in exploring individual vulnerabilities and protective factors in our future articles. We further explored the Relationship Level to examine close relationships in university students' peers, partners, family members that may increase the risk of experiencing violence and considered how social circles influence behaviour and contribute to experiences related to GBV. In the Community Level we explored settings such as the university and students' neighbourhoods and environments, where social relationships occur and at the Societal Level, we looked at broad societal factors like economic, educational, social policies.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through two hundred and twenty-two (222) questionnaires comprising of close-ended questions. The five-point Likert type scale questionnaire, measured the participants' perceptions of GBV with regard to the following constructs and sections: Individual level, relationship level, community level and societal level, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree, were self-distributed manually and administered to the participants in the venues in accordance with the schedules, and only those participants that were in attendance during the scheduled timeslots completed and submitted the questionnaires. The questionnaire had 5 sections: A, B, C, D and E. Section A: The primary objective of this section was to collect data related to the demographic characteristics of the participants. Specifically, the study investigated participants' gender, age, the academic program in which they were enrolled, and the faculty to which they belonged. Section B: This segment encompassed five statements (B1-B5) that aimed to elicit participants' perceptions regarding individual-level factors contributing to VAW. Section C: Focusing on relationship-level factors, the section consisted of five statements (C1-C5) that sought to understand participants' perspectives on aspects influencing VAW within interpersonal relationships. Section D: Addressing community-level factors, this section comprised five statements (D1-D5) that explored participants' perceptions of how community dynamics and contexts contribute to VAW. Section E: Lastly, this section encompassed four statements (E1-E5) that delved into participants' views on societal-level factors impacting VAW on a broader societal scale. These distinct sections collectively provided a comprehensive framework for analysing the multifaceted factors associated with VAW.

### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaires were checked to ensure all questions were responded to. The information from the questionnaire was transformed into numerical codes which were entered into a computer in a format usable by a statistical package. Data cleaning was performed using SPSS summary to identify and correct errors. The data were downloaded into Microsoft Excel for Windows and then transferred to SPSS version 28.0 for analysis. The Descriptive statistics were used to describe and interpret the data. Measures such as averages, frequencies and percentile spread were calculated. Demographic variables and statements related to GBV perceptions of university students were analysed and presented in tables, frequency percentages, means and standard deviations explained socio-demographic data. Chi-square tests assessed percentages and significant differences in perceptions. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) compared GBV perceptions for continuous variables. Cronbach Alpha values assessed internal consistency of scales. Validity was tested using Pearson correlation. Variables using a five-point Likert scale were collapsed into three categories for interpretation. GBV perceptions were scaled using the mean value and grouped accordingly.

## **RESULTS**

The research findings section outlines the findings of the study in relation to the research questions.

### **Mean and Standard Deviation**

It is vitally important to note that, the scale of 1.0-2.9 represents a negative perception to the responses. On the other hand, a scale of 3.0-5.0 represents a positive perception to the responses.

**Table 1.1:** Source: Survey data (2023)

Statement	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Young age at marriage leads to an increased exposure to violence due to husband’s perceived superiority over women	222	3.21	1.34	1	5
Women with lower levels of education are at greater risk of experiencing violence	222	3.39	1.31	1	5
Alcohol use is both a risk factor for and an outcome of violence against women	222	3.88	1.21	1	5
A childhood history of abuse or trauma increases the likelihood of children’s experiencing or perpetrating violence in the future	222	3.91	1.18	1	5
Unemployment is a risk factor for violence against women	222	2.99	1.32	1	5
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation	222	3.48	1.4	1	5

In the context of research participants’ perceptions on GBV at the individual level, five distinct areas were delineated as follows: young age at marriage leads to an increased exposure to violence due to husband’s perceived superiority over women (n=222, M=3.21, SD=1.34), women with lower levels of education are at greater risk of experiencing violence (n=222, M=3.39, SD=1.31), alcohol use is both a risk factor for and an outcome of violence against women (n=222, M=3.88, SD=1.21), a childhood history of abuse or trauma increases the likelihood of children’s experiencing or perpetrating violence in the future (n=222, M=3.91, SD=1.18), and unemployment is a risk factor for violence against women (n=222, M=2.99, SD=1.32).

The findings indicated a favourable perception among the research participants, with an average score of 3.48. Furthermore, considering the elevated standard deviation (SD) of 1.40, it can be inferred that the research participants’ GBV perceptions exhibited significant variation.

