Fighting gender-based violence at high schools in Thulamela Municipality

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DECLERATION

I personally declare that this research report is my own independent work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Management in Governance at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It was not on any occasion submitted formerly for any other degree or examination in any other University. Where I have used the work of other authors, I have properly acknowledged them and I have not copied any author or scholar‘s work with the intention of passing it off as my own. All the interviews and informal discussions that were conducted for the purposes of this research report have also been cited correctly and I did not pass off any of my participant’s work, suggestions and quotes as my own. I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else’s work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong. I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to correctly acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature.....Date.....16 July.....2025

Khathutshelo Andries Nethononda

DEDICATION

This research work is devoted to my lovely wife Mrs Nethononda Ailwei Salphinah. Throughout the research period she supported me through thick and thin. Her unswerving support made it possible for me to complete my research work. She has been there for me when I felt that I was overwhelmed and exhausted. I salute her for her colossal provision and the strengths she granted me. She is my rock, my pillar of strength and my world, without her it could be impossible to complete my research project.

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To this end, I would like my children to follow my paradigm in achieving better and quality education as they grow and even to surpass my educational achievements. The grade has been set for you, no limit in life.

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a persistent challenge in South African secondary schools, despite the presence of legal frameworks and policies designed to prevent it. This study investigates the effectiveness of GBV prevention mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province. Grounded in feminist theory which critiques power dynamics and patriarchal structures that sustain GBV, and interpretivism, which acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality, this study explores stakeholders' subjective experiences and perspectives. I argue that while policy frameworks exist, their implementation is weak due to inadequate stakeholder awareness, insufficient training, and systemic failures in enforcement. Findings revealed a significant disconnect between policy and practice, with many teachers and SGB members either unaware of existing GBV mechanisms or lacking the training needed for effective implementation. Although social workers displayed greater competence in addressing GBV cases, their limited presence in schools restrict their ability to provide sufficient support. Additionally, a culture of silence and victim-blaming emerged as key barriers, deterring survivors from reporting incidents due to stigma and institutional inaction. This study contributes both theoretically and practically by advancing discussions on GBV policy implementation in South African schools and highlighting the gap between legal frameworks and daily school practices. It underscores the urgent need for targeted training, stricter policy enforcement, and enhanced collaboration among schools, social services, and law enforcement agencies. Key recommendations include the introduction of comprehensive school-based GBV education programmes, greater accessibility to GBV policies, and institutional reforms to improve accountability in addressing GBV cases. Future research should examine the long-term effects of GBV interventions on learners' academic performance and well-being. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to efforts on the creation of safer, more equitable learning environments in South African schools.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and People Rights
CJCP	Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DDG	Deputy Director General
GBV	Gender Based Violence
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
LO	Life Orientation
NSSF	National School Safety Framework
POPIA	South African Protection of Personal Information Act
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SAPS	South African Police Services
SGB	School Governing Body
SGBV	School Gender Based Violence
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children Emergency Fund
VFR	Victim Friendly Rooms
WHO	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue within South African secondary schools, presenting a significant barrier to the realisation of safe and conducive learning environments (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks and policies designed to address GBV in schools, including the South African Schools Act (1996) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (2007), the implementation of these mechanisms remains inadequate. Schools continue to be sites where learners, particularly female students, experience various forms of GBV, including sexual harassment, bullying, and physical assault. Gender based violence in schools and outside school landscape tortures both males and females in general, although it affect mostly women and children.

The United Nations defines gender-based violence (GBV) as acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological harm that are rooted in entrenched gender norms, stereotypes, and unequal power relations (UNESCO, 2015). GBV affects a wide array of individuals, including students, educators, family members, and broader community members, with women and girls bearing the greatest burden. Despite extensive international efforts to combat GBV, it remains a pervasive and deeply embedded issue that manifests across various social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Historical and contemporary research highlights that GBV in schools is not a new phenomenon. Niehaus (2000) traces the presence of school-related GBV back to the 1950s, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where teachers were implicated as perpetrators against schoolgirls. A study conducted in Malawi by Heise (2002) further confirms that GBV is a global issue that violates fundamental human rights but remains underreported and inadequately addressed. The situation in South Africa reflects a similar pattern, with GBV escalating following the country's transition to democracy. In 2001, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund highlighted a disturbing observation, noting that incidents of assault, rape, and sexual violence increased in the post-apartheid era, raising concerns about the effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms in addressing these issues (UNICEF, 2001).

Statistics further demonstrate the severity of the problem in South Africa. A study conducted by Gender Links in 2012 found that 77% of women in Limpopo, 51% in Gauteng, 45% in the Western Cape, and 36% in KwaZulu-Natal had experienced some form of GBV. The study also revealed that men were the primary perpetrators, with 76% of men in Gauteng, 48% in Limpopo, and 41% in KwaZulu-Natal admitting to committing acts of GBV (Gender Links, 2012). The World Health Organisation classifies GBV as both a social crisis and a global health emergency, due to its devastating physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences (WHO, 2019).

Gender-based violence is driven by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and environmental factors. Scholars have identified key contributors, including poverty, alcohol consumption, the normalisation of violent masculinity, and structural inequalities that leave women and children particularly vulnerable (Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015; Hatcher, Stöckl, McBride, Khumalo, & Christofides, 2019). GBV manifests in various forms, ranging from rape, physical assault, and verbal abuse to economic deprivation, coerced sexual acts, child pornography, incest, bestiality, and necrophilia (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2020). Its pervasive and multifaceted nature underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, especially in environments meant to protect young people, such as schools.

Importantly, boys also experience victimisation by girls in schools. In response, boys often retaliate physically. In such cases, girls are typically the first to report the incidents to teachers, seeking safety and protection (Mitchell and Mothobi-Tapela, 2004; Ngidi and Moletsane, 2018). This suggests that boys are also victims of gender-based violence, although this form of violence is significantly underreported both within schools and to external stakeholders such as parents and the police. Research indicates that boys are often reluctant to report abuse by girls to teachers because they perceive themselves as part of a dominant group expected to be strong, resilient, and independent (Gqola, 2007). This reflects the influence of patriarchy in South African society, where boys are socialised to suppress their emotions and avoid appearing vulnerable. As a result, they often remain silent about their experiences of victimisation in an effort to preserve a sense of power and control.

Non-conformity to dominant heterosexual discourses often places vulnerable boys at risk of ongoing humiliation and marginalisation by both dominant male peers and female students (Izugbara, 2015). The Academy for Educational Development (AED, 2004) report on African

schools further highlights that although both boys and girls are subjected to violence, acts such as groping, bullying, verbal abuse, and rape are disproportionately experienced by girls and young women (Wible, 2004). While the report acknowledges that boys are also victims of gender-based violence, their experiences tend to be less frequent and less visible in comparison to those of girls.

This study investigates the effectiveness of mechanisms established to combat GBV in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province. By examining the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders, including teachers, school governing body (SGB) members, and social workers, the study provides an in-depth analysis of the gaps between policy and practice in the fight against GBV. The researcher argues that while South Africa has a robust legal and policy framework for addressing GBV, its effectiveness is undermined by weak implementation, insufficient training of educators and school administrators, and a lack of institutional accountability. The research highlights that many stakeholders remain unaware of the existing GBV policies or lack the necessary skills to enforce them effectively (see *Chapter 4*). In addition, the study uncovers a culture of silence and victim-blaming, where survivors of GBV fear reporting incidents due to the risk of retaliation and institutional inaction (see *Chapter 5*).

The study is framed within feminist theory, which interrogates how patriarchal structures and gendered power dynamics contribute to the persistence of GBV in schools. Feminist theory is particularly relevant in this context, as it provides a lens through which to understand ways in which male dominance, entrenched gender norms, and systemic inequalities perpetuate GBV in educational institutions. In addition, an interpretivist paradigm guides the study, recognising that the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders are shaped by their social and institutional contexts. This theoretical foundation informs the study's methodological choices and the interpretation of findings, as discussed in *Chapter 2*.

To investigate the effectiveness of GBV mechanisms in Thulamela secondary schools, the researcher employed a qualitative case study approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 participants, comprising 25 teachers, 15 SGB members, and 5 social workers. The selection of participants was guided by purposive sampling, ensuring that those directly involved in GBV prevention and response were included in the study. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data, identifying key patterns related to policy awareness,

implementation challenges, and stakeholder responses. As detailed in *Chapter 3*, the qualitative approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complexities surrounding GBV in schools, providing rich insights into both systemic failures and potential solutions.

The findings, discussed in *Chapters 4 and 5*, reveal a stark contrast between the formal policies designed to prevent GBV and their implementation at the school level. While social workers demonstrated a stronger understanding of GBV policies and intervention strategies, their limited presence in schools constrained their ability to provide adequate support. Teachers and SGB members, on the other hand, were largely unaware of or untrained in GBV policies, resulting in inconsistent and often ineffective responses to incidents. Moreover, the study highlights the role of broader social and cultural norms in perpetuating GBV, with some educators and community members exhibiting attitudes that normalise or excuse violence against women and girls.

This study makes both intellectual and practical contributions to the field of GBV prevention in South African schools. Intellectually, it extends debates on the implementation of GBV policies by providing empirical evidence on the disconnect between legal frameworks and everyday school practices. Practically, it highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions, including comprehensive teacher training, improved accessibility to GBV policies, and strengthened institutional accountability (see *Chapter 6*). The study concludes by identifying areas for future research, including the need for longitudinal studies that assess the long-term impact of GBV interventions on learners' academic performance and psychosocial well-being. Further research is also needed to explore the intersectionality of GBV, particularly how factors such as race, class, and disability shape experiences of violence in school settings. By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to combat GBV in South African schools and advance gender equality within the education sector.

1.2 Background to the study

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue in South Africa, underpinned by historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and patriarchal social norms. It manifests in various forms, including sexual harassment, physical assault, coercion, and emotional abuse, affecting individuals in homes, workplaces, and educational

institutions (Gouws, 2022). Schools, in particular, have increasingly become environments where gendered violence occurs. Learners, especially girls, are subjected to abuse by their peers, educators, and other authority figures (Burton and Leoschut, 2013).

School-based GBV includes peer-to-peer violence among learners as well as abuse perpetrated by members of School Governing Bodies and school staff. Its impact often extends beyond the school grounds, affecting surrounding communities. This underscores that GBV affects individuals regardless of age, race, or background. On a global scale, GBV is recognised as a significant barrier to educational access and success. It contributes to poor health outcomes, psychological trauma, and infringes on basic human rights (Dobbert, 1997). This highlights that GBV is not limited to one nation or group; rather, it is a widespread crisis with far-reaching consequences.

While girls are disproportionately affected, GBV also impacts boys, and it takes many forms including verbal abuse, bullying, and sexual assault. GBV is not restricted to physical or sexual harm. It also includes subtle forms of violence such as economically coerced sex, sexual harassment, degrading language that undermines self-worth, and the practice of assigning domestic chores to girls while others focus on academic tasks (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). These examples illustrate the pervasiveness of GBV across gender lines and social environments.

