STRATEGIES TO PREVENT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AT UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA: A NARRATIVE REVIEW.

Tiisetso Aubrey Chuene[1]*, Mahlodi Phildah Maphakela[2], Sethepele Anastasia Phogole[3]
[1]Pharmacist, Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre, Division of Student Affairs, University of Limpopo, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa.
[2]Clinical Nurse Practitioner, Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre, Division of Student Affairs, University of Limpopo. Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa.
[3]Student Assistant, Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre, Division of Student Affairs, University of Limpopo. Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa.

Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be a significant public health issue affecting millions worldwide. It is pervasive and deeply embedded within societies. Despite numerous efforts by governments and various organizations to combat it, GBV has become almost a routine occurrence at South African universities. This paper explored strategies that may be adopted to reduce GBV at South African universities. This is a conceptual paper, and it relies solely on secondary data for analysis and interpretation. The authors employed a purposive sampling strategy to gather data from a variety of databases that were particularly relevant to the subject matter. Secondary data from EbscoHost, Scopus, Google Scholar, PubMed, Jstor, Sabinet, and Proquest were sampled and reviewed using keywords and phrases related to GBV. This review highlights how universities can foster a safer, more inclusive environment where GBV is not tolerated and victims are supported and empowered through continuous training, awareness campaigns, peer support systems, clear policies, and effective response and reporting mechanisms. Preventing GBV at universities requires a collective effort from academic staff, support staff, students, and partners. Therefore, ongoing collaboration, sustained efforts, and a commitment to change are essential for making a significant difference in the prevention of GBV. To support GBV prevention efforts in universities, research should be conducted to investigate how well-coordinated strategies involving the university community contribute to creating safer campus environments. Further research should be conducted to assess the influence of digital awareness campaigns and peer-led programs on shifting student perceptions and behaviors related to GBV. University GBV policies should formally recognize and support peer-led education programs and survivor advocacy groups. These policies must also incorporate intersectional, inclusive approaches that address the unique requirements of marginalized populations, such as students with disabilities, international students, and the LGBTQ+ community.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be a significant public health issue affecting millions worldwide (Beyene et al., 2019). It is pervasive and deeply embedded within societies. Despite numerous efforts by governments and various organizations to combat it, GBV has become almost a routine occurrence at South African universities. According to Samakao and Manda (2023), students at higher education institutions are among the most vulnerable groups affected by GBV. Mahlori et al. (2018) emphasized that the problem of GBV extends throughout the educational system, affecting both schools and universities. Several scholars have identified GBV as a major obstacle to achieving equity, development, and peace at universities. For instance, Makhubele et al. (2018) and Mahlori et al. (2018) contend that GBV directly infringes on students' basic rights, hinders their social and economic development, and fosters an environment of unrest within student residences. Universities are key environments for promoting the prevention of GBV, offering students the knowledge to identify and mitigate risky behaviors (Samakao & Manda, 2023).

South African universities have reported a significant increase in cases of GBV, with prevalent cases of intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, and femicide (Klencakova et al., 2023; Mutinta, 2022; Manik & Tarisayi, 2021). To address this problem, universities

have adopted various policies aimed at preventing GBV. However, despite these efforts, incidents of GBV continue to occur within the universities (Gwiza & Hendricks, 2024; Mahabeer, 2021). Studies on strategies to prevent GBV in higher education are limited. As a result, it is important to identify effective strategies for preventing GBV within these institutions. This study therefore explored the strategies to prevent GBV at the universities, to ensure violence-free universities.

METHODOLOGY

A narrative review was employed to achieve the objective of this review. According to Sukhera (2022), narrative reviews offer adaptive and comprehensive techniques for assessing and interpreting the literature. Thus, researchers may explore an in-depth description and analysis of previously published literature on a particular topic. This approach enabled the authors to review the literature, clarify key concepts, summarise existing evidence, identify techniques previously employed, and highlight gaps in the literature and potential areas for future research.