**Table1.2:** Source; Survey data (2023)

Statement	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Multiple sexual partnerships by women’s partners are strongly associated with intimate partner violence or sexual violence	222	3.35	1.07 (1.068)	1	5
Low relationship satisfaction is a risk factor for VAW for both men and women	222	3.38	1.09 (1.008)	1	5
Traditional involvements of in-laws in the marital life of young couples increase marital conflicts and the risk of violence	222	3.46	1.27 (1.271)	1	5
Low socio-economic status and socio-economic stress are risk factors against women	222	3.36	1.67 (1.674)	1	5
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation	222	3.39	1.28	1	5

With regards to the respondents’ perceptions of GBV on the relationship level, four areas were outlined and the findings were as follows: multiple sexual partnerships by women’s partners are strongly associated with intimate partner violence or sexual violence (n=222, M=3.35, SD=1.07), low relationship satisfaction is a risk factor for VAW for both men and women (n=222, M=3.38, SD=1.09), traditional involvement of in-laws in the marital life of young couples increase marital conflicts and the risk of violence(n=222 , M=3.46, SD=1.27), and low socio-



economic status and socio- economic stress are risk factors against women (n=222, M=3.36, SD=1.67). The results showed the overall mean score of 3.39 which described the positive perceptions of the research respondents of GBV on the relationship level. Furthermore, with the higher SD (1.28) reported, it could be inferred that the perceptions of the research respondents of GBV on the relationship level varied.

**Table 1.3:** Source: Survey data (2023)

Statement	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Women living in poverty are at a greater risk for experiencing violence	222	3.52	1.25 (1.254)	1	5
Lack of social support from natal family and removal from previous social networks make women more vulnerable to experiencing violence	222	3.49	1.05 (1.054)	1	5
Insufficient employment opportunities put women at risk of experiencing violence against women	222	3.58	1.11 (1.109)	1	5
Challenging traditional gender roles are contributing factors to violence against women	222	3.52	1.16 (1.164)	1	5
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation	222	3.53	1.14	1	5

On the community level, the research respondents’ perceptions of GBV, four parts were explained and the outcomes were as follows: women living in poverty are at a greater risk for experiencing violence (n=222, M=3.52,SD=1.25), lack of social support from natal family and removal from social networks make women more vulnerable to experiencing violence (n=222, M=3.49, SD=1.05), insufficient employment opportunities put women at risk of experiencing violence against women (n=222, M=3.58, SD=1.11), and challenging traditional gender roles are contributing factors to violence against women (n=222,M=3.52, SD=1.16). The results showed the overall mean of 3.53, which explained the positive perceptions of the research respondents of GBV on the community level. Additionally, with the higher SD (1.14) reported, it could be contingent that the perceptions of the research respondents of GBV on the community level diverged.

**Table 1.4:** Source: Survey data (2023)

Statement	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Women growing up in a culture that normalizes men’s superiority over women put themselves at greater risk of violence	222	3.8	1.22 (1.221)	1	5
Attitudes and social norms about acceptance or approval of violence normalize and facilitate violence	222	3.73	0.96 (0.959)	1	5
Perpetrators of violence not prosecuted increase the risk of violence against women	222	3.88	1.23 (1.229)	1	5
Cultural practices violate the human rights of women	222	3.4	1.25 (1.254)	1	5
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation	222	3.70 (3.7025)	1.17 (1.165)	1	5
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With regards to the respondents’ perceptions of GBV on societal level, four ranges were explicated as follows: women growing up in the culture that normalize men’s superiority over women put themselves at greater risk of violence (n=222, M= 3.80, SD=1.22), attitudes and social norms about acceptance or approval of violence

normalize and facilitate violence (n=222, M=3.73, SD=0.96), perpetrators of violence not prosecuted increase the risk of violence against women (n=222, M= 3.88,SD =1.23), and cultural practices violate the human rights of women ( n=222, M =3.40,SD =1.25). The results showed the overall mean of 3.7 which clarified the positive perceptions of the research respondents' perceptions of GBV on the societal level. Additionally, with the higher SD (1.17) reported, it could be commissioned that the perceptions of the research respondents of GBV on societal level speckled.

### **Correlation analysis of the individual, relationship, community and society levels**

In the correlations section below, it should be noted that the following grades were applied, 0 to 49% was deemed poor/weak, 50 to 74% was moderate and greater and equal to 75% was perfect/a good association.