GBV arises from normative gender role expectations and the unequal distribution of power between genders within particular societal contexts (Bloom, 2008). In South Africa, the post-apartheid era has seen high levels of political and violent crime. As a result, violence such as assault, rape, and sexual abuse has become prevalent in schools (UNICEF, 2001). Social constructs of masculinity further exacerbate this trend, as men are often expected to embody traditional cultural norms. Ratele (2008) argues that men are not inherently violent but are socialised into specific gender roles that reinforce dominance and aggression.

Patriarchy and power imbalances are key contributors to GBV. Numerous studies identify gender inequality and discriminatory cultural practices as root causes (Abrahams et al., 1999; Jewkes, 2002; Sigsworth, 2009; Wood and Jewkes, 2001). The literature further recognises that GBV stems from a combination of individual, community, economic, cultural, and religious influences that interact at different levels of society (Krug et al., 2015).

Cultural practices such as lobola (bride price), ukuthwala (the abduction of girls for marriage), and virginity testing reinforce harmful gender norms. Some men misinterpret the payment of lobola as conferring ownership of their partners, which in turn fosters abuse within marriage (Ansell, 2001; Ludsin and Vetten, 2005). This perception is often expressed in statements such as "I paid lobola for you," used to justify controlling behaviour (Ludsin and Vetten, 2005). Ukuthwala, which involves abducting a girl for the purpose of marriage, has been practiced in certain African communities for generations (Nkosi, 2009; Kheswa and Hoho, 2014). In contemporary contexts, this practice often results in forced marriages without the girl's consent, constituting a form of gender-based abuse.

Abuse of power and authority also contributes significantly to GBV, especially when such power is used to control or exploit women and children. This is evident in cases of sexual abuse and coercion by those in positions of influence (Leach, 2001). Furthermore, patriarchy continues to define women as inferior to men, and this belief is perpetuated through religious and cultural systems (Frieslaar and Masango, 2021).

School-related GBV can be categorised into two main types. Explicit gender violence includes sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse, assault, and rape. Implicit gender violence comprises corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse, the unofficial use of students for unpaid labour, and other unauthorised behaviours that inflict harm (Akiba et al., 2002).

Although many countries have made strides toward achieving gender equality in education (Hyde, 2001), girls continue to encounter numerous obstacles that impede their academic progress. These include sex-based discrimination, unequal investment in education by governments, political instability, and poverty. GBV is especially prevalent in societies that hold traditional or conservative views about gender roles, often placing women in subordinate positions relative to men (Jewkes et al., 2002). Such beliefs are frequently used to rationalise violence against women (Heise et al., 2002). Buscher (2005) further argues that gender inequality fosters a culture of violence, particularly gender-based violence.

There is growing concern about the impact of GBV on the educational and emotional development of girls. If left unaddressed, sexual violence in schools can hinder learning, erode self-esteem, and increase vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and

AIDS. These outcomes, in turn, disrupt the education system and disproportionately affect girls' ability to attain their educational goals (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

A study conducted by the South African Medical Research Council across 23 schools and a sample of 14,776 learners revealed alarming statistics. Seventeen percent of students carried weapons, 41 percent had been victims of bullying, 14 percent belonged to gangs, 15 percent were forced into sexual acts, 19 percent had sustained injuries from physical fights, 32 percent felt unsafe in school environments, and 50 percent had experienced violence either as survivors or perpetrators. These findings underscore the severity of gender-based violence in South African schools, reinforcing the urgent need for effective intervention strategies. The prevalence of GBV in schools not only violates learners' rights to safety and dignity but also disrupts their education and overall well-being (Soudien, 2020).

1.3 Gender-based violence in South African schools

Despite a constitutional commitment to gender equality and the protection of children, South African schools continue to grapple with widespread incidents of GBV. Research indicates that many learners, particularly girls, face a heightened risk of sexual harassment and abuse within school environments (Jewkes, Gevers, Chirwa, Mahlangu, Shamu, Shai, & Lombard, 2019). A study by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) found that nearly one in five learners has experienced some form of sexual violence at school, with many cases going unreported due to fear, stigma, and institutional inaction (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). The persistence of GBV in schools is not only a reflection of broader societal norms, it is also indicative of systemic failures in implementing prevention and response mechanisms effectively (Sibanda-Moyo, Khonje & Brobbey, 2017).

Research conducted by Duru & Balkis (2018) highlights that school violence can take many forms, including ethnic harassment, intimidation, and gender-based discrimination, which create an unsafe environment for learners, particularly girls. The extent of the problem is alarming. A study by Burton (2008) found that out of 1.8 million learners between Grade 3 and Grade 12 in South Africa, approximately 15.3% had experienced some form of GBV. Further, a national survey conducted in 2012 revealed that 22.2% of secondary school learners had

encountered GBV within a 12-month period, amounting to more than one million students (1,020,597).

The school setting is a microcosm of society, reflecting the same structural inequalities that enable gendered violence in the broader South African context. Schools in rural areas, in particular, face significant challenges in preventing and responding to GBV due to factors such as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and a lack of access to social support services (Kabeer, 2014). In Limpopo Province, where schools often operate in socio-economically marginalised communities, these challenges are exacerbated by deep-seated cultural attitudes that normalise male dominance and female subordination, making it difficult to challenge GBV effectively (Jewkes et al., 2019).

1.4 Policy and legal frameworks

South Africa has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework aimed at addressing GBV, with specific measures targeting school-based violence. The *Children's Act* (No. 38 of 2005) and the *Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act* (No. 32 of 2007) provide legal protections for children against various forms of abuse, while the *National School Safety Framework* (Department of Basic Education, 2015) outlines specific guidelines for preventing and responding to violence in schools. Additionally, the *Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools* (2021) acknowledges the link between GBV, coercion, and teenage pregnancy, highlighting the need for comprehensive school-based interventions (Department of Basic Education, 2021).

Despite these policies, research has shown that implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in under-resourced schools (Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017). Many educators and school governing bodies (SGBs) lack awareness of existing GBV policies or do not receive sufficient training to implement them effectively (Gouws, 2022). Furthermore, weak enforcement mechanisms and a lack of accountability contribute to an environment where GBV is often ignored or trivialised, leaving survivors without adequate support (Soudien, 2020). The gap between policy and practice is particularly evident in rural schools, where institutional barriers further limit the ability to address GBV comprehensively (Jewkes el at., 2019).

1.5 Barriers to effective GBV prevention in schools

One of the most significant barriers to addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is the culture of silence and victim-blaming, which discourages survivors from reporting incidents. Many learners fear retaliation or disbelief from educators and school authorities, resulting in widespread underreporting and a lack of accountability for perpetrators (Jewkes et al., 2015). GBV is not a new phenomenon; it is a global pandemic that has existed for a long time, including within the South African context. Its roots can be traced to the colonial and apartheid eras, and it continues to persist in contemporary South Africa (Nichols, 1983).

During the colonial and apartheid periods, systemic discrimination and abuse were inflicted on individuals based on race, colour, language, and cultural background, with Black people, women, and children bearing the brunt of this oppression. The enduring legacy of colonialism and apartheid has contributed significantly to the prevalence and normalisation of GBV in present-day South Africa. This historical context has created a societal structure where violence and inequality remain deeply embedded.

Despite progressive legislative instruments such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996), which aspires to protect every individual's rights and dignity, GBV continues to be pervasive. Scholars such as Bhabha (2002) and Gqola (2001) have characterised the Constitution as aspirational, noting that while it provides hope, it has not yet fully realised the transformation needed to eliminate gender-based violence. Women and children continue to live in fear of being harassed, raped, assaulted, or killed, and are subjected to various forms of inequality and abuse.

Several factors contribute to the persistence of GBV in South African society. These include harmful cultural practices, rigid religious beliefs, societal silence, discriminatory laws and policies, and the widespread normalisation of violence. In many cases, those who publicly condemn GBV are themselves perpetrators, further complicating efforts to address the issue. Nair (2001) highlights the troubling case of former Deputy President Jacob Zuma's rape trial, which shocked the nation and revealed the complicity of political leaders who are expected to protect the rights of all citizens, particularly the vulnerable.

The entrenchment of GBV is also reinforced by dominant notions of masculinity and traditional gender roles that are sanctioned by society. Lorde (1984) notes that the silence of women and children in the face of abuse contributes to the ongoing perpetuation of violence. Men often use their positions of power to exert control over women and children, making GBV a gendered phenomenon in which men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators. While the government has taken steps toward addressing GBV through initiatives such as women's empowerment, these efforts have largely remained legislative rather than truly transformative (Ramphele, 1996; Yates and Gqola, 1998).

True empowerment must go beyond policy to fundamentally shift the structures that uphold gender inequality and violence. As Lewis (1992) argues, women and girls in South Africa are not safe in public spaces and live in constant fear of being raped, assaulted, kidnapped, harassed, or even killed. These lived realities demand more than surface-level interventions; they require deep societal transformation. To curb GBV effectively, South Africa must invest in gender-progressive strategies that economically empower women and dismantle patriarchal myths. Salo (2005a) emphasises that empowering women in meaningful and transformative ways can help shift societal attitudes, challenge entrenched gender norms, and undermine the delusions of power and entitlement that fuel violence against women and children.

This issue is compounded by deeply ingrained gender norms that normalise male aggression and position girls as responsible for avoiding harassment, rather than holding perpetrators accountable (Kabeer, 2014). In rural contexts, where traditional beliefs often play a central role in shaping social attitudes, these norms can be even more difficult to challenge (Mokwena, Mokwena, Van Der Heever, & Mokgatle, 2020).

Another critical barrier is the lack of training among educators and SGB members. While teachers are often expected to play a protective role in ensuring learner safety, studies indicate that many lack the necessary knowledge or skills to recognise and respond to GBV effectively (Soudien, 2020). In some cases, educators themselves have been implicated as perpetrators, further eroding trust in the school as a safe space for learners (Jewkes el at., 2019). Without targeted training on gender sensitivity and GBV prevention, schools will continue to struggle with enforcing policies meant to protect learners.

In addition, insufficient collaboration between schools, social services, and law enforcement agencies weakens institutional responses to GBV. While reporting protocols exist, a lack of follow-through from relevant authorities often leads to cases being dismissed or inadequately addressed (Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017). In many rural schools, social workers and counsellors are not readily available, leaving survivors without critical psychosocial support (Mokwena et al., 2020). Strengthening inter-agency coordination is therefore essential to ensuring that survivors receive the assistance they need and that perpetrators are held accountable.

1.6 Locating the study in Thulamela Municipality

Thulamela Municipality, situated in Limpopo Province, provides a critical context for examining the effectiveness of GBV prevention mechanisms in South African secondary schools. Rural schools in this region face unique challenges related to policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and social attitudes towards GBV (Kabeer, 2014). Given the high rates of GBV in South African schools and the documented weaknesses in policy enforcement, it is crucial to assess how schools in Thulamela navigate these challenges and what factors contribute to the success or failure of prevention strategies.

While previous research has examined GBV in South African schools broadly, there remains a gap in understanding how rural secondary schools implement GBV prevention mechanisms and what barriers hinder their effectiveness (Soudien, 2020). This study seeks to contribute to this discourse by critically assessing how educators, SGB members, and social workers engage with existing policies and what structural changes may be necessary to strengthen GBV prevention efforts in schools.

1.7 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive lens for understanding gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The selected theories: feminist theory, social ecological theory, and intersectionality theory, offer complementary insights into the structural, social, and institutional dimensions of GBV. These theories not only provide a framework for

understanding the causes and consequences of GBV in schools but also guide the analysis of the effectiveness of existing mechanisms in preventing and addressing such violence.