The authors reviewed the literature by conducting searches in the following databases, as they offered a wide range of multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed scholarly articles: EbscoHost, Google Scholar, PubMed, Sabinet, and Proquest. To gather the most relevant literature from the databases, the selected keywords included "gender-based violence," "universities," "students," and "strategies," combined using the Boolean operators "AND," "NOT," and "OR." Once the search terms were entered, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to sift through and select the relevant literature from the databases.

The research papers were chosen using the eligibility criteria outlined below:

- Published between 2014 and 2024: A decade of data was considered to ensure that the review concentrates on the most current studies.
- Published in English: English was chosen as the criterion for the language of the publications under analysis because it is generally easier to access, as multiple databases and repositories predominantly collect high-quality articles in English. This criterion, therefore, improved the chances of finding pertinent and current studies. Additionally, this criterion reduced the number of possible translation or interpretation difficulties that could affect the credibility of the results.
- Qualitative and quantitative studies: The inclusion of various study designs, like

descriptive studies, cross-sectional studies, systematic reviews, observational studies, meta-analysis, and reports, facilitated a thorough exploration of the topic.

- Concentrated on violence against students at universities: students are at crucial phases of their lives when they are more inclined to be in committed, intimate, or long-term partnerships. During these crucial stages, they establish relationships, negotiate living dynamics, and possibly begin a family. They are also juggling the development of their careers, adjusting to changing social roles, and shaping their identity throughout this time, all of which may affect how they perceive and respond to violence in their relationships. Thus, concentrating on this target group enabled the authors to explore the strategies that may emerge in these contexts, which are often different from those observed in other target groups.

The following criteria for exclusion were applied in this review: Articles that described strategies that do not specifically address gender-based violence, strategies that are not aimed at students, or strategies that are carried out outside of academic institutions. Subsequently, the abstracts of the chosen papers were thoroughly scrutinized, taking into account their relevance to the review's scope and reliability factors such as the appropriateness of data collection and analysis techniques used.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Theoretical Perspective

Social Learning Theory (SLT) by Bandura (1969) and discussed further by Bandura and Hall (2018) hypothesizes that individuals learn through observing, mimicking, and receiving feedback from the environment. In the context of GBV, the SLT hypothesizes that individuals learn to practice violence by observing violence in the vicinity and rationalizing the same as the norm (Powers et al., 2020). Deane (2019) emphasizes how informal learning, especially socialization and peer-to-peer interactions, shape people's perceptions of gender and normalize violence. This is even more pronounced in universities, where student culture, peer influence, and informal interactions between students have effects on gender and violence attitudes (Isaac, 2021; Kgolane, 2023).

At institutions of higher learning, these factors of social learning result in the perpetuation of GBV. Despite the differences in the structures of the universities, GBV is learned and perpetuated through shared challenges. Isaac (2021) highlights that sexist harassment and insults,

which are tolerated in university environments, perpetuate the idea that such behavior is acceptable. Role models, professors, senior students, and staff who can exhibit negative gender attitudes also contribute to such normalization. Such behavior sets a bad precedent, perpetuating a toxic campus culture that encourages GBV and discrimination. In addition to the SLT, several studies have also sought to explore the role of masculinities in contributing to gendered violence. For example, Sikweyiya et al. (2023) applied the theory of toxic masculinity in investigating how certain masculine norms normalize and reproduce violence. Their work highlights the way these norms tend to create routine acts of violence within institutional settings such as universities. Furthermore, Flood (2020) highlights the importance of understanding the dynamics of violence, power, and culture in the management of GBV in schools. Earlier research has concentrated on the need to address informal learning processes, yet these forces have not been adequately researched in GBV in South African universities. Isaac (2021) and Kgolane (2023) believe that universities' failure to conduct proper disciplinary action and address inimical behavior is mostly to blame for the persistence of GBV in universities. Sidelil et al. (2022) also mention that both formal and informal environments must be addressed to prevent the uncontrollable spread of sexist behaviors. Nonetheless, even with these findings, there is still a massive gap in knowing how university culture, student interactions, and overall societal norms all play a part in learning and reproducing GBV. Therefore, the SLT gives us a profound framework for the explanation of the South African institutional processes of GBV. With the use of the SLT, it becomes clearer how GBV behavior gets learned, consolidated, and maintained within such contexts. Applying the theory, we can better see how GBV gets institutionally rooted and, more importantly, by ascertaining influential indicators that continue its prevalence. These include underreporting, weak support mechanisms, and adverse institutional reactions.