#### **Individual level**

The Pearson's Correlations specified a poor correlation/association (30%; 18.6%; 23% and 18%) respectively, between A1 (Young age at marriage leads to an increased exposure to violence due to the husband's perceived superiority over women) against all other variables at a significant 95% confidence level. This designated that all the variables were independent of one another.

#### **Relationship level**

Pearson's correlations showed a poor correlation/association (9.7%; 14.5% and 17.8%) between B1 (Multiple sexual partnerships by women's partners are strongly associated with intimate partner violence or sexual violence) and all other variables at a significant 95% confidence level. That is, all variables were independent of one another.

#### **Community level**

Pearson's correlations indicated a moderate correlation/association (52% and 56.8%) between C1 (Women living in poverty are at a greater risk of experiencing violence) against variables C2 and C3 and a poor correlation with C4 (36.5%) at a significant 95% confidence level.

#### **Societal level**

Pearson's correlations indicated a poor correlation/association (34.3%; 34.2% and 47.7%) between D1 (Women growing up in the culture that normalizes men's superiority over women, put themselves at a greater risk of violence) against all other variables at a significant 95% confidence level. That is, all the variables were independent of one another.

### **Analysis of variance (ANOVA)**

Analysis of variance was used to compare the means of three (3) or more populations in a single test.

#### **Individual level**

ANOVA exhibited significant statistical difference (p-value < 0.0001) amongst all the variables (A1; A2; A3; A4 and A5). This suggested that there were no links/relationships amongst the variables as was previously indicated by the correlations test. All the variables were thus independent of one another. ANOVA displayed a non-significant result (p-value >0.674) amongst all the variables (B1; B2; B3 and B4). This indicated that there were statistical associations/relationships amongst the variables even though these were shown to be poor by the correlations test.

#### **Community level**

ANOVA delivered a non-significant result (P-value = 0.8526) amongst all the variables (C1; C2; C3 and C4), which denoted that there were statistical associations/relationships amongst the variables that were shown to be

moderate by the correlations test.

### **Societal level**

ANOVA confirmed a significant statistical difference ( $p$ -value  $< 0.0001$ ) amongst all the variables (D1; D2; D3 and A4). This entailed that there were no associations/relationships amongst the variables as was previously specified by the poor correlations test. All the variables were thus independent of one another.

### **Hypothesis testing**

Pearson's chi-square test and ANOVA were used to further illustrate the significant differences between the variables. In this study, the null hypotheses ( $H_0$ ) were tested, and the alternative hypotheses ( $H_1$ ) results based on the tests, are presented below. Moreover, for this study, when the  $p$ -value was less than 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ) at a 95% confidence interval, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted (Karagöz & Koyuncu, 2019). However, when the  $p$ -value is greater than 5% ( $p > 0.05$ ) at a 95% confidence interval, the null hypothesis is retained or accepted and the alternative hypothesis is rejected (Karagöz & Koyuncu, 2019).

### **Gender and individual level**

In this section, we investigated how the participants viewed gender, guided by the following hypothesis:

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the individual level.

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the individual level.

All the responses regarding GBV at the individual level reported a  $p$ -value of less than 0.05, which was ( $p=0.033$ ), indicating a significant difference. In other words, all the research respondents had differing opinions on the subject of GBV at this level.

Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted meaning that there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of the females and males regarding the individual level factors contribution to GBV in South Africa.

### **Gender and Relationship Level**

The perceptions of the respondents with respect to gender were examined in this section of the study based on the following hypothesis:

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV at the relationship level.

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the relationship level.

All the responses on GBV at the relationship level reported a  $p$ -value of less than ( $p < 0.05$ ) which was ( $p=0.006$ ), representing a significant difference. This implies that, all the research respondents had a differing opinion regarding GBV at the relationship level. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

### **Gender and community level**

The perceptions of the respondents with respect to gender were examined in this section of the study based on the following hypothesis:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the community level.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the community level.

All responses of the respondents vis-à-vis GBV on the community level reported a p-value of (p=0.001) which was less than (p<0.05), representing a significant difference. In other words, all the research male and female respondents had differing opinions concerning GBV at the community level. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

### **Gender and society level**

The perceptions of the respondents with respect to gender were examined in this section of the study based on the following hypothesis:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the societal level.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a statistically significant difference between the gender of the respondents and their perceptions regarding GBV on the societal level.