Feminist theory provides a critical foundation for understanding GBV as a manifestation of patriarchal power structures that reinforce gender inequality in schools and society at large (Connell, 2012). In South Africa, feminist scholars such as Gqola (2021) and Ratele (2015) argue that GBV is deeply embedded in historical and socio-cultural norms that normalise male dominance and female subordination. Schools, as microcosms of society, reflect these broader inequalities, with male teachers, male students, and sometimes even school administrators abusing their authority over female learners. From a feminist perspective, gender-based violence is not merely a series of isolated incidents but rather a systemic issue that results from entrenched gender hierarchies (Leach & Humphreys, 2007). Research has shown that teachers often use their positions of power to sexually harass and exploit female learners (Dunne, 2008). At the same time, institutional responses to GBV are often inadequate, as schools, police, and justice systems frequently dismiss or trivialise complaints, further silencing survivors (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Feminist theory also highlights the role of hegemonic masculinity in perpetuating GBV in schools. Connell (1995) describes hegemonic masculinity as a dominant cultural norm that glorifies male aggression and control, often leading to violence against women and gender non-conforming individuals. This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where gendered power relations in schools have been found to influence classroom dynamics, teacher-student relationships, and school governance structures (Harber, 2013). By applying feminist theory, this study explores how gendered power dynamics shape the occurrence of GBV in secondary schools, how schools as patriarchal institutions reinforce or challenge GBV, and the extent to which school-based interventions effectively address the power imbalances that sustain GBV.

While feminist theory focuses on power and structural inequalities, *social ecological theory* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) provides a multi-layered approach to understanding the different levels at which GBV is perpetuated and prevented. This theory is particularly useful in examining how individual, relational, community, and societal factors interact to either enable or mitigate gender-based violence in schools (Heise, 1998). At the individual level, learners and teachers bring their own experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about gender and violence into the school environment. Studies show that socialisation processes that normalise violence begin at an

early age, shaping how boys and girls view power, consent, and gender roles (Jewkes et al., 2015). At the relational level, relationships between teachers and students, among peers, and within families significantly influence the prevalence and reporting of GBV. Research indicates that perpetrators of school-related GBV often rely on the silence or complicity of others (Leach, 2014).

At the community level, schools do not exist in isolation but are embedded within communities that either reinforce or challenge gender-based violence. For example, community acceptance of corporal punishment, early marriages, or rigid gender norms can shape school policies and teachers' attitudes toward GBV (Berry, Biersteker, Dawes, Lake & Smith, 2013. At the societal level, national policies, laws, and media discourses influence how gender-based violence is framed and addressed. Although South Africa has progressive legal frameworks, implementation gaps remain (Burton & Leoschut, 2013), particularly in rural areas such as Thulamela Municipality. The social ecological framework is essential in this study because it allows for an analysis of GBV as a complex and interconnected issue rather than as isolated incidents. By using this theory, this research investigates how different social levels contribute to the occurrence of GBV in secondary schools, what barriers exist in implementing GBV prevention strategies at school, community, and policy levels, and how interventions can be designed to be more contextually relevant by addressing multi-level factors.

While feminist and social ecological theories provide a broad understanding of GBV in schools, *intersectionality theory* adds an important dimension by recognising that not all learners experience GBV in the same way. Intersectionality highlights how race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability intersect to create multiple layers of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). In South Africa, rural black female learners face heightened vulnerabilities to GBV due to economic marginalisation, limited access to justice, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that reinforce male dominance (Zulu, 2015). Research has shown that learners who belong to marginalised groups, such as LGBTQIA+ students, are also at an increased risk of violence and discrimination in schools, yet their experiences are often excluded from mainstream GBV interventions (Msibi, 2012).

Intersectionality is particularly useful in understanding why school-based GBV mechanisms may be ineffective for certain groups of learners. While policies and interventions may be designed to address GBV in general, they often fail to account for how overlapping forms of

discrimination create unique vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, a black female learner from a poor background in Thulamela may face not only gender-based violence but also economic and cultural barriers that prevent her from reporting abuse or seeking help. Comparably, a male learner who experiences GBV may be less likely to report it due to societal expectations of masculinity. This study employs intersectionality to examine how different forms of oppression interact in school environments and how GBV mechanisms can be improved to be more inclusive and responsive to diverse experiences.

In triangulating feminist theory, social ecological theory, and intersectionality theory, this study offers a comprehensive approach to analysing the effectiveness of GBV prevention mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. These theories complement each other, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how GBV occurs, how it is addressed, and how existing mechanisms can be strengthened to create safer educational environments for all learners.

1.8 Problem statement

Gender-based violence (GBV) in South African schools continues to be a pressing issue, severely undermining learners' rights to safety, dignity, and quality education. Schools, which should be safe spaces for learning and development, have instead become environments where many learners, particularly girls, face physical, sexual, and psychological violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). The persistence of GBV in schools not only violates fundamental human rights but also contributes to poor academic performance, increased dropout rates, and long-term psychological trauma among affected learners (Jewkes el at., 2019). Despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks such as the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (No. 32 of 2007), implementation challenges continue to hinder meaningful progress in eradicating GBV in schools (Department of Basic Education, 2015). The issue is particularly severe in under-resourced areas like Thulamela Municipality in Limpopo Province, where institutional capacity and stakeholder coordination remain weak (Kabeer, 2014).

South Africa has one of the highest rates of GBV globally, with Statistics South Africa (2019) reporting that one in three women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, with

many incidents occurring in school settings. Studies have highlighted the systemic failures in addressing GBV, including the lack of enforcement of protective laws, inadequate teacher training, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that normalise violence against women and girls (Gqola, 2021; Harber, 2013). Scholars such as Leach and Humphreys (2007) argue that GBV in schools is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, perpetuating cycles of violence that extend into broader society. In addition, research by Human Rights Watch (2001) found that many learners are discouraged from reporting abuse due to fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, and a lack of institutional support. The role of educators in this crisis is also concerning, as studies indicate that some teachers themselves are perpetrators of sexual violence, further eroding trust in schools as safe spaces (Dunne, 2008).

While existing research has been instrumental in identifying the prevalence and nature of GBV in schools, there is a significant gap in understanding the effectiveness of current prevention mechanisms, particularly in rural and resource-constrained environments. Much of the available literature has focused on urban school settings (Berry et al., 2013), leaving rural municipalities like Thulamela under-examined in terms of GBV policy implementation and intervention effectiveness. Moreover, while policy frameworks exist, there is limited empirical research assessing how these policies are operationalised at the school level and whether they effectively safeguard learners from violence (Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017).

In addition, studies focusing on the role of key stakeholders such as teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers, in responding to GBV in schools remain scarce. There is little research examining whether these stakeholders possess the necessary knowledge, training, and institutional support to implement GBV prevention measures effectively (Ncube, 2021). Protection Orders in South Africa: The Effectiveness of Implementation and Enforcement for Victims of Gender-based Violence. Moreover, most studies on GBV in schools have predominantly focused on female learners as victims, leaving gaps in understanding how GBV affects all learners, including male and gender non-conforming students (Soudien, 2020).

This study seeks to address these critical gaps by examining the effectiveness of GBV prevention mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality in the Limpopo province. It explores how educators, SGB members, and social workers understand and respond to GBV cases, the institutional challenges they encounter, and the broader structural barriers that hinder the success of existing interventions. By focusing on a rural context that

has received limited scholarly attention, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of GBV in South African schools. The findings will help inform policy improvements, enhance stakeholder training, and support the development of more context-specific interventions to create safer, more supportive school environments for all learners.

1.9 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of mechanisms designed to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province. Despite South Africa's progressive legal frameworks and policies, GBV remains widespread in schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Berry et al., 2013). The continued prevalence of school-related GBV suggests that prevention mechanisms may be ineffective, poorly implemented, or inadequately enforced, necessitating a critical assessment of their functionality at the school level.

This study explores how teachers, SGB members, and social workers engage with and implement GBV prevention strategies in secondary schools and identifies key barriers that hinder their effectiveness. While numerous studies have examined GBV in urban school settings (Dunne, 2008; Gqola, 2021), there remains a significant gap in research focusing on rural schools, where socio-cultural factors, patriarchal norms, and limited institutional resources may exacerbate vulnerabilities to GBV. By focusing on Thulamela Municipality, this study seeks to fill this gap and provide context-specific insights into the unique challenges faced by rural schools in preventing and responding to GBV.

Likewise, this research assesses the level of awareness, training, and capacity among key stakeholders; teachers, SGB members, and social workers, to prevent, identify, and respond to GBV cases effectively. Understanding whether these stakeholders possess the necessary knowledge, institutional support, and resources will help determine whether existing GBV prevention mechanisms are accessible and impactful, particularly within the rural education landscape.

1.10 Research questions

The study will be guided by the following main research question:
How effective are the existing mechanisms in combating gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province?

The following sub-questions will also be addressed:

1. How do teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers understand and respond to gender-based violence in secondary schools?
2. What are the key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of GBV prevention mechanisms in Thulamela secondary schools?
3. What improvements can be made to existing policies and interventions to enhance the effectiveness of GBV prevention in schools?

1.11 Research report outline

This research report is structured into six chapters, each building upon the previous to provide a comprehensive exploration of the effectiveness of mechanisms designed to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. In *Chapter one*, the researcher introduces the study by outlining the background and context of gender-based violence in South African secondary schools. He presents the research problem, highlighting the persistence of GBV in schools despite the existence of national policies and legal frameworks aimed at preventing it. The chapter also outlines the research questions and significance of the study. In addition, the researcher provides a brief discussion of the theoretical framework that underpins the study and introduce the structure of the report.

Chapter Two focuses on the research methodology. In this chapter, the researcher justifies the qualitative research approach and explain the interpretivist paradigm that guided my inquiry. The researcher describes the case study design and discuss the data collection methods, which included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. He also outline the sampling strategy and data analysis techniques, highlighting the use of thematic analysis. Ethical considerations are discussed in detail, given the sensitivity of the topic, and he engages in reflexivity to acknowledge his positionality as a researcher.

Chapter Three presents the first empirical analysis, focusing on participants' understanding of gender-based violence. Here, the researcher explores how teachers, school governing body (SGB) members, and social workers define and interpret GBV within school settings. He analyses their responses against existing literature, showing the extent to which their understandings align with or diverge from scholarly definitions. This chapter sets the foundation for understanding how different stakeholders perceive GBV, which is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of prevention mechanisms.

In *Chapter Four*, the researcher examines the mechanisms currently in place to combat GBV in schools and assess their effectiveness. Drawing from interview data and document analysis, he highlights gaps in policy implementation, stakeholder knowledge, and institutional responses to GBV incidents. The discussion reveals significant challenges, including limited accessibility to GBV policies, lack of training for teachers, and poor enforcement of school-based interventions.

Chapter Five shifts focus to the responses of different stakeholders in addressing GBV. The researcher critically examines the roles played by teachers, SGB members, and social workers in responding to reported cases of GBV. The findings indicate varying levels of awareness, engagement, and effectiveness, with social workers displaying the most structured and survivor-centred approach. However, he also highlights the challenges faced by social workers, particularly in terms of resource constraints and weak collaboration with schools.

