

An Exploratory Study of the Knowledge, Experiences, Perception and Psychosocial Consequences of Gender-Based Violence: Among Adolescents in the Biyem-Assi Neighbourhood, Yaounde- Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

The experiences individuals undergo significantly shape their knowledge and perception about life, during the early stages of human development, especially the adolescence phase, the World Health Organization WHO (2025) stated that adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, which is a critical period that is characterized by rapid physical growth and secondary development of sexual characteristics, that brings about bodily changes and numerous self-discoveries, particularly in their psychosocial lives. To understand the psychosocial impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) on adolescents within a community, Villar (2025) states that the main contemporary social challenge in this era is GBV with profound implications for individuals, families, and communities. It is essential to assess the knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of adolescent victims of GBV; therefore, this study is crucial for the effectiveness of addressing GBV issues among adolescents.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method, using a purposive sampling strategy to select adolescents who have been victims of gender-based violence (GBV). The target population is the Yaoundé VI Biyem-Assi neighbourhood. The sample consists of teenage survivors of GBV in this area. In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary means of data collection, with participants' permission obtained for audio recording to ensure accurate data gathering. A total of 80 survivors were contacted, of whom 60 agreed to participate in the interviews regarding GBV-related issues. Four local NGOs were also approached, and arrangements were made through social media for collaboration.

Finding and conclusion

The psychosocial impact of adolescents' knowledge about gender-based violence (GBV) influences their ability to respond wisely to situations and identify appropriate resources for support. adolescents psychosocial state resulting from their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions, will also negatively affect the community. Consequently, a community cannot thrive when a significant number of its adolescents are victims of GBV. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must collaborate in developing effective prevention and response strategies to address GBV and support the well-being and empowerment of adolescents. Ensuring sustainable development requires protecting young people's lives and mental health by providing adequate information and guidance on where to seek help when necessary. Conclusively, proactive measures of GBV prevention among adolescents must be taken very seriously in homes, schools, and every community.

Keywords: Knowledge, Experiences, Perception, Psychosocial Consequences, Gender-Based Violence, Adolescents

INTRODUCTION

The experiences individuals go through shaping their knowledge and perceptions of life, particularly during their early stages of development, such as adolescence. Adolescents are in critical stages of growth, experiencing bodily changes and numerous self-discoveries in their psychosocial lives. With the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) affecting millions, including adolescents, this social pandemic has widespread repercussions (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019). GBV impacts individuals of all age groups, regardless of their status or environment.

Bows and Fileborn (2020) explain that the consequences of GBV can be severe and often unrecoverable, affecting an individual's physical, social, educational, and overall well-being, which in turn has a direct impact on community health. According to Ngwa et al. (2020), the frequent occurrence of GBV in communities has become unbearable, with many individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress, and no significant measures are being taken to prevent it or to minimize its occurrence. Khasahala (2019) highlights that the psychosocial impacts of GBV on adolescents cannot be overlooked; hence, it is imperative to study the knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of GBV victims among adolescents to effectively meet their needs and to properly implement proactive measures to prevent GBV among adolescence.

Ligiero et al. (2019) and Ellsberg et al. (2015) identify the necessity of appropriate interventions. Mbuagbaw et al. (2017) reported that more than 42% of adolescents in Cameroon have experienced GBV, indicating a pressing need for proactive interventions and reactive strategies tailored to the specific types of GBV commonly encountered in particular communities.

Adolescents, especially girls, are particularly vulnerable to GBV, but the victimization of boys is also increasing. According to Dalby et al. (2021), the WHO (2013) states that GBV against adolescents has been neglected, leading to devastating impacts on their development, education, and prospects. Cotter and Savage (2019) argue that gender-based violence encompasses harm done to individuals based on their actual or perceived gender identity and expression, which is particularly relevant for adolescents who are often dependent.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a social pandemic that affects individuals of all ages, including adolescents, and serves as a foundation for various other social problems. Therefore, it is essential to explore the life experiences of adolescents who have survived GBV and their perspectives on this issue (Ostadtaghizadeh, 2019, 2023). Understanding these experiences is crucial for creating effective interventions for victims suffering from post-traumatic stress and for preventing GBV among adolescents. According to Kaufman et al. (2019), the significance of this research cannot be overstated.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) reports that 15% of adolescents worldwide suffer from mental disorders, with one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 affected. Many of these cases are related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from GBV. There is a crucial need to prioritize the psychosocial well-being of adolescents, as it is vital to achieving sustainable development goals. The future of adolescents must be safeguarded to ensure the sustainability of the environment, animals, cultures, and values. However, adolescents are often neglected in these considerations.