All the responses regarding GBV at the societal level reported a p-value of higher than (p>0.05) which was (p=0.064), signifying no noteworthy difference. This means, all the research respondents, had the same perception concerning GBV on the societal level. Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted and the alternative hypothesis was rejected.

## **DISCUSSION**

The research findings centered on perceptions related to individual, relationship, community, and societal factors contributing to violence against women in South Africa. The study concluded that violence against women in South Africa is influenced by factors at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels. University students identified individual factors such as early marriage, unemployment, substance abuse, childhood traumas and lack of education as key contributors to violence against women in South Africa. Perceptions among individuals in South Africa indicate that several relationship factors contribute to GBV against women. These factors include engaging in multiple sexual partnerships, experiencing low relationship satisfaction, and facing stress due to traditional family involvement and low socio-economic status. Additionally, community-level factors, such as poverty, lack of social support, reduced social networks, limited employment opportunities and rigid gender roles, elevate the risk of women being exposed to GBV. The study found that university students identified community-level factors as the primary drivers of gender-based violence (GBV) against women in South Africa. Additionally, societal-level factors, including cultural norms that normalize male superiority, acceptance of violence, lack of prosecution for perpetrators, and cultural practices, were perceived as significant contributors to GBV. The study findings indicate that inadequate enforcement and the absence of comprehensive national laws and regulations in South Africa contribute significantly to the escalation of violence against women. These contributing factors encompass early marriage, family background, socio-economic stress, and deeply ingrained cultural and societal beliefs. The alignment of these findings with the ecological approach to gender-based violence (GBV) is evident. According to this perspective, violence is not caused by a single factor but rather results from a combination of various elements, ultimately fostering an environment where men's violent behaviour is excused and tolerated. The study findings are fully aligned to the arguments of the ecological approach to GBV, which argues that there is no single factor which "causes" violence but rather, a number of factors combined to promote the likelihood that men will be excused and tolerated for behaving violently towards women (Ellsberg et al., 2015). The more risk factors present, the higher the likelihood of violence.

Findings to this study aligns with Beneria et al. (2015), stating that violence against women is more prevalent



due to their personal and biological history that may alter a person's behaviour towards other people. At the individual level, these factors include the perpetrator being abused as a child or witnessing marital violence in the home, having an absent or rejecting father and the frequent use of alcohol. Due to the experience to which they are exposed, an individual tends to adopt that behaviour as being normally acceptable.

Jayasinghe and Ezpeleta (2019), agree with the findings in this study that uneducated and low-educated women are more likely to report tolerant attitudes towards violence. The data also indicates that abuse is more prevalent among women older than 20 years, married, living in urban settings, and with high education levels. In addition, Alesina et al. (2016) report that youth growing up in violent surroundings is likely to develop a tolerant attitude in adulthood. We observe that when educational status is low, it could negatively impact women's economic opportunities. According to Jayasinghe and Ezpeleta (2019), uneducated and low-educated women tend to exhibit more tolerant attitudes toward violence. According to Beyene et al. (2019), women with higher levels of education are less susceptible to experiencing violence compared to those with lower educational attainment.

The study aligns with Mwale (2018) who reported that GBV is closely linked to women's socio-economic status. This, in turn, is closely linked to their education levels, whereas if the educational status is low, it may disadvantage women's economic opportunities. The findings are also in line with a study which revealed that socio-economic and cultural issues are at the center of GBV in Papua New Guinea (Lamprell & Braithwaite, 2017). Findings to the study concur with the previous studies about women's dependency on men for financial support as a risk factor for all kinds of dating and intimate violence (Ilyasuet al., 2011; Masvawure, 2010; Sheferet al., 2012). This financial dependency gives men increased power and control over wives, and can escalate to abuse. Women's emotional dependence on their husbands is more apparent when they are financially dependent.

We argue that the economic disparities that exist between men and women continue to reflect inequalities and contribute adversely to conditions that increase the vulnerability of young female students and their exposure to victimization by violence. We profess that this is likely to continue forever, as long as there is no advocacy for university policies and practices to promote gender equity and the treatment of women and girls in their relationships, families, and the communities in which they live.

We pronounce that female students have a high dependency ratio and thus remain vulnerable to GBV. Their poor backgrounds seem to affect them more than it affects their counterparts, predisposing them to insufficient money which impinges on their survival and decision to resort to commercial sex work and its other dimensions. For example, Shefer et al. (2012) made a study of transactional sex at a university in South Africa in 2012. This study found that female students sometimes enter into sexual relationships with older men, commonly referred to as "sugar daddies". They do so for various reasons, including financial assistance. These older partners [inclusive of male lecturers] may help cover both their personal and/or university expenses (Shefer, et al., 2012).