In conclusion, in *Chapter Six*, the researcher brings together the main arguments and findings of the study in the conclusion. The researcher revisits the research aims and reflect on the key theoretical and methodological choices that guided the study. He then provide a discussion of the main findings as they relate to the research questions, demonstrating how the study contributes both intellectually and practically to the field. The chapter also offers recommendations for improving GBV prevention mechanisms in secondary schools and identifies areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Research methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to explore the effectiveness of mechanisms designed to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The study aimed to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders, including teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers, regarding the implementation and impact of GBV prevention strategies. To achieve this, a qualitative research approach was adopted, enabling an in-depth exploration of the social and institutional factors influencing GBV interventions in schools.

The chapter begins by discussing the research approach and philosophical underpinnings that guided the study, including the interpretivist paradigm and the constructivist epistemological stance. It then details the research design, justifying the use of a case study methodology to investigate GBV mechanisms in a real-world educational setting. This is followed by an explanation of the data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which were used to gather rich qualitative data from participants. The sampling strategy is also outlined, highlighting the use of purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience in GBV prevention and intervention.

In addition, the chapter describes the data analysis process, focusing on thematic analysis as the chosen method for identifying patterns and themes within the collected data. Issues of validity and reliability are addressed, with emphasis on data triangulation and member checking as strategies to enhance the credibility of the findings. Given the sensitivity of the study's focus, a comprehensive discussion on ethical considerations is provided, detailing measures taken to protect participants' confidentiality, ensure voluntary participation, and minimise potential psychological distress. Lastly, the chapter reflects on the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, acknowledging the potential influence of personal biases and familiarity with the research setting. The study's limitations are also critically examined,

recognising constraints related to sample size, geographical scope, and the contextual specificity of the findings.

2.2 Research approach

This research aims to capture the depth and complexity of stakeholder experiences with GBV mechanisms, contributing valuable insights to the ongoing efforts to prevent and address GBV in South African schools. This study adopts an interpretivist research approach to explore the complex dynamics of GBV mechanisms in schools. Interpretivism emphasises that reality is socially constructed and can only be understood through subjective experiences and interactions (Bryman, 2016). This perspective aligns with the study's objective of exploring how different stakeholders perceive and experience GBV prevention efforts within secondary schools.

Ontologically, the study adopts a relativist view, recognising that multiple realities exist and are shaped by individual experiences (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This ontological position justifies the use of an interpretivist approach, as it acknowledges that diverse perspectives must be explored to fully understand the effectiveness and challenges of GBV mechanisms in Thulamela Municipality. Epistemologically, the research is grounded in constructivism, which posits that knowledge is created through social interactions and is inherently influenced by context and experience (Crotty, 1998). This epistemological stance supports the collection of rich, qualitative data, allowing for an exploration of how stakeholders interpret and respond to GBV interventions in their schools.

2.3 Research design

This study employs a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for examining social phenomena within their natural context. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences through non-numerical data, providing a detailed exploration of participants' perspectives and behaviours (Creswell, 2013). A case study design allows for an in-depth examination of GBV mechanisms within secondary schools in Thulamela Municipality. According to Yin (2009), case studies are particularly effective when the boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. This approach enabled me to gather data

from multiple sources, including interviews and document analysis, to gain a holistic understanding of GBV mechanisms in the municipality.

2.4 Access to the research site and data collection process

Upon receiving ethical clearance from the Wits University School of Governance on 22 March 2022, the researcher formally requested permission to access the research site from the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education (DoE) on 25 January 2024 via email. This request sought access to all selected secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality for the purpose of conducting research interviews (see Appendix 11). On 5 and 6 February 2024, the Director of PR and R and the Deputy Director General (DDG) of Corporate Services granted official permission for access to all schools in Thulamela Municipality.

Following this approval, the researcher sent formal requests to various circuit managers to gain access to five selected schools: Tshilala Secondary School in Luvubu Circuit, Phaswana Secondary School and Raluswielo Secondary School in Sibasa Circuit, Tondalushaka Secondary School in Vhumbedzi Circuit, and Thohoyandou Technical High School in Thohoyandou Circuit. After receiving permission from the respective circuit managers, the researcher was granted access to interview teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members in each school. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the ethical clearance protocols established by the Wits School of Governance and the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education. Circuit managers further facilitated engagement with school principals and SGB members to coordinate interview schedules and ensure a smooth data collection process.

In addition to schools, the researcher sought permission to interview social workers from the Thulamela Social Development Department. A formal request was submitted via email, directed to the circuit manager, who responded positively on 13 February 2024, granting verbal approval to conduct interviews with social workers from the Mutale, Malamulele, and Thohoyandou circuits. Following this approval, the circuit manager provided a structured interview schedule with specific dates and locations for the interviews. The researcher subsequently contacted social workers via telephone to confirm interview slots in line with the provided schedule. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher adhered strictly to

the ethical protocols outlined by the Wits School of Governance and the Limpopo Department of Education.

After securing all permissions, engagement with participants proceeded smoothly, with minor logistical challenges that were effectively managed. The research purpose was clearly communicated to all participants, ensuring transparency and voluntary participation. The first set of interviews took place at Tshilala Secondary School in Luvuvhu Circuit, where teachers were well-prepared and cooperative. However, some SGB members initially expressed discomfort with audio recording, fearing that their statements might be used against them. After thorough clarification regarding confidentiality and the purpose of the study, they became more comfortable and participated freely. Subsequent interviews were conducted at Thohoyandou Technical High School in Thohoyandou Circuit, Phaswana and Raluswielo Secondary Schools in Sibasa Circuit, and Tondalushaka Secondary School in Vhumbedzi Circuit. Teachers and SGB members in these schools were approachable and cooperative, which facilitated effective data collection.

Interviews with social workers followed a similar pattern. The first interview was conducted at Mutale Circuit with a single social worker, and the session proceeded without any disruptions. The next set of interviews took place in Malamulele Circuit, where three social workers participated, engaging openly and sharing their experiences without hesitation. The final interviews were conducted in Thohoyandou Circuit, where a social worker provided valuable insights into gender-based violence (GBV) cases in schools.

Overall, the data collection process was successful, with participants demonstrating a clear understanding of the research purpose. The cooperation of teachers, SGB members, and social workers contributed to the richness and depth of the data collected. The ethical principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent were strictly upheld throughout the process.

2.5 Research methods

To investigate the effectiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, the study employed two primary qualitative research

methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These methods were selected to provide an in-depth exploration of both personal experiences and institutional frameworks, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in context.

2.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews. A total of 45 participants were interviewed, comprising 25 teachers, 15 SGB members, and 5 social workers from the five selected secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a balance between structured questions and open-ended prompts, enabling participants to provide detailed narratives of their experiences with GBV mechanisms.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were conducted in either English or Tshivenda, depending on the participants' preferences. The key focus areas of the interviews included stakeholders' roles in GBV prevention and response, perceptions of the effectiveness of existing mechanisms, challenges faced in implementing GBV interventions, and recommendations for improving GBV mechanisms in schools. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, allowing me to probe for further insights as necessary. According to Kvale (1996), semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for exploring sensitive topics like GBV, as they facilitate open, conversational engagement while maintaining researcher control over key discussion points. This approach yielded rich, detailed data, enhancing the study's ability to capture stakeholder perspectives on GBV prevention.

2.5.2 Document analysis

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted to provide contextual insights into policy frameworks and institutional guidelines governing GBV prevention. The documents reviewed included school policies on learner safety and GBV prevention, government reports on GBV in schools, and legislative frameworks such as the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) and the Domestic Violence Act (No. 116 of 1998). Document analysis provided an additional layer of evidence, helping to assess how GBV prevention efforts are designed and implemented within schools. This method also facilitated triangulation of findings, ensuring that data from interviews and documents corroborated one another.

Document analysis is recognised as a critical method in case study research, as it offers a broader perspective on the institutional and policy environment (Bowen, 2009). In this study, document analysis helped contextualise participants' experiences, linking their perceptions to broader legislative and policy frameworks on GBV prevention in South African schools.

2.6 Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants directly involved in GBV prevention initiatives. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that targets information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Participants were chosen based on their roles within the school system, including teachers responsible for student welfare and GBV response, SGB members involved in school governance and disciplinary processes, and social workers providing psychosocial support to survivors of GBV.

This sampling approach ensured that data was collected from individuals with direct knowledge and experience of GBV mechanisms in secondary schools. By including multiple stakeholder groups, the study was able to capture diverse perspectives on the effectiveness, challenges, and potential improvements of GBV prevention strategies. Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this study, as it prioritised depth over breadth, ensuring that the data collected was meaningful and directly aligned with the research objectives.

2.7 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected from interviews and document reviews. This method was chosen because it allows for a systematic and flexible approach to identifying patterns within qualitative data while remaining grounded in participants' perspectives. The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

To ensure a rigorous analysis, interview transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times to familiarise myself with the data. Recurring patterns and key ideas were identified and assigned initial codes. These codes were then examined for similarities and grouped into broader themes aligned with the study's research questions. Themes were further refined to ensure clarity, coherence, and meaningful representation of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Thematic analysis was selected for this study because of its suitability for exploring social phenomena, such as GBV, in an open and exploratory manner. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), thematic analysis enables researchers to capture both explicit and implicit meanings within qualitative data, making it particularly useful for studies that examine complex social issues. This approach allowed the research to generate an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of GBV mechanisms in secondary schools in Thulamela Municipality.

2.8 Validity and reliability

Validity in this study was ensured through data triangulation and member checking, both of which enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data triangulation was achieved by comparing findings from multiple sources, including interviews with teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers, as well as document analysis of relevant policies and guidelines. This approach strengthened the credibility of the findings by ensuring consistency across different data sources and reducing the risk of biased interpretations (Patton, 2015).

In addition, member checking was also employed as a validation strategy, allowing participants to review their interview transcripts to verify the accuracy of their responses and interpretations. This process minimised researcher bias and ensured that participants' perspectives were authentically represented in the analysis (Birt et al., 2016). By incorporating participant feedback, the study upheld trustworthiness and confirmability, which are critical in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Moreover, reliability was maintained through the use of a standardised interview guide, ensuring consistency across all interviews and enabling comparability of responses (Patton, 2015). Likewise, detailed documentation of the data collection and analysis processes was

maintained, enhancing transparency and reproducibility (Miles & Huberman, 2014). The study employed systematic coding and thematic categorisation, ensuring that findings were not based on individual interpretations but rather emerged from a structured and rigorous analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These measures collectively reinforced the dependability and confirmability of the research process.

2.9 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this study, which explores the effectiveness of mechanisms to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools, strict ethical protocols were followed to safeguard the dignity, rights, and well-being of all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Wits University School of Governance, ensuring that the study adhered to the fundamental ethical principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice (South African Department of Health, 2015; Wassenaar, 2006).

To uphold participants' autonomy and right to make informed decisions, all individuals involved in the study were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, objectives, methodology, and potential risks and benefits. The document also clearly stated participants' rights, including their right to voluntary participation without coercion, anonymity and confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any negative consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before participating in interviews, all participants were required to provide written informed consent, confirming that they understood the research objectives and agreed to participate willingly. Special attention was given to ensuring that consent was both informed and voluntary, particularly for participants who may have had personal experiences related to GBV.