Prevalence and challenges of managing GBV at universities in South Africa.

The prevalence of GBV against students is increasing at South African universities, particularly among female students who are often the primary victims (Mutinta, 2022). However, Finchilescu and Dugard (2021) argue that GBV incidents at universities are rarely reported to management, making it challenging to assess the extent of the issue and hindering prevention efforts. There have been limited surveys conducted to assess the prevalence of GBV among students in South African universities. As highlighted by von Meullen and van der Waldt (2022),

the existing studies are often restricted to a small number of universities or specific faculties, which makes it challenging to draw generalizations or broader conclusions. The lack of a trustworthy database regarding the prevalence and type of GBV in South African society is lamented by Enaifoghe (2019).

According to Mofokeng and Tlou (2022), gathering statistics on cases such as sexual harassment and intimidation at universities is challenging, as these forms of GBV are hard to quantify due to underreporting. Hewett et al. (2023) emphasize that the non-disclosure of GBV further distorts prevalence statistics, as it is estimated that fewer than 40% of women who experience GBV seek any form of assistance and less than 10% of those who do turn to the police for help. Although there are no nationwide comparable statistics describing the prevalence of GBV in South African universities, it has been predicted that a significant percentage of GBV cases, particularly rape, have been reported by university students in the country (Davids, 2020). Ajayi (2021) conducted a study on the prevalence and factors associated with sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women at a South African university. The study found that 25.2% of female students experienced sexual violence in the past year, and about two out of five girls had encountered it in their lifetime. A comparable incidence of 26.2% was found in a systematic review and meta-analysis of lifetime sexual violence prevalence across South African universities (Beyene, 2019). These studies underscore the alarming frequency with which students are subjected to sexual violence at universities.

According to Finchilescu and Dugard (2018), the single largest obstacle to the management of GBV at universities is underreporting, and fear of victimization and suspicion of reporting systems are leading drivers. Mahabeer (2021) reasserted the necessity for a better support reporting cycle to avoid further traumatizing victims and for change to be instituted as per their agency and needs. These challenges accentuate the need for enhanced practice and provision of services for survivors at every university. The problem of GBV within academic communities, and particularly within South African universities, is being compounded by other social foundations along with the values that erode effective interventions. Buhlungu (2019) gave a thorough overview of university policy and culture, and how these factors can affect the effectiveness of GBV programs. Zungu et al. (2019) note the importance of intersectionality, where groups who are marginalized face additional barriers when they encounter GBV. This highlights that GBV is a common problem in South African universities that stops the achievement of equity and development.

Despite several policy attempts, GBV remains a prevailing problem. Existing literature indicates that students at universities are particularly susceptible to GBV and frequently report incidents of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, as well as harassment (Samakao & Manda, 2023; Mahlori et al., 2018). Makhubele et al. (2018) believe that GBV infringes on the rights of students outright and fosters an insecure and unpredictable environment. Further, Gwiza and Hendricks (2024) and Mahabeer (2021) have added that although policies to combat GBV have been introduced at universities, incidents are still not reported, meaning that the policies have not been effectively enforced. While solutions have been mooted, scholars like Machisa et al. (2021) and Sikweyiya et al. (2023) identify a critical gap in addressing emotional and economic abuse, which is often entangled with physical and sexual violence in institutions of higher learning. This body of literature encourages further research into effective prevention interventions against GBV in universities and the improvement of student safety and well-being.