This study is vital for immediate action concerning the current and future well-being of individuals and society. Neglecting adolescents' psychosocial well-being poses risks to both their future and societal stability. According to Rahman et al. (2023) and Bih (2024), psychosocial problems are significant issues faced by adolescents, yet they remain largely unrecognized and untreated (WHO, 2024). Wainberg et al. (2017) also emphasize this point.

In Cameroon, the prevalence of GBV among adolescents is alarming, with many individuals victimised. Statistics show that one in five women aged 15 and older experiences physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual violence (UNICEF, 2020). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of addressing GBV among adolescents, there is a lack of research on its psychosocial impact in Cameroon. Previous studies have often focused exclusively on adolescent girls; however, UNICEF (2019) reports that one in five boys experiences

physical violence and one in ten boys experiences sexual violence, resulting in significant psychosocial challenges. Many of these boys struggle to integrate into society and may become perpetrators of GBV.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Statistics show that an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys worldwide have experienced sexual violence. Girls aged 15-19 are particularly vulnerable, with a prevalence rate of 29.4% (UNICEF, 2017). There is a saying that the future belongs to the younger generation; however, if they do not actively engage in combating violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), through outreach programs and training workshops aimed at raising awareness and teaching prevention strategies, many lives—especially those of adolescents—will be at risk (Crooks et al., 2019).

The psychosocial impact of GBV on adolescents is profound and critical to their well-being. It is urgent to implement strategies that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). GBV can have severe and lasting negative effects on the holistic lives of adolescents, particularly when they lack safety in their environments. Many experience multiple forms of violence, even from their homes, close relatives, and other perpetrators in their neighbourhoods.

An individual's life experiences shape their perceptions and knowledge, and the psychosocial impact can be overwhelming. Nembang (2020) clearly stated that GBV against adolescents is on the rise, and individuals, families, institutions, and communities must take conscious action. Decker et al. (2015) noted that adolescents and youth are at high risk of GBV, and growing up in such environments may lead them to normalise these experiences. According to the 2018 Demographic Health Survey, adolescents in Cameroon face a high risk of GBV, with 1 in 4 adolescents being victimised.

Previous research has highlighted the need for more studies on GBV among adolescents in Cameroon. Despite the high rates of GBV among adolescents in Cameroon, there is a lack of research on their experiences, perceptions, and psychosocial consequences, particularly in the Yaoundé VI Biyemassi neighbourhood. This study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and psychosocial consequences of GBV among adolescents in the Yaoundé VI, Biyemassi neighbourhood. The findings will contribute to the development of effective interventions to prevent and respond to GBV among adolescents in Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study employs a qualitative approach. The sampling strategy used is purposive sampling, selecting adolescents who have been victims of gender-based violence (GBV), regardless of gender, aged between 13 and 19. The target population for this study is the Yaoundé VI Biyem-Assi neighbourhood, chosen for its heterogeneous nature, as it includes individuals from almost all ten regions, tribes, and clans in Cameroon, as well as foreign communities, including Chadians, Central Africans, Malians, Nigerians, and others residing in the area.

Data Collection Methods:

In-depth interviews were utilised as the primary means of data collection for this study. The procedures for conducting the interviews were as follows: First, the interviewer ethically requested consent from both the adolescents and their parents or guardians, as well as from trainers for those aged 13 to 19 years. All respondents were assured that the information they provided would be used solely for research purposes and that their identities would remain confidential.

Data collection for the study took three weeks. A phone was used for recording to ensure accurate information gathering, and permission from the respondents was obtained before any recording.