Strict confidentiality protocols were maintained throughout the study to protect participants' identities and sensitive information. To ensure anonymity, group codes were assigned to all participants, and no identifying details such as names, schools, or specific locations are disclosed in the final research report (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). All audio recordings and interview transcripts are securely stored in password-protected electronic files and locked physical storage, accessible only to the researcher. Over and above, raw data will be securely retained for a designated period, as per ethical guidelines, after which it will be

permanently deleted or destroyed to prevent unauthorised access (South African Protection of Personal Information Act [POPIA], 2013). Given the emotional and psychological impact that discussions of GBV may have, participants were given the option to decline answering any question that made them feel uncomfortable (Birt et al., 2016).

2.9.1. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a critical aspect of this study, given the subjective nature of qualitative research and the sensitive focus on gender-based violence (GBV). The researcher, a Black African male, conducted interviews with various stakeholders in Thulamela Municipality, including educators, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers. All participants were also Black African and Tshivenda-speaking.

There was no possibility of racial discrimination influencing the research process, as both the researcher and participants shared the same racial and linguistic background. However, the researcher acknowledged that his gender identity could potentially introduce unconscious bias, particularly during interactions with female participants. To mitigate the risk of gender-based bias or stereotyping, the researcher applied principles of gender mainstreaming throughout the study. This approach promoted gender equality and supported the collection of balanced and unbiased data.

The researcher's Christian beliefs also had the potential to influence personal interactions, especially in contexts where participants may hold different religious views. To avoid any form of religious intimidation or discomfort, the researcher maintained a position of religious neutrality. This ensured that all participants felt respected and included, regardless of their faith.

The age of the researcher did not negatively affect the interview process, as all participants were over the age of 18. This helped create an environment free from power imbalances or hierarchical barriers that might otherwise inhibit open dialogue.

Conducting research in Thulamela Municipality, where the researcher is both a community member and a scholar, required ongoing self-awareness to minimise bias and maintain objectivity. Familiarity with some participants helped build trust and rapport, but it was

essential for the researcher to maintain a clear distinction between his personal identity and his role as a researcher. This separation was crucial in preventing undue influence on participants' responses.

To ensure that participants' perspectives shaped the research process, the researcher used open-ended, non-leading interview questions. This approach allowed participants to express themselves freely and reflect their lived experiences, rather than responding to the researcher's expectations (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Maintaining the authenticity of participants' narratives was central to the study, especially given the power dynamics associated with researching sensitive topics such as GBV. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of the responses. Special care was taken in translating interviews conducted in Tshivenda into English to retain both meaning and context (Regmi, Naidoo and Pilkington, 2010). Language did not present a barrier, as most educators and social workers were proficient in English, while SGB members preferred Tshivenda. The researcher's fluency in both languages allowed for accurate translation and interpretation before the data were coded and analysed.

Working in a familiar environment required consistent self-reflection to ensure personal relationships did not compromise the credibility of the findings. Engaging in reflexive practice helped the researcher manage personal biases and maintain the focus on participants' voices (Berger, 2015). Through a commitment to fairness, neutrality, and transparency, this reflexive approach enhanced the overall trustworthiness and reliability of the research findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

2.10 Limitations of the study

As with any research, this study had limitations that must be acknowledged. The qualitative approach provided an in-depth understanding of GBV mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, but its contextual nature means that findings cannot be generalised to all schools in Limpopo Province or South Africa (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The experiences and challenges identified are specific to the socio-cultural and educational environment of Thulamela, and while they offer valuable insights, they do not necessarily reflect broader trends.

A key limitation was the geographical scope, as the study focused solely on secondary schools in Thulamela Municipality. While this provided rich, localised insights, it does not account for regional variations in GBV interventions across different municipalities or provinces. Socio-economic conditions, school policies, and community attitudes may influence the effectiveness of GBV mechanisms differently elsewhere, requiring caution when applying these findings beyond the studied area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The sample size comprising 25 teachers, 15 SGB members, and 5 social workers, was sufficient for qualitative inquiry but limited in broader representativity. While qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, a larger or more diverse sample might have revealed additional perspectives on GBV prevention and intervention strategies (Patton, 2015). The study's reliance on self-reported experiences also presents the challenge of subjectivity, as participants' responses were shaped by personal experiences, social norms, and institutional constraints (Berger, 2015). Although data triangulation through document analysis was employed to enhance credibility, findings remain influenced by participants' perspectives.

As a researcher from Thulamela Municipality, his familiarity with the region posed a potential limitation, as prior knowledge could have subtly influenced interpretation. While efforts were made to maintain objectivity and neutrality, the possibility of subconscious bias cannot be entirely ruled out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the sensitive nature of GBV may have led some participants to withhold details or self-censor responses, despite confidentiality assurances (Birt et al., 2016). Given the stigma surrounding gender-based violence, there is always a risk that responses were framed in ways that align with socially acceptable narratives rather than full lived realities.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into GBV prevention mechanisms in Thulamela's secondary schools. The findings provide a strong foundation for further research on strengthening GBV interventions in South African schools. Future studies could address these limitations by conducting comparative research across multiple municipalities, increasing sample diversity, and incorporating longitudinal data collection to track changes in GBV prevention efforts over time.

CHAPTER 3

The understanding of the meaning of gender-based violence

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher explores how teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, understand gender-based violence (GBV). Given the alarming prevalence of GBV in South African schools, it is essential to examine how those responsible for school governance and learner safety define, interpret, and respond to this issue. Their conceptualisation of the nature, causes, and manifestations of GBV directly influences the effectiveness of school-based prevention and intervention efforts. While policies and awareness campaigns provide frameworks for addressing GBV, individuals' personal beliefs, cultural norms, and lived experiences often shape how these frameworks are understood and applied in school settings.

The argument pursued in this chapter is that although teachers and SGB members generally recognise GBV as a serious issue, their understanding is not always comprehensive or aligned with policy definitions. Some participants view GBV narrowly as physical violence, particularly men abusing women, while others acknowledge it is psychological, emotional, and economic dimensions. Likewise, while some recognise GBV as a systemic problem rooted in power inequalities, others perceive it as a private matter rather than a broader social concern. These variations in understanding have direct implications for how GBV is addressed in schools.

The researcher begins by examining how teachers and SGB members define GBV, comparing their perspectives with academic and policy definitions. He then explores the different forms of GBV identified by participants, with a focus on how these acts occur within secondary schools, from physical violence and sexual harassment to verbal abuse and discriminatory practices. Lastly, the researcher investigates where participants acquire their knowledge of GBV, whether through formal education, media, professional training, or personal experiences. By weaving together these perspectives, this chapter provides insight into how conceptual understandings of GBV shape ways in which it is recognised and addressed in schools.

3.2 Gender-based violence: Perspectives of teachers and SGB members

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive social issue that manifests in physical, psychological, economic, and sexual abuse, often fuelled by gendered power imbalances and societal norms (UNESCO, 2015). The way in which educators and School Governing Body (SGB) members conceptualise GBV is particularly important, as their perceptions influence how they recognise, respond to, and intervene in GBV incidents within schools. Findings from this study suggest that teachers and SGB members in Thulamela Municipality generally have a clear understanding of GBV, which they attribute to exposure to media, community discussions, and educational subjects like Life Orientation. While many of their definitions align with academic literature and policy frameworks, some participants provided narrower interpretations that focused predominantly on physical violence, overlooking the broader psychological, economic, and structural dimensions of GBV.

3.3 Perspectives of teachers on gender-based violence

Participants in this study primarily conceptualised GBV as violence directed at individuals based on their gender, with a strong focus on violence against women. Teacher 1, for instance, defined GBV through a deeply personal account:

> Yes, as I have experienced it in our own family, my grandparents were killed, and the perpetrators were arrested but released, and when someone abuses us women based on our gender as women or females (T1).

This response highlights not only a personal connection to GBV but also a broader critique of systemic failures in addressing gender-based crimes. Teacher 1's statement reflects the well-documented weaknesses of the justice system, where perpetrators of GBV frequently evade accountability, reinforcing a climate of impunity (Heise, 2011). In South Africa, where conviction rates for GBV-related crimes remain low, many survivors and affected families lose faith in the legal system, leading to underreporting and normalisation of violence (Tholaine, & Calvino, 2022). Despite progressive legislation such as the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (No. 32 of 2007) and the Domestic Violence Act (No.

116 of 1998), gaps in enforcement continue to undermine the protection of survivors (Mailula, 2022).

Beyond legal failures, Teacher 1's definition also reflects the structural and gendered nature of GBV. The European Institute for Gender Equity (2022) defines GBV as a systemic issue rooted in gender inequity and power imbalances, an idea evident in Teacher 1's assertion that women are targeted solely because of their gender. This perspective aligns with Jewkes et al. (2015), who argue that GBV is perpetuated by patriarchal structures that legitimise male dominance while reinforcing female subordination. South African statistics on femicide, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment in schools indicate that women and girls remain disproportionately affected by GBV, further reinforcing the gendered nature of the crisis (Gouws, 2022).

Teacher 1's account also points to the intergenerational impact of GBV, where family trauma influences individual perceptions of safety, justice, and gender relations. Mailula (2022) highlights how experiences of violence shape both survivors' and communities' long-term attitudes toward gender-based oppression. In South Africa, marginalised communities are particularly vulnerable, as historical inequalities, socio-economic hardships, and weak institutional support systems exacerbate the risks of GBV persistence across generations (Berry et al., 2013).

In addition, Teacher 1's statement reveals the intersection between personal experience and broader societal discourse on GBV. While media platforms and educational programmes have increased awareness of GBV, lived experiences carry emotional weight that shapes individual and collective responses. According to Gouws (2022), GBV is not merely an individual struggle but a collective social issue, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality, systemic violence, and state inaction. Teacher 1's response, therefore, provides a first-hand illustration of how justice system failures, structural inequality, and personal trauma intertwine, in the end shaping perceptions of GBV and the urgency of interventions.

Another participant, Teacher 8, provided a more nuanced perspective, stating:

> Yes, it is when there is violence between women and men; as a result, it affects their lives in negative ways, and it is a violent prompt to any person

> based on gender, especially women by men. This is so because men are more dominant than women (T8).

This response acknowledges both the gendered nature of GBV and the broader social consequences of violence. Teacher 8 highlights male dominance as a driving factor behind GBV, aligning with UNESCO (2017), which asserts that GBV is often fuelled by entrenched gender norms that reinforce male power and female subordination. This recognition of power imbalances is crucial, as scholars argue that GBV is not merely an interpersonal issue but a reflection of broader systemic inequalities (Jewkes et al., 2015). Teacher 8's understanding aligns with feminist and human rights discourses, which emphasise the structural and ideological roots of GBV, rather than framing it as isolated acts of violence (Gouws, 2022).

While most participants focused on violence against women, some acknowledged that men can also be victims of GBV. Teacher 6, for example, defined GBV as:

> It is all about physical power and wives and husbands fighting. Yes, it is when people hurt one another, and it can be a woman abusing men or men abusing women (T6).