Legislation and policy frameworks on GBV in South Africa.

According to Hewett et al. (2023), the purpose of institutional policies is to create a safe environment for both students and staff members. Even though most institutions have these regulations in place, non-adherence is still a problem (Mahlori et al., 2018). Given the gravity of the situation, the South African government has implemented important legal changes (South African Government, 2022). On the 28th of January 2022, President Cyril Ramaphosa endorsed the following three Bills to strengthen the fight against GBV:

1. **The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 13 of 2021:** This law establishes new crimes like sexual harassment, broadens the National Register for Sex Offenders, and provides extra protections for individuals who are at risk, such as female students below 25 years. Although sexual harassment laws and regulations are in place at most South African universities, their effectiveness is questioned in light of the low reporting rates. Universities face a dilemma in this regard because they want to be seen as addressing sexual harassment seriously, but if they take proactive measures to combat it, there is a fear that the issue could lead to more reports, which could damage their reputation as an institution. To deal with the structural and specific factors underlying this phenomenon, a coordinated strategy is required. A crucial starting point in this respect is legislation, regulations, and university support and response systems.

2. **The Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Act, 12 of 2021:** This Act modifies current legislation to further control the presentation of evidence, bail, and the handling of those who are more vulnerable during court proceedings. This act enables amendments that establish stricter conditions for granting bail to individuals accused of committing criminal offenses related to GBV. These changes also broaden the range of offenses that require mandatory minimum sentences.

3. **The Domestic Violence Amendment Act, 14 of 2021:** The Act expands the meaning of domestic violence and introduces new concepts such as "controlling behavior" and "coercive behavior". It broadens the Act's reach to include harm that occurs through Internet communication, which is especially pertinent for university students. The implementation of this Act represents an important effort to strengthen the legal framework and systems designed to tackle and prevent GBV within the country.

In addition to the aforementioned Acts, the National Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) formed a Ministerial Task Team to look into matters related to GBV and sexual harassment at universities in South Africa (Brink et al., 2021). The DHET developed the Policy Framework to address GBV within the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system, which aims to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for eliminating GBV while encouraging adherence to, and the defense and realization of, human rights as outlined in Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights (DHET, 2020). According to this policy, universities can improve the safety of all students by implementing thorough prevention initiatives that increase knowledge of GBV-related laws and procedures, as well as additional strategies designed to prevent GBV occurrences.

Furthermore, on the 24th of May 2024, the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Bill was enacted (Republic of South Africa, 2024). This law permits the establishment of the council, an official entity tasked with providing tactical direction in the fight against femicide and GBV. It outlines the council's objectives and duties, including the appointment of its Board, the formation of Board committees, the establishment of guidelines and standards for local and provincial working committees, and the authority to develop regulations (Republic of South Africa, 2024).

The Act acknowledges that GBV is a severe social issue and that survivors of GBV and femicide are among the most vulnerable in society, requiring urgent protection. It aligns with the principles and objectives of our Constitution, which upholds the rights to equality, freedom, and personal security. Through a multi-sectoral approach and a coordinated government response, the Act seeks to address and combat GBV (Republic of South Africa, 2024). This Act, along with its emphasis on engaging various stakeholders, including different government departments, seeks to investigate the root causes of GBV and femicide by addressing social issues such as the national crime rate, unemployment, and the lack of education on GBV and femicide in both basic and higher learning curricula. This approach aims to foster a culture of accountability and, ideally, contribute to the reduction and eventual elimination of GBV and femicide in society.