The study findings further concur with Mwale (2018), that GBV may be associated with patriarchal beliefs that perpetuate the dominance of men and boys over women and girls. In this report, it is stated that cultural practices may arise from certain beliefs that can be related to male superiority over women such as the payment of bridal price at marriages or gender roles that are assumed by either men or women. This belief leads women to stay submissive and obedient even when they are physically, sexually and mentally abused.

The study findings support Simona et al. (2018) on the view that the persistence of traditional beliefs, which privilege men as the holders of authority within the family, continue to keep the levels of domestic violence experienced by women, as this creates strong social pressure for them to endure the violence. These are societal expectations that women accept any violence or ill-treatment that their husbands or male partners may perpetrate. Moreover, Simona et al. (2018) argue that this social pressure also contributes to women's unwillingness to report family-based violence. As a result of cultural beliefs, women have continued to experience GBV because they have tolerated these actions and have justified the unfair actions (Alesina, et al., 2016; Hegdahl, et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015).

Cultural gender stereotypes are major contributors to the marginalization of women. Africa is a multicultural society, in which different cultures have their own norms, values and beliefs, of which South Africa is a part.

Many types of violence are identified by the literature as being caused by different cultures. In a study conducted in South Africa and Nigeria, it was found out that males hold onto the headship role with cultural acceptance of violence, including its use in conflict resolution for dating violence perpetration and victimization (Aguanunu, 2014; Boladaleet al., 2015; Radzilani-Makatu & Mahlalela, 2015).

The study argues that ideological and cultural factors play a role when women have to decide on how they want to deal with the aggression and abuse they undergo. She further asserts that GBV in the household is a behavioural pattern that has become assimilated as a type of marital relationship and, because of the existing bias against intervening in the privacy of married and family life; it has been covered up by society and by the victims themselves. We further assert that, women persist in enduring profoundly detrimental relationships, often unable to envision alternative ways of cohabitation due to their acceptance of cultural norms governing the dynamics of couple hood. These norms delineate the roles of wife and mother, occasionally leading to an idealization of family and marriage.

## CONCLUSION

The study findings indicated that respondents were evenly distributed across genders, with the majority falling within the 18 to 25 age group (83.8%). University students identified individual factors as significant contributors to GBV against women. These factors included early marriage, unemployment, substance abuse, childhood traumas, and lack of education. Students also highlighted multiple sexual partnerships, low relationship satisfaction, traditional family involvement, and socio-economic stress as significant relationship factors that provoke GBV. Additionally, the research emphasized community-level factors, such as poverty, lack of social support, removal from social networks, insufficient employment opportunities, and challenging gender roles, which were associated with an increased risk of GBV against women. Furthermore, societal-level factors, including cultural norms, acceptance of violence, lack of prosecution for perpetrators, and cultural practices, were perceived as contributing to the prevalence of GBV.

In addition to the constructs within the social ecological model, inadequate enforcement and the absence of national laws and regulations have been recognized as challenges exacerbating violence against women. The absence of specific national laws addressing gender-based violence (GBV) provides perpetrators with an incentive to engage in and persistently commit GBV, as they are aware that there will be no consequences for their actions.

In summary, from the study findings, it was also concluded that the poor enforcement and lack of national laws and regulations in South Africa was one of the challenges exacerbating VAW. Other individuals may understand that what they do constitutes GBV, but owing to lax institutional policies addressing GBV, they are likely to perpetrate these acts because of a lack of reprisals.

## Limitation and Future Research

This article encountered several limitations. Firstly, the theoretical framework constrained the study's scope, depth, and applicability. Secondly, the quantitative methodology employed restricted the study's quality and the diversity of the collected data. Additionally, the analysis limited the accuracy, completeness, and significance of the findings. Lastly, ethical considerations posed restrictions on data access, consent, and confidentiality. Despite these limitations, we recognize their importance in serving distinct purposes.

We recommend that future research concentrate on quantifying the prevalence and impact of GBV within higher education institutions (HEIs). This can be achieved by investigating factors such as the severity and types of incidents. Additionally, exploring the relationship between GBV and academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of university students would be valuable. Lastly, analysing demographic variables such as gender, age, and disability status could help identify patterns related to GBV experiences.

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