This response suggests an awareness that GBV affects both genders, yet it primarily frames GBV in terms of physical violence and interpersonal conflict. The use of terms like 'fighting' implies a mutual exchange of violence, which risks misrepresenting GBV as an issue of individual conflict rather than a structural problem linked to gendered power relations. This perspective aligns with Bloom (2008), who defines GBV as encompassing physical, emotional, and economic abuse, often rooted in unequal power dynamics between genders. However, Teacher 6's emphasis on reciprocal violence diverges from broader feminist and human rights frameworks, which highlight that GBV is primarily a tool of oppression rather than an equal struggle between genders (Kruger, 2011).

The findings reveal a complex and varied understanding of GBV among teachers, reflecting both structural and individualised interpretations of the issue. While some participants recognised GBV as gendered violence disproportionately affecting women, their conceptualisations ranged from systemic critiques of patriarchal oppression to narrow definitions focusing on physical abuse. This variation underscores the broader societal

discourse on GBV, where legal, cultural, and social narratives shape individual perceptions and responses (Jewkes et al., 2015; Gouws, 2022).

A key theme emerging from the data is the link between GBV and systemic failures, particularly the role of weak legal enforcement in perpetuating a culture of impunity. This aligns with feminist critiques that argue GBV is sustained not only by individual acts of violence but by institutional inaction and socio-political structures that normalise gendered harm (Tholaine, & Calvino, 2022; Mailula, 2022; Gqola, 2015). Teachers who framed GBV as a broader social crisis rather than isolated incidents demonstrated a more critical engagement with the issue, reinforcing the argument that GBV must be understood as a structural problem requiring systemic interventions.

However, not all participants viewed GBV through a structural or feminist lens. Some responses reflected individualistic and depoliticised interpretations, framing GBV as mutual conflict between men and women rather than a product of entrenched gender inequalities. This perspective aligns with mainstream narratives that dilute the power dynamics inherent in GBV, often reducing it to generalised violence rather than a mechanism of gendered control (Bloom, 2008). Such understandings risk minimising the root causes of GBV and may weaken efforts to implement effective school-based interventions, reinforcing the need for educator training on the systemic dimensions of gendered violence (Kruger, 2011).

Over and above, while some participants acknowledged the intersection of GBV with social hierarchies, economic inequalities, and cultural norms, others maintained narrower perspectives that emphasised only physical and sexual violence. This omission of psychological, emotional, and economic abuse is significant, as research shows that non-physical forms of GBV can be just as damaging as overt acts of violence, particularly within educational settings (UNESCO, 2017). The absence of a holistic understanding suggests that schools may not be fully equipped to address the diverse and intersecting forms of GBV experienced by learners.

These findings reinforce the central argument of this chapter: that while educators play a critical role in identifying and addressing GBV, their understanding of the issue directly influences the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies. The presence of both structural and limited interpretations within the dataset highlights the need for sustained engagement with

gendered power relations in education, ensuring that GBV interventions go beyond punitive responses to include transformative approaches that challenge patriarchal norms and institutional complicity. Ultimately, these insights suggest that closing the gap between policy frameworks and everyday school practices requires a shift in how GBV is conceptualised, moving from an individualised problem to a systemic issue embedded in broader social inequalities.

3.4 Perspectives of SGB members on gender-based violence

School Governing Body (SGB) members demonstrated an understanding of gender-based violence (GBV), though their definitions often emphasised specific aspects of school-related violence. Their perspectives reflected a recognition of verbal abuse, discrimination, bullying, and sexual violence, yet at times, the gendered nature of GBV was not explicitly acknowledged. This aligns with research indicating that stakeholders in educational settings may conceptualise GBV in ways that prioritise certain visible forms of violence while overlooking its structural and systemic dimensions (Dunne, Humphreys, & Leach, 2006).

SGB Member 3 highlighted verbal abuse and discrimination as central elements of GBV, stating:

> Examples of GBV are when learners insult each other and discriminate against other learners based on their sexuality. They call them names, exclude them from groups, and make them feel like they do not belong. Some even face threats or violence just because they are different, and teachers do not always intervene to stop it (SGB 3).

This response underscores the importance of emotional and psychological harm as aspects of GBV, aligning with research by Mirsky (2003), which argues that GBV extends beyond physical violence to include verbal harassment, intimidation, and psychological abuse. Discrimination based on sexuality, as mentioned by SGB Member 3, is particularly significant, as studies show that LGBTQIA+ learners face heightened risks of bullying, exclusion, and violence in school settings (Msibi, 2012). In South Africa, despite constitutional protections against discrimination, homophobia and gender non-conforming stigma remain prevalent in

schools, leading to mental health challenges, disengagement from learning, and increased dropout rates (Francis & Reygan, 2016).

SGB Member 4 expanded on the theme of verbal abuse, adding:

> When learners attack each other, they insult others based on their background and insult other learners about their parents. This creates divisions among students, making some feel inferior or excluded. It leads to tension in the school environment, and sometimes, these insults turn into physical fights because learners feel disrespected (SGB 4).

This response highlights how discriminatory practices and bullying form part of school-related GBV. However, the lack of explicit reference to gender dynamics suggests a broader conceptualisation of violence, rather than one specifically centred on gendered power relations. Kennedy and Bennett (2006) support this perspective, noting that GBV in schools often includes verbal harassment, exclusion, and intimidation, particularly against girls and marginalised groups. Yet, failure to frame such violence within gendered social structures risks minimising its root causes and the ways in which power imbalances shape victimisation patterns (Dunne et al., 2006).

Some SGB members explicitly acknowledged sexual and physical violence as central components of GBV. SGB Member 5 stated:

> Touching girls' private parts, using weapons to hurt others, and some minor cases (SGB 5).

This response aligns with global and South African research on school-related GBV, which identifies sexual harassment, coercion, and assault as some of the most common and harmful forms of violence experienced by learners (UNICEF, 2001; Plan International, 2013). Studies show that girls in particular are vulnerable to unwanted touching, sexual exploitation, and coercion by both peers and educators, with such experiences negatively affecting their academic performance, school attendance, and psychological well-being (Harber & Mncube, 2015)

Likewise, the reference to the use of weapons in acts of violence reflects concerns about escalating school violence in South Africa, where some learners are subjected to physical aggression, gang-related conflicts, and other forms of brutality (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). This aligns with UNESCO's (2015) definition of GBV, which includes coercion and the use of force as mechanisms through which gendered violence is enacted. The phrase 'some minor cases', however, suggests potential normalisation of violence, highlighting how certain acts may be downplayed or perceived as routine rather than serious forms of GBV. Leach, Dunne, and Salvi (2014), suggest that in school environments where GBV is prevalent, there is often a desensitisation to certain forms of violence, making it more difficult to challenge and prevent

Although SGB members acknowledged different manifestations of GBV, some definitions lacked explicit engagement with the gendered power relations that underpin such violence. This reflects findings by Jewkes et al. (2015), who argue that while violence in schools is widespread, it is often depoliticised and discussed as general aggression rather than a symptom of entrenched gender inequalities. In South Africa, research indicates that school-based GBV is strongly linked to patriarchal attitudes, social norms that tolerate violence, and systemic failures to protect vulnerable learners (Gouws, 2022). By focusing primarily on verbal harassment, physical fights, and bullying, some participants' perspectives reflect a broader tendency to frame GBV as a general school discipline issue rather than a structural gendered problem.

Nonetheless, the identification of sexual violence by some SGB members suggests an awareness of the more severe and explicitly gendered forms of GBV. This aligns with Plan International (2013), which states that addressing GBV in schools requires recognising how different forms of violence intersect, particularly in terms of sexual abuse, bullying, and discriminatory practices. Moreover, Francis and DePalma (2014) argue that effective GBV interventions must consider how power, gender norms, and institutional cultures influence the ways in which violence is defined, reported, and addressed within schools.

3.5 Forms and manifestations of gender-based violence in schools

Gender-based violence (GBV) in schools manifests in multiple, interconnected ways, including physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as verbal abuse and discriminatory

practices deeply rooted in gender norms. Understanding these forms is crucial in identifying the extent of GBV and formulating effective interventions within school environments. The findings from this study indicate that teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members in Thulamela Municipality recognise multiple manifestations of GBV, with a strong emphasis on physical violence and sexual harassment. However, there is a notable gap in acknowledging more subtle yet equally damaging forms, such as economic abuse, coercive control, and institutionalised discrimination. This suggests that while GBV is widely recognised, dominant understandings remain focused on visible, overt acts of violence, often neglecting the broader structural and systemic forces that sustain gendered inequalities in schools.

Participants most commonly identified GBV in terms of physical violence, reflecting a broader societal tendency to equate violence with its most tangible forms. Teacher 6 described GBV as:

> All about physical power and wives and husbands fighting, where one tries to control the other. It happens when there is no respect, and instead of talking, people use violence to solve their problems. This kind of behaviour affects children too because they grow up thinking it is normal (T6), and further elaborated that:
>
> It is when people hurt one another, and it can be a woman abusing men or men abusing women (T6).

This conceptualisation suggests an understanding of GBV that is primarily situated within the context of domestic relationships, overlooking its pervasiveness in school settings. While physical violence undeniably forms part of GBV, framing it as a reciprocal dynamic between men and women risks obscuring the structural power imbalances that make women and girls disproportionately vulnerable. The emphasis on physicality also neglects other insidious forms of gendered harm, such as coercion, intimidation, and psychological abuse, which, although less visible, can be equally damaging. Research by UNESCO (2015) and Plan International (2013) highlights that GBV extends beyond direct physical harm to encompass various forms of social control, discrimination, and emotional violence that limit individuals' opportunities and reinforce unequal gender relations.

Beyond physical violence, sexual violence emerged as another key concern among participants. SGB Member 5 noted that GBV includes:

> Touching girls' private parts, using weapons to hurt others, and some minor cases. These things happen in schools, and sometimes learners are too scared to report them. Some perpetrators get away with it because there is no proper follow-up, and victims feel like nothing will change even if they speak out (SGB 5).

This response acknowledges the prevalence of sexual harassment in schools, particularly in the form of unwanted physical contact, yet the phrase "some minor cases" raises concerns about the potential minimisation of certain forms of sexual violence. The normalisation of sexual harassment in schools is well-documented in South Africa, with research by UNICEF (2001) and Leach (2003) indicating that male teachers and older male students frequently exploit their power to sexually harass and coerce female learners. The reference to weapons in SGB Member 5's response further suggests that GBV in Thulamela Municipality is not limited to coercion but may also involve physical threats, reinforcing the climate of fear that often prevents survivors from reporting abuse.

Despite recognising sexual violence, participants did not fully engage with the psychological consequences of such experiences, nor did they address the systemic barriers that enable perpetrators to act with impunity. Plan International (2013) argues that sexual violence in schools significantly hinders girls' education, leading to absenteeism, early dropout, and long-term trauma, highlighting the need for interventions that go beyond punishment and focus on dismantling the gendered power structures that allow such violence to persist.

Verbal abuse also emerged as a significant form of GBV, particularly in the form of gendered insults and discriminatory remarks. SGB Member 3 observed:

> Examples of GBV are when learners insult each other and discriminate against other learners based on their sexuality. They call them names, exclude them from groups, and make them feel like they do not belong. Some even face threats or violence just because they are different, and teachers do not always intervene to stop it (SGB 3).