Sampling

A total of 80 survivors were contacted, and 60 expressed a willingness to participate in in-depth interviews concerning GBV-related issues. Four local NGOs were approached, and arrangements were made through social media forums to identify interested participants. Ultimately, 40 respondents were obtained through an NGO, while 20 individuals from the neighbourhood accepted the invitation for the interview.

Data Analysis

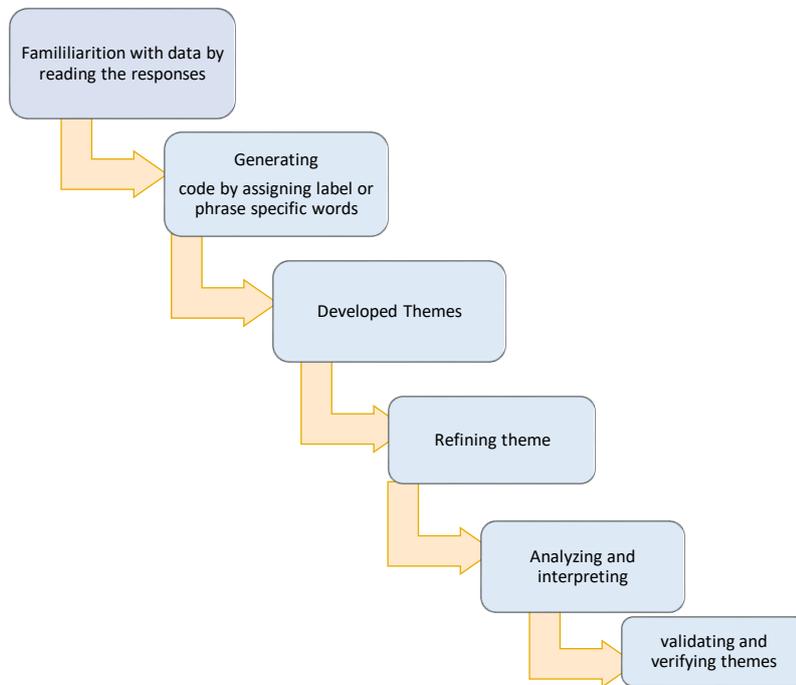


Fig. 1. Steps Used in Thematic Analysis to Analyze the Data

The above steps were followed rigorously. The researcher listened to each response twice before noting down key points. Afterwards, coding was performed on similar words. Themes were then generated, refined, and analysed, as presented in the table below (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Table 1. A table of themes from data collection.

<p>Knowledge on GBV</p> <p>Themes:</p> <p>Ignorance’s:</p> <p>“I have no idea”,</p> <p>“I have never heard of that word”.</p> <p>Passive Hearing:</p> <p>Overhead that word on television</p> <p>Formal Knowledge</p> <p>I attended a conference</p> <p>They told us in school.</p> <p>From an NGO</p>	<p>GBV Experience</p> <p>Themes:</p> <p>Verbal violence;</p> <p>treating words, forcing them against their will.</p> <p>“if you say it I will kill you. if you come I will kill you”.</p> <p>abusive words</p> <p>Emotional Violence</p> <p>Trauma, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression</p> <p>Physical violence: Fighting, injury, deformation,</p> <p>Sexual violence:</p>	<p>GBV Perception themes:</p> <p>cultural</p> <p>Believes</p> <p>“It a culture that cannot be stop”</p> <p>Social perception</p> <p>That is how it is in our culture to show he is man enough</p> <p>Men are wicket</p> <p>Socioeconomic perception</p> <p>Poverty is the cause</p>	<p>Psychosocial impact of GBV</p> <p>Themes:</p> <p>Poverty</p> <p>Loss of trust</p> <p>Sickness / insanity</p> <p>Sickness / mental heath</p> <p>Revenge</p> <p>No empathy</p> <p>Sex worker / prostitution</p> <p>Alcoholic</p>
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<p>ICT/ SOCIAL MIDIA I saw it on social media Head it from the TV From an NGO. Religious Information I was in Inform in church Through a church program. Counseling Cultural knowledge Cultural norms and practice Tradition</p>	<p>Rape, advance touch, Domestic violence; un- peaceful homes Cultural/ traditional practice. Child marriage, gender inequality ICT/Median violence; Social media, internet, violence. pornography Father frequently beat mother Loss of Autonomy and control. School violence. Fight, rape, rejection, verbal violence.</p>	<p>and vulnerability That is life, some people have bad luck, Many are victimizing so is normal, Government/ policy, lack of policy Now] here to report, perpetrators keep on victimization, Psychological perception Blame, Fear, helpless, hopeless. Feeling of worthless Naive Foolishness Is a way men show authority, according to our tradition? Family culture parenting style Favoritism</p>	<p>School drop out Rejection/ low self esteem Shame Division, strive Killing Health issues HIV & AIDS Depression Anxiety, uncertainty Unwanted pregnancy, Failure, Environmental trauma</p>
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SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Summary on survival pre-knowledge on GBV.