The laws mentioned above show that South Africa has extensive laws and policies in place to combat GBV at universities. However, despite demonstrating a commitment to addressing GBV, it can be argued that there are significant gaps in their effectiveness and execution. For instance, while the laws are progressive in broadening definitions and increasing penalties, they often overlook the underlying causes of GBV, such as gender inequality, and the insufficient support systems available to victims. Moreover, there is an urgent need for increased resources to enforce these laws and to improve services for victims, such as counseling. Although the proposed National Council on GBV and Femicide is a step forward in establishing a dedicated body to address these issues, it must be endowed with the necessary authority, independence, and resources to bring about real change. Additionally, concerns remain regarding the delays in delivering justice to survivors and the lack of adequate training for law enforcement and judiciary members to handle GBV cases with the appropriate sensitivity and urgency. Without a stronger focus on full implementation, monitoring, and support for victims, the legislation risks becoming more symbolic than transformative in the battle against GBV.

DISCUSSION

GBV prevention at universities is an essential and challenging task that calls for an integrated approach involving students and employees, among other stakeholders. The following are some strategies that can be adopted to assist in preventing GBV in university settings:

Conduct regular workshops and awareness campaigns.

Universities can regularly organize workshops, seminars, awareness campaigns, guest speaker events, and continuous training sessions on GBV. These activities should aim to engage both staff members and students and should teach them how to identify early warning signs of violence, the value of consent, ethical intervention techniques as bystanders, and what it takes to maintain non-violent relationships. As suggested by Magudulela (2017), to educate students about GBV and how to prevent it, activities should incorporate discussion panels, dialogues, digital awareness campaigns, media interviews, partnerships with other similar groups, and participatory visual methods (like drama, photovoice, and poetry). Consequently, to increase students' participation, this review strongly supports the implementation of digital awareness campaigns, participatory visual methods, and continuous training sessions to consistently remind the university community about GBV and available support services for victims.

In addition, universities can integrate information about GBV prevention into student orientation programs, as this will ensure that new students are immediately informed about the policies in place to protect them, as well as the resources available to help them should they face any form of violence. Furthermore, incorporating GBV-related topics into the curriculum is also a key step in fostering a more empathetic and informed student body. By promoting critical thinking around gender issues, power dynamics, and consent, students can engage in discussions that challenge harmful norms and behaviors. This can create a more respectful and supportive atmosphere on campus, with students better equipped to recognize, address, and prevent instances of GBV. Joseph (2015) asserts that the effectiveness of these activities depends on their successful implementation by universities. Therefore, for prevention programs to succeed, it is essential that academics, campus management, staff, and students all support and engage with them.

Continuous training of staff members and campus Security Officers

Prevention of GBV requires continuous education and flexibility. Universities must ensure that their staff members participate in regular training sessions and receive frequent updates to stay current with the effective strategies, latest research, and changing campus policies on GBV prevention and response. University staff should be trained to identify the signs of GBV and respond appropriately, with an emphasis on handling situations with care and discretion. Training will help staff

members build trust with students who have experienced GBV, ensuring they feel comfortable disclosing their experiences and seeking support. Moreover, universities should offer training to staff members about the different types and dynamics of GBV. This will foster a supportive setting where survivors will feel comfortable sharing their experiences and will ensure staff members are informed about various forms of GBV, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence. Campus Security Officers, on the other hand, should also be educated about GBV and be trained to assist victims in reporting incidents and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable. According to Brink et al. (2021), Campus Security Officers are essential since they are frequently the initial point of contact for individuals with stressful and emergency circumstances and should therefore be well-trained in internal processes and operations. Therefore, by equipping Campus Security Officers and staff members with the knowledge, skills, and resources to identify, address, and prevent GBV, universities can cultivate safer environments, provide better support for survivors, and encourage a culture of reporting, respect, and accountability. Staff trained in GBV prevention will be more equipped to support and execute university-wide prevention initiatives, including awareness campaigns, educational workshops, and policy enforcement. Training will ensure that all campus community members are aware of their legal responsibilities concerning GBV, including reporting obligations under different laws. This is especially crucial for individuals who are mandatory reporters, such as healthcare professionals, security officers, and counselors.