This response highlights how GBV is often enacted through language, reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusionary practices that marginalise certain groups. The use of verbal

harassment as a means of enforcing gender norms is well-documented. Kruger (2011) argue that sexist and homophobic insults are deeply embedded in school cultures, making them difficult to challenge. UNESCO (2017) further asserts that verbal abuse contributes to a hostile school environment that discourages equal participation in education and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. The specific mention of sexuality-based discrimination by SGB Member 3 is particularly significant in the South African context, where LGBTQIA+ learners remain highly vulnerable to verbal and physical harassment. Despite legal protections, Francis and Reygan (2016) found that homophobic bullying is often dismissed or ignored by teachers, reflecting the broader societal marginalisation of queer identities. The findings suggest that while educators and SGB members acknowledge verbal abuse as a form of GBV, there is limited engagement with the systemic nature of such violence and how it perpetuates gender inequalities in schools.

Psychological violence emerged as a significant yet less explicitly recognised form of GBV within schools, encompassing intimidation, coercion, and the use of fear to control or oppress individuals based on their gender. Although participants did not frequently highlight this dimension, responses from some teachers and SGB members suggested an awareness of the psychological consequences of GBV, even if not explicitly framed as such. Teacher 8 acknowledged the broader impact of violence, stating:

> Violence between women and men affects their lives in negative ways, leading to stress, fear, and broken families. It causes emotional pain, makes people feel unsafe, and affects how they relate to others. Sometimes, it even stops people from focusing on their work or studies because they are always worried about what might happen next (T8).

This statement, while general, recognises that the consequences of GBV extend beyond immediate physical harm. Psychological violence in schools often manifests in the form of threats, manipulation, and the exertion of power dynamics to control learners, particularly girls and marginalised groups. Kennedy and Bennett (2006) argue that school-related GBV frequently operates in subtle but deeply damaging ways, with male-dominated school cultures reinforcing gender hierarchies, limiting female learners' agency, and creating an environment in which gender inequality is normalised. In many instances, psychological violence is embedded in daily school interactions, where girls are subjected to social control through restrictive norms, exclusionary practices, and the fear of reprisal should they resist dominant

gender expectations. This kind of violence, though less overt, has lasting implications, as it conditions learners to accept unequal power relations as natural, thereby reinforcing cycles of gendered oppression.

Although participants demonstrated an awareness of physical, sexual, and verbal violence, there was a notable absence of discussion on economic and institutional GBV. Economic GBV in schools can take various forms, including the coercion of female learners into transactional relationships, financial exploitation by educators, and the economic marginalisation of girls through discriminatory educational practices (Leach et al., 2014). Institutional GBV, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which school policies, disciplinary measures, and broader educational structures reinforce gendered inequalities. Mailula (2022 argues that schools are not neutral spaces but are often complicit in sustaining patriarchal norms that disadvantage female learners and limit their access to equal opportunities. The lack of recognition of these dimensions among participants suggests that economic and institutional forms of GBV may be less visible or less understood, particularly in under-resourced schools where gendered power dynamics are deeply entrenched. The omission of these critical aspects underscores the need for a more comprehensive framework in GBV education, ensuring that teachers and SGB members are equipped to recognise and address the full spectrum of gendered violence in schools.

The findings indicate that while teachers and SGB members in Thulamela Municipality recognise multiple forms of GBV, their understanding remains largely confined to its most visible manifestations, namely physical and sexual violence. The emphasis on these forms, while important, risks obscuring more insidious and systemic forms of GBV that shape everyday school experiences, such as verbal harassment, economic coercion, and institutional complicity. This reflects the broader argument of the chapter: that GBV in schools is not simply a collection of isolated incidents but a deeply embedded structural issue that must be addressed through systemic change. A critical gap in participant responses is the failure to fully engage with the intersectional nature of GBV, particularly how race, class, sexuality, and disability shape different experiences of gendered violence. Gouws (2022) highlights that effective GBV interventions must go beyond punitive measures and focus on transforming the underlying social norms and power structures that enable violence to persist. Schools, as sites of both learning and socialisation, have a crucial role to play in challenging gendered inequalities, but

this requires a shift in how GBV is conceptualised, from an individualised problem to a systemic issue embedded in broader social structures.

3.6 Sources of knowledge and awareness about gender-based violence

Understanding the sources of knowledge and awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) is crucial in evaluating how teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members conceptualise and respond to GBV in schools. The findings of this study indicate that participants acquire their understanding of GBV from multiple sources, including media platforms, formal education, personal experiences, and professional training. These sources shape their perceptions and influence how they engage with GBV-related issues within school environments. However, while media and informal discussions contribute significantly to awareness, the study reveals gaps in structured training and policy knowledge, which may limit the effectiveness of interventions in schools.

A significant number of participants reported that their awareness of GBV stems from widespread discussions on various media platforms, including television, radio, and social media. Teacher 1, for example, highlighted the role of media in increasing public awareness:

> GBV is publicly spoken about on radio, social media, TV, LO subjects, homes, public spaces, and other platforms, but even though people talk about it, the problem is still there. Some listen and learn, but others ignore it, and in some cases, nothing really changes because the violence continues in secret (T1).

This response suggests that mass media plays a critical role in shaping public discourse on GBV, providing a platform for high-profile cases, advocacy campaigns, and policy discussions that contribute to general knowledge. Makhetha (2021) supports this finding, noting that media coverage has played a crucial role in raising awareness and shifting public attitudes towards gender-based violence in South Africa. Similarly, the European Institute for Gender Equity (2022) argues that social media activism has increased visibility around GBV, mobilising communities to demand policy changes and justice for survivors.

However, while media sources provide valuable information, they do not always offer in-depth knowledge about school-specific manifestations of GBV or the legal frameworks designed to address it. Studies indicate that media narratives often focus on extreme cases of GBV, such as femicide and high-profile sexual assault cases (Motsei, 2007, Gqola, 2015; Tlhabi, 2017), without adequately addressing the everyday forms of gendered violence that occur in schools, such as harassment, discrimination, and psychological abuse (Prinsloo, 2009, Motsaathebe, 2023). This suggests that while media contributes to general awareness, it does not necessarily equip educators with the practical skills needed to prevent or respond to GBV within school environments.

Formal education also emerged as a key source of GBV awareness, particularly through subjects such as Life Orientation (LO). Several participants indicated that GBV-related topics are integrated into the school curriculum, allowing both learners and teachers to engage with issues of gender violence. The inclusion of GBV in education aligns with UNESCO's (2017) recommendations, which emphasise that embedding GBV education within school subjects is a critical strategy for fostering gender-equitable attitudes and preventing violence. However, while participants acknowledged the role of education in shaping their understanding of GBV, there is evidence that the depth of engagement may be limited.

Studies suggest that while Life Orientation introduces topics related to gender equality, sexual violence, and discrimination, teachers often lack the specialised training needed to facilitate meaningful discussions on these issues (Kruger, 2011). Without proper pedagogical training, educators may struggle to effectively address sensitive topics or challenge deeply embedded patriarchal norms that normalise violence. Furthermore, Moffitt (2018) highlights that GBV education in schools often focuses on individual behavioural change rather than addressing the systemic causes of gender violence, such as institutionalised sexism, economic dependency, and cultural attitudes towards masculinity and femininity. This suggests that while school-based education contributes to GBV awareness, it may not always translate into meaningful action or effective prevention strategies within schools.

Personal experiences also played a significant role in shaping participants' understanding of GBV. Teacher 1 shared a painful experience that influenced her perspective:

> Yes, as I have experienced it in our own family, my grandparents were killed, and the perpetrators were arrested but released. It was painful because we never got justice, and it felt like their lives did not matter. Even now, we still live in fear, knowing that those who commit such violence can walk free (T1).

This response highlights how lived experiences of violence influence individuals' perceptions of GBV, often deepening their understanding of the issue. Heise (2011) suggests that personal exposure to GBV can lead to heightened awareness, particularly when individuals witness or experience the failures of the justice system. In South Africa, where conviction rates for GBV-related crimes remain low, survivors and affected families often feel disillusioned with legal institutions, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness and normalisation of violence (Tholaine, & Calvino, 2022).

However, while personal experiences can foster a strong commitment to addressing GBV, they may also introduce biases or emotional responses that influence how individuals engage with the issue in professional settings. Educators who have experienced or witnessed GBV may develop a heightened sensitivity to the issue, but without structured training, their responses remain inconsistent, reactive, or influenced by personal emotions rather than evidence-based interventions. This underscores the importance of formal training and support structures to ensure that educators and SGB members approach GBV with both empathy and a clear understanding of appropriate intervention strategies.

Despite the various sources of awareness, the findings reveal that structured professional training on GBV remains inadequate among teachers and SGB members. While participants demonstrated a general understanding of GBV, many did not reference formal training sessions, workshops, or policy briefings as sources of their knowledge. This aligns with Ncube (2021) findings, which highlight that while South Africa has progressive policies on GBV, implementation is often weak due to a lack of specialised training for educators and school administrators. Without ongoing professional development, educators lack the necessary skills to identify, report, and address GBV effectively within schools.

A lack of structured training also contributes to inconsistencies in how GBV is identified and addressed, particularly when it comes to handling cases of sexual violence, psychological abuse, or gender discrimination. Leach et al. (2014) note that in many schools, teachers and

administrators are not adequately equipped to deal with GBV incidents, leading to victim-blaming attitudes, institutional inaction, or informal resolutions that fail to protect survivors. Furthermore, without a clear understanding of policy frameworks such as the South African Schools Act (1996) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (2007), educators are bound to lack the confidence or legal knowledge to take appropriate action when cases arise. This suggests that while informal sources such as media, education, and personal experience contribute to GBV awareness, they are not sufficient substitutes for formal training that provides specialised, policy-driven guidance on intervention and prevention strategies.

The findings highlight a critical gap between awareness and practical implementation, reinforcing the need for comprehensive professional training on GBV in schools. While teachers and SGB members are exposed to various sources of knowledge, including media, education, and personal experience, the absence of structured training leaves them ill-equipped to effectively respond to and prevent GBV. Strengthening educator training programmes, integrating GBV into school policies, and ensuring consistent professional development are necessary steps to bridge this gap and create safer school environments. Without these interventions, schools will continue to be spaces where GBV is recognised but inadequately addressed, ultimately failing to protect learners and promote gender equality.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the understanding of gender-based violence (GBV) among teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The primary aim of the chapter was to assess how these key stakeholders define GBV, the different forms in which it manifests in schools, and the sources of their knowledge and awareness about the issue. Understanding how teachers and SGB members conceptualise GBV is essential, as their perceptions shape how they identify, prevent, and respond to incidents of gender-based violence within the school environment.

The findings in this chapter reinforce the broader thesis argument that while policy frameworks addressing GBV exist, their implementation is weak due to inadequate stakeholder awareness, insufficient training, and systemic failures in enforcement. The central argument pursued in

this chapter is that while teachers and SGB members in Thulamela Municipality demonstrate a general awareness of GBV, their understanding is largely shaped by media exposure, personal experiences, and informal discussions, rather than structured policy engagement or professional training. This gap in formal knowledge and training limits their ability to effectively identify, prevent, and respond to GBV in schools, ultimately weakening the impact of existing legal frameworks. Without structured professional development and clearer policy enforcement, schools remain ill-equipped to combat GBV effectively, leaving many cases unreported or inadequately addressed. The following chapter builds on this discussion by critically examining the mechanisms designed to combat GBV in secondary schools, assessing their accessibility, implementation, and overall effectiveness in addressing gender-based violence in Thulamela Municipality.

CHAPTER 4

The understanding of the mechanisms to fight gender-based violence

4.1 Introduction

The government has introduced various legal frameworks and policies aimed at curbing GBV in schools. These include the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996), and key provisions within the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which guarantee human dignity, the right to life, and freedom from violence. Despite these established mechanisms, the effectiveness of their implementation remains uncertain, particularly in rural areas such as Thulamela Municipality. This chapter seeks to explore the level of awareness among teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members regarding these mechanisms, assess their accessibility, and evaluate whether they are effectively implemented in secondary schools.

The central argument pursued in this chapter is that while mechanisms to combat GBV in schools exist, their effectiveness is undermined by a lack of awareness, limited accessibility, and inadequate implementation. The findings indicate that many teachers in Thulamela Municipality are either unaware of the specific mechanisms designed to address GBV or do not have direct access to them. As a result, they often rely on informal and inconsistent methods when dealing with GBV cases, such as personal judgement, disciplinary actions that are not aligned with policy guidelines, or mediation between victims and perpetrators without structured intervention. This lack of awareness and accessibility significantly weakens the intended impact of GBV response mechanisms, leaving many cases unresolved and allowing GBV to persist in schools. Furthermore, the absence of formal training and policy communication among educators exacerbates the situation, as teachers and SGB members are not adequately equipped to implement GBV-related policies effectively.

This chapter is organised into three key sub-themes. First, it examines teachers' awareness and understanding of GBV mechanisms in schools. This section explores whether teachers and SGB members are familiar with policies such as the South African Schools Act and the National Education Policy Act, and whether they can identify specific mechanisms designed to combat GBV in their respective schools. Second, the chapter discusses the accessibility and

implementation of these mechanisms, highlighting the challenges that prevent teachers from effectively using them. These include bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of institutional support, and the perceived disconnect between policy and practice. Lastly, the chapter explores the role of training and policy communication in strengthening GBV responses in schools. Given that awareness alone is not sufficient, the discussion focuses on whether teachers have received formal training on GBV-related policies and whether such initiatives have been successful in improving their ability to respond to GBV cases.

4.2 Awareness and understandings of GBV mechanisms in schools

The effectiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) intervention strategies in schools depends largely on the awareness and understanding of these mechanisms by educators and School Governing Body (SGB) members. Teachers are often the first point of contact when incidents of GBV occur in schools; therefore, their knowledge of available policies and frameworks is crucial in ensuring that cases are appropriately handled and that survivors receive the necessary support. However, the findings of this study suggest that the majority of teachers in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality are unaware of the specific mechanisms designed to combat GBV. Many participants reported either having no knowledge of such mechanisms or being uncertain about their existence in their schools. This lack of awareness raises concerns about the effectiveness of GBV response strategies, as it suggests that even where policies exist, they may not be properly communicated or integrated into the daily operations of schools.

Several teachers explicitly stated that they do not know of any formal mechanisms in place to address GBV. Teacher 9, for instance, admitted:

> We send the perpetrator home so that they come with the parents in order to resolve the matter, and sometimes we punish them; for example, we make them clean the school yard as if back in the day. But as for the mechanisms, I do not know if there are any mechanisms to fight gender-based violence in schools. When violence or abuse occurs, we use our own judgment. I know it is not right, but what can we do? I think we need these mechanisms to guide us (T9).

This highlights a critical gap in knowledge, as it demonstrates that teachers are resorting to informal disciplinary measures rather than structured intervention protocols. The reliance on

personal judgment rather than formal policies can lead to inconsistent and ineffective responses to GBV cases, potentially leaving survivors without proper support. Mathebula and Runhare (2021), argue that educators often struggle to apply GBV-related policies effectively due to inadequate training and limited access to policy documents. Furthermore, Moffitt (2018) notes that teachers often lack clarity on their role in GBV prevention, resulting in ad hoc responses that fail to prioritise survivor protection and justice.

Similarly, Teacher 11 indicated uncertainty about whether mechanisms exist in their school, stating:

> I think we have the mechanisms, though I cannot state as I haven't seen one here in our school, but I understand that the mechanisms can assist when we are confronted with gender issues. I am saying that because there are some cases that occur or emerge, and we do not know where to start. Yes, we need the mechanisms to fight gender-based violence in schools (T11).

The participant suggests that while there is an awareness that mechanisms should exist, the lack of direct engagement with these policies renders them ineffective. The literature supports this concern, as Bray (2000) emphasises that mechanisms such as school codes of conduct must be accessible, clear, and unambiguous to all stakeholders, including teachers. Without direct engagement with these policies, teachers may be unable to respond to GBV cases in a manner that aligns with national frameworks and best practices. Additionally, Jewkes et al. (2015) highlight that even when schools adopt GBV policies, they are often poorly enforced, leaving teachers without the institutional support required to implement them effectively.

Further reinforcing this issue, Teacher 15 expressed scepticism about the existence of mechanisms in public schools, stating:

> There are no mechanisms here in our school, maybe in private schools and other government institutions. But we call the abuser and the victim together in order to resolve the issue and show the abuser the consequences of gender-based violence if it ever occurs, but we don't have proper mechanisms in schools (T15).

This suggests that there is a perception that GBV response mechanisms are more prevalent in private institutions than in public schools, further highlighting the issue of accessibility.

According to the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), all schools are required to develop and implement policies that ensure a safe and non-violent learning environment for learners. However, the responses from participants suggest that such policies are either not well communicated or not effectively implemented at the school level. Ncube (2021) indicates that in many rural and under-resourced schools, GBV prevention measures are often neglected due to a lack of institutional capacity and oversight.

The findings of this study contrast with the expectations set out in national and international legal frameworks. In *Chapter 1,* I identified several mechanisms designed to combat GBV in schools, including Section 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which guarantees human dignity, Section 11, which guarantees the right to life, and Section 12, which guarantees the right to freedom and security. Additionally, the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) explicitly prohibits corporal punishment and any form of psychological or physical abuse in schools. Despite the presence of these policies, the findings indicate that they are not widely known or utilised by teachers in Thulamela Municipality. This lack of awareness result in GBV cases being handled inconsistently, with survivors potentially facing further harm due to inadequate responses from school authorities.

Furthermore, the literature highlights the importance of training educators on GBV-related policies to ensure that mechanisms are properly understood and implemented. According to Ncube (2021), one of the major challenges in addressing GBV in schools is that teachers are not adequately trained on how to handle such cases. Without targeted training, educators lack the confidence and knowledge required to intervene effectively. The responses from teachers in this study confirm this assertion, as they indicate a strong desire for mechanisms to be introduced or made more accessible. This suggests that while teachers recognise the importance of addressing GBV, they require greater institutional support to do so effectively.

The absence of formal training not only weakens the implementation of GBV mechanisms but also contributes to the normalisation of informal and sometimes harmful approaches to GBV cases. For example, Berry et al. (2016) argue that when teachers rely on mediation between perpetrators and victims, it reinforces power imbalances rather than addressing the root causes of violence. Moffitt (2018) further states that schools often prioritise maintaining order over protecting survivors, leading to cases being dismissed or inadequately addressed. These findings suggest that without proper training and institutional reinforcement, GBV mechanisms

remain ineffective, leaving both educators and learners vulnerable to the consequences of gendered violence.

4.3 Accessibility and implementation of GBV mechanisms

The effectiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) intervention strategies in schools depends not only on their existence but also on their accessibility and proper implementation. Even when legal frameworks and policies are in place, their impact is limited if teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members are unable to access or utilise them effectively. The findings of this study suggest that in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality, GBV mechanisms are either not easily accessible or not properly implemented. Many teachers reported that they had never seen any GBV-related policies in their schools, nor had they received training on how to apply them. The absence of clear guidance on how to handle GBV cases means that educators often rely on informal methods, which may not align with national policies or best practices.

Several participants indicated that GBV mechanisms are inaccessible in their schools, leaving them uncertain about how to handle cases. Teacher 9, for example, stated:

> As for the mechanisms, I do not know if there are any mechanisms to fight gender-based violence in schools. When violence or abuse occurs, we use our own judgment. I know it is not right, but what can we do? I think we need these mechanisms to guide us (T9).

This response highlights two key issues: first, the absence of clear, documented mechanisms in the school environment, and second, the tendency for educators to use their discretion rather than established protocols when addressing GBV cases. The reliance on personal judgment rather than formal policies is concerning, as it can lead to inconsistent and ineffective responses. Mathebula and Runhare (2021) confirm that one of the main challenges in addressing GBV in South African schools is the failure to make policies easily accessible to teachers, leading to poor implementation. Similarly, Ncube (2021) highlights that many schools do not adequately communicate GBV-related policies, meaning that teachers may be aware of national frameworks but lack direct access to guidelines on implementation.

Similarly, Teacher 11's response suggests a general awareness that GBV mechanisms exist but an inability to access or utilise them, stating:

> I think we have the mechanisms, though I cannot state as I haven't seen one here in our school, but I understand that the mechanisms can assist when we are confronted with gender issues (T11).

The statement suggests that while teachers may have theoretical knowledge of the existence of GBV policies at a national level, these mechanisms are not present in their schools in a tangible or practical way. This aligns with Bray's (2000) argument that policies and legal frameworks must be clearly communicated, easily accessible, and practically implemented in school settings. If educators are unaware of where to find GBV policies or how to use them, their effectiveness is severely compromised. Additionally, Moffitt (2018) argues that even where policies exist, their implementation is often hindered by a lack of leadership and institutional support, further reinforcing the disconnect between policy and practice.

The issue of accessibility was further emphasised by Teacher 15, who expressed doubt about whether GBV mechanisms were available in public schools:

> There are no mechanisms here in our school, maybe in private schools and other government institutions. But we call the abuser and the victim together in order to resolve the issue and show the abuser the consequences of gender-based violence if it ever occurs, but we don't have proper mechanisms in schools (T15).

The participant suggests that there is a perception among some teachers that formal GBV mechanisms are more prevalent in better-resourced institutions, such as private schools. The belief that public schools are excluded from structured intervention mechanisms highlights the inequality in policy implementation and dissemination. The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) explicitly mandates that all schools, regardless of their classification, must provide a safe learning environment free from violence. However, the findings suggest that while the legislation exists, its implementation is inconsistent across different types of schools. Jewkes et al. (2015) confirm that educational inequalities contribute to disparities in GBV policy implementation, with under-resourced schools often struggling to adopt and enforce protective measures.

A major factor contributing to the inaccessibility of GBV mechanisms is the lack of training and institutional support. As highlighted in *Chapter 1*, the Constitution of South Africa guarantees human dignity, the right to life, and freedom from all forms of violence (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Additionally, the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) and the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) set out clear frameworks to protect learners from abuse. However, the responses from teachers suggest that these policies remain theoretical rather than practical tools in schools. Ncube (2021) argues that without structured training and ongoing professional development, educators cannot be expected to implement GBV policies effectively. The lack of training not only limits teachers' ability to access existing mechanisms but also prevents them from recognising gaps in school policies and advocating for better implementation.

Moreover, the absence of proper implementation results in inconsistent and, at times, ineffective approaches to addressing GBV cases. Instead