Most respondents reported that they had never heard of or been educated about the various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) at home, in school, or in their training centres until they became victims. A few indicated that they had prior knowledge from church teachings, while some learnt about it through social media and their schools. They frequently pointed to cultural practices that grant boys certain privileges; for example, in cases of rape, it is often said that if the boy is sexually active, he is less culpable.

All respondents indicated that they often experience verbal violence at home, in schools, and in their neighbourhoods. Most reported experiencing frequent physical violence in some of their homes and communities. They explained that, especially in the evenings, they often encounter harassment in poorly lit areas, such as incomplete buildings, dumpsters, and overgrown bushes.

These experiences have fostered negative perceptions about life and the world around them. They view GBV in all its forms as a way of life; some believe that certain individuals were created to behave this way. Others noted that the cultural norms, particularly in the Central Region, normalise victimisation organisations in neighbourhoods in intimate partner violence, which children then mimic. Additionally, many respondents expressed the view that GBV is on the rise due to the government and other stakeholders not addressing related issues with the seriousness they deserve. For instance, most indicated that very little support is provided to them after victimisation; they often receive only medical attention following an incident, leaving them to endure their trauma in silence.

The psychosocial impact of adolescents' understanding of GBV can help them react appropriately in various situations and know where to seek help when needed. Furthermore, their psychosocial state is influenced by

their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions, which directly affect the community, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.



Fig. 2 Knowledge, experience, and perception of GBV on an individual and the psychosocial

Explanation of the Figure: The knowledge, experiences, and perceptions that audiences have regarding gender-based violence (GBV) significantly contribute to their personality and have a direct impact on society.

DISCUSSION

Most respondents indicated that seeing pictures of victims and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) on social media, along with interventions and online support, can make help more accessible for victims (Emezue, 2020). Potter et al. (2022) noted that the application of information and communication technology (ICT) and social media in preventing and responding to sexual violence can help combat GBV. For instance, there is a need for helplines to be made available so that victims can seek help or report insecure situations in schools or communities (Weller et al., 2021). Additionally, GBV information campaigns spread through social media, radio, and television can address both proactive and reactive issues of GBV, especially among adolescents (Pearson et al., 2021).

Kinyanda et al. (2020) found that GBV significantly impacts children's mental health, with those who witness GBV more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and PTSD or become perpetrators (Osok et al., 2018). The mental health of mothers directly affects their children; the more women are caught in the web of GBV, the more it impacts the mental health of adolescents, leading to a persistent rise in psychosocial problems (Kinyanda et al., 2021). Their study on the impact of GBV on adolescent girls' mental health found that GBV was associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, often severe and long-lasting (Murray et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2020).

Hossain et al. (2021) stated that social norms significantly shape attitudes toward GBV. Ogundipe et al. (2020) added that individuals holding traditional attitudes toward women are more likely to perpetrate GBV, suggesting that adolescents from such homes may also grow up to become perpetrators if timely interventions are not made. Traditional leaders can play a crucial role in preventing GBV; they need training on GBV prevention and should collaborate with organisations and law enforcement to promote positive attitudes toward women and girls (Hossain et al., 2020). For example, in the Biyem-Assi neighbourhood, frequent harassment and intimate partner violence occur, with bystanders often watching or recording incidents.