Establish Peer Support Networks

Universities should create peer support programs where trained students can provide guidance and a listening ear to their fellow students who are survivors of GBV. For example, universities can set up student-led peer education initiatives, where students are trained to offer support, educate others, and raise awareness about GBV. These peer educators can organize workshops, develop educational materials, and offer direct support to their peers. As noted by Chuene (2023), peer educators at institutions of higher learning may serve as a valuable source of input for addressing societal issues such as GBV. Peer-to-peer education can therefore be more impactful because students are generally more receptive to what their peers have to teach them. Students can be trained to support one another when they witness or experience GBV. The peer support networks can serve as dependable spaces where students can report incidents and direct others to the right departments for support. In addition to empowering peer educators, universities can enable students who have experienced GBV to lead support groups or share their stories, contributing to awareness and reducing stigma. Survivor-led initiatives can foster a sense of solidarity and recovery within the community.

Encourage student leadership participation in GBV.

The GBV prevention at universities can be greatly aided by the Student Representative Council (SRC). The SRC is in an excellent position to impact campus lifestyle and culture, push for change, and carry out initiatives that promote a secure and supportive setting for all students. As noted by Kgarose et al. (2023), the SRC serves as a liaison between students and university management, advocating for students' needs and interests while working with the universities to implement policies and initiatives that promote the welfare of students. Thus, the SRC can advocate for the establishment or reinforcement of campus policies that deal with GBV and ensure that there are clear definitions of GBV, clear reporting channels, and disciplinary processes. The SRC can collaborate with university management to ensure that these policies are inclusive, survivor-focused, and effectively communicated to all students.

As stated by von Meullen and van der Waldt (2022), the SRC's role in promoting GBV awareness should be mandatory, not only for a specific department but for the entire SRC team. Raising awareness of GBV at universities is crucial for ensuring the establishment of appropriate policies, systems, structures, and mechanisms. Therefore, the SRCs have a big role to play in educating the entire student population about important aspects of GBV. According to Ntsala and Mahlatjie (2016), SRCs must raise students' general awareness by sharing information that has an immediate impact on students. A university's GBV programs' type and scope have an impact on the function that SRCs play in promoting awareness of GBV, as well as the frequency of variables that affect SRCs in this capacity. As a result, the SRC can plan activities that emphasize the value of healthy, civil, and mutually beneficial relationships. Furthermore, the SRC can organize workshops that teach students skills on how to resolve conflicts constructively and peacefully. These skills can help prevent GBV by fostering communication, empathy, and respect within relationships.

Establish a Research Unit to focus on GBV.

The establishment of a specialized GBV research unit can help universities take the lead in tackling this public health challenge. This unit can provide helpful

information, help generate data, develop intervention initiatives, inform policies, and support the broader movement for gender equality and the eradication of violence within the universities. Through the GBV research unit, the universities can conduct studies to determine the prevalence of GBV and students' perceptions of campus safety in order to frequently evaluate the atmosphere on campus. This will assist in identifying areas of concern and monitoring the effectiveness of the interventions, making adjustments where needed. The University management can also use the gathered information to make well-informed decisions about resource allocation. In addition, universities can gather feedback from GBV survivors regarding their interactions with campus services, ensuring that their voices contribute to shaping policies and processes for handling GBV within the campus setting. Universities can provide researchers with specific training on GBV topics, including methods for gathering data on GBV and ethical standards to be followed when working with GBV survivors. This will ensure that the university community is engaged in the research process and can support the work of the research unit.

GBV is an evolving issue, making it essential to leverage social capital in building informal social controls and fostering university development and empowerment. As highlighted by Mutinta (2022), universities can conduct studies on GBV, and this can be achieved by collaborating with other institutions, internal and/or external research organizations, and research units. The goal would be to create interventions that enhance safety on campus and off-campus student housing. Additionally, research should guide awareness campaigns on GBV, where communities actively participate in designing and executing initiatives that highlight the realities of GBV among students.

Effective response and reporting strategies

One major obstacle to successfully addressing GBV and offering help to survivors is the underreporting of GBV cases at universities (Davids, 2020). Survivors frequently refrain from reporting incidents due to reasons such as feelings of humiliation and isolation, lack of confidence in the system, or fear of reprisals. According to Makhene (2022), an integrated, survivor-centered strategy that promotes confidence, offers assistance and guarantees anonymity is essential to overcoming underreporting and addressing GBV on campus. To address underreporting, universities can adopt the following strategies:

- **Create transparent, safe, and confidential reporting procedures.**

Universities should set up anonymous and confidential reporting channels, such as online portals or hotlines, where survivors can report GBV without the risk of being identified. This approach will help alleviate fears of retaliation or judgment, encouraging survivors to speak out. It will guarantee that the identities of survivors and the details of their cases remain confidential throughout the reporting and investigation process. Additionally, permit trusted third parties (such as healthcare professionals, campus counselors, support groups, and student organizations) to report cases on behalf of survivors who may feel unsafe or too vulnerable to report on their own.

- **Foster confidence in the system**

Ensure that students are informed and understand how the institution responds to cases of GBV. The procedures should be clear and transparent, outlining the steps, possible outcomes, and the victim's rights. Students will feel more assured that their cases will be treated properly and with urgency as a result of this. Additionally, ensure that all university employees, such as administrators, counselors, healthcare providers, and campus security officers, have received training on how to react in a trauma-informed and non-judgmental way. This entails maintaining confidentiality and respect while interacting with victims in a delicate, perceptive, and sympathetic manner. Furthermore, universities should foster a culture where survivors are not blamed or interrogated about the details of the violence. This will help reduce the fear of being blamed or doubted by those who decide to speak out. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, universities should implement a clearly stated, university-wide zero-tolerance policy for GBV, ensuring that all forms of GBV will have transparent, uniform repercussions. This will demonstrate to students that the university is committed to addressing and preventing GBV, therefore encouraging them to report GBV incidents.

- **Provide extensive and easily accessible victim support services.**

Universities should ensure that victims receive free, confidential, and easily accessible therapy services. These services should be widely promoted and tailored to be culturally sensitive. Campus-based services should provide a variety of choices, including medical, psychological, support groups, and legal representation, and should be manned by experts who have received specialized training in assisting GBV victims. Survivors are likely to report incidents if they know they will receive practical support, such as legal help, assistance with campus accommodations, or temporary housing.

Additionally, victims can be given the choice of confidential counseling or restorative justice processes if they prefer not to pursue formal disciplinary measures but still want to find a resolution. This can lessen their fear of more damage and offer them greater authority over the situation. Provide continuing support and monitoring following an investigation to make sure the victim is not subjected to retaliation, bullying, or harassment. A counselor or survivor advocate may visit them to make sure they are safe and doing well.

As emphasized by Humbert and Strid (2024), universities should establish an inclusive and intersectional approach to GBV. This can be done by acknowledging that GBV impacts individuals in various ways depending on factors such as ethnicity, race, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Therefore, support services and outreach efforts can be customized to meet these varied needs. Additionally, universities should develop programs and services that are inclusive of disabled students, LGBTQ+ students, and international students, who may encounter specific challenges related to GBV. Furthermore, introduce culturally sensitive interventions and support services, especially for international students or those from diverse cultural backgrounds, as they may experience unique obstacles related to GBV. The establishment of an inclusive and intersectional approach will ensure safe spaces and support networks for vulnerable student populations who may feel isolated or reluctant to report due to concerns about discrimination or a lack of understanding of their experiences.

Conclusion

Preventing GBV at universities requires a collective effort from the entire campus community, including students, academic staff, support staff, and external partners. Through continuous training, support systems, clear policies, and proactive prevention strategies, universities can foster a safer, more inclusive environment where GBV is not tolerated, and victims are supported and empowered. Ongoing collaboration, sustained efforts, and a commitment to change are essential for making a significant difference. Universities can reduce the prevalence of GBV and establish an inclusive, respectful, and empathetic environment by implementing the suggested strategies into practice, which will make their campuses a safer and more welcoming setting for all students.

Recommendations

To successfully address GBV within the universities, it is vital to adopt persistent, comprehensive, and inclusive programs. These should involve frequent awareness campaigns, educational workshops, and student-led peer education initiatives aimed at promoting understanding of consent, bystander responsibility, and healthy relationship dynamics. Introducing GBV-related topics during student orientation and integrating them into the academic curriculum may help establish a foundation of respect and compassion. Encouraging peer support networks and empowering student leadership, especially through active SRCs, may contribute to the development of a supportive atmosphere that promotes early intervention and motivates survivors to speak up. Additionally, it is also essential to provide personnel and campus security with continual, trauma-informed training so they can react to situations responsibly and discreetly.

Moreover, universities should also establish specialized GBV research groups to determine the frequency of violence, get input from survivors, and analyze how well interventions are working. Establishing secure, anonymous reporting avenues and easily accessible support services like counseling, legal assistance, and healthcare are other essential ways for universities to improve their response mechanisms. To overcome underreporting, a survivor-centered approach based on accountability and transparency is essential. Crucially, every intervention needs to be interdisciplinary and inclusive, acknowledging the distinct experiences of students from various ethnic, cultural, gender, and disability backgrounds. Universities may create more secure and encouraging learning environments where all students may thrive without fear of GBV by implementing a strict zero-tolerance policy, encouraging cooperation with other organizations, and providing ongoing education for all parties involved.

Limitations

This review has limitations. As a narrative review, it followed a non-systematic approach, which may introduce selection bias and result in the omission of relevant studies. The review's reliance solely on peer-reviewed articles published in English may have led to the exclusion of pertinent studies in other languages. Moreover, the validity of the included evidence was not assessed using a standardized evaluation process. Nonetheless, narrative reviews remain valuable tools for summarizing and synthesizing extensive information on broad topics. Despite these limitations, the narrative review provides meaningful insights into how South African universities can implement strategies to address and prevent GBV on campuses.

Future Research

To enhance GBV prevention in higher education settings, future studies should explore the effectiveness of

integrated approaches that engage students, staff, and campus security in fostering safer university environments. It is equally vital to evaluate the impact of digital awareness initiatives, participatory visual methods, and peer-led interventions on transforming student attitudes and behaviors toward GBV. Universities are encouraged to establish dedicated GBV research units to produce evidence-based insights, evaluate the success of interventions, and guide policy improvements. Additional research should examine how incorporating GBV education into student orientation and academic programs influences knowledge of consent, mutual respect, and healthy relationships. These research units can also support continuous assessment, policy formulation, and the design of inclusive, survivor-focused responses that reflect the needs of diverse student communities.

List of abbreviations
DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training.
GBV: Gender-Based Violence.
PSET: Post-School Education and Training.
SLT: Social Learning Theory.
SRC: Student Representative Council.

Acknowledgments

Author Biography
Mr. Tiisetso Aubrey Chuene is a Primary Care Drug Therapy Pharmacist at the Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre at the University of Limpopo. Mr Chuene holds a Master of Public Health degree and is currently a PhD candidate in Public Health. His research interests are in Public Health, Pharmacy Practice, and Mental Health. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1976-146X
Ms. Mahlodi Phildah Maphakela is a Clinical Nurse Practitioner at the Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre at the University of Limpopo. Ms Maphakela holds a Master of Public Health degree and is currently a PhD candidate in Public Health. Her research niche focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention, Gender violence, and Mental Health. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3363-6174X
Ms. Sethepele Anastatia Phogole is a postgraduate student at the University of Limpopo and a Student Assistant at the Department of Student Health and Wellness Centre at the University of Limpopo. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2278-2459

Author contributions

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