Seth et al. (2020), Ogundipe et al. (2021), and Jewkes et al. (2020) stated that social media can significantly shape attitudes toward GBV among young people, with campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives positively impacting these attitudes (Fatusi, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). GBV can majorly affect children's education and well-being (Mkanta & Chacha, 2021), resulting in consequences such as loss of income, reduced productivity, and increased healthcare costs (Mkanta & Chacha, 2021). This includes social isolation, stigma, and reduced social support (Hossain et al., 2021; Kinyanda et al., 2021).

GBV can lead to significant consequences for adolescents, including emotional and behavioural problems, reduced academic performance, and increased risk of mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress (PTS). Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance of triggers (Ogundipe et al., 2021; Peterman et al., 2020). Adolescents who experienced GBV were more likely to report feelings of shame and self-blame and were also more likely to experience social isolation and stigma (Vyas et al., 2020). Additionally, survivors of GBV are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation and attempts (Mkanta & Chacha, 2021). Other studies have indicated that GBV is associated with decreased self-esteem and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (O'Reilly et al., 2020), with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression among adolescent girls mediated by feelings of shame and self-blame (Katz et al., 2020).

Research published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* in 2021 found that gender-based violence (GBV) can lead to social withdrawal and isolation during adolescence, with survivors more likely to experience social isolation and reduced support (Hossain et al., 2021). Other studies, such as Shahoo (2020), reveal that individuals who experienced GBV were more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, as well as social isolation and stigma (Machisa et al., 2020; Njoroge et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Njoroge et al. (2020) noted that adolescent girls who experienced GBV were more likely to report feelings of shame and self-blame, leading to increased social isolation and stigma. Another study found that adolescent girls who experienced GBV were also more likely to engage in risky behaviours, such as substance use and unprotected sex (Decker et al., 2018). The experience of GBV can result in feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, further exacerbating social isolation and stigma (Sahoo et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020; Tol et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2020; Abrahams et al., 2020; Bott et al., 2020).

A few respondents indicated that they had experienced GBV and had interacted with both international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) located within their neighbourhoods (Kalamer, 2016). While many local NGOs are active in GBV interventions, respondents from the Biyem-Assi neighbourhood reported that very few had received discussions on GBV in schools, despite regularly experiencing it there. A few mentioned that their school guidance counsellors had informed them about the various forms of GBV. Community-based initiatives can be effective in preventing GBV in rural areas, with community-based counselling and support services positively impacting attitudes toward GBV (Hossain et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The evidence from this study suggests that gender-based violence (GBV) has severe and long-lasting psychosocial consequences for adolescents in the Biyemassi neighbourhood of Yaoundé and other communities. There is an urgent need for proactive interventions from all stakeholders within these communities. A society cannot have a promising future with many victims of GBV.

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers need to collaborate in developing effective prevention and response strategies to address GBV and support the well-being and empowerment of adolescent girls. The best way to ensure sustainable development is to protect the lives and mental health of young people by providing adequate information and resources for seeking help when necessary. Additionally, GBV prevention must be taken very seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- School guidance counsellors, psychotherapists, and psychosocial professionals need to understand the experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of their students to accurately address their problems and take proactive measures.
- Each community should consider the knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and psychosocial impacts of GBV on adolescents to implement effective proactive and reactive measures against GBV among the younger generation.
- This study is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to create and implement timely and appropriate policies that address the challenges adolescents face concerning GBV, such as utilising ICT to combat GBV by establishing hotlines and call centres, as stated by WHO (2021).

- Menon et al. (2020) emphasised the need for cooperation among different institutions within each community to actively engage in GBV prevention. Community leaders, including local authorities such as chiefs and divisional officers, as well as law enforcement, should collaborate to address GBV prevention and response. (Patton et al., 2016).
- Parents should be actively involved in preventing their children from becoming victims of GBV. To be successful, they should take proactive steps and not allow their adolescents to navigate these challenges alone.
- More studies should be conducted in communities focusing on adolescent GBV prevention in Cameroon.
- There is a need for qualitative aspects of the study to be explored further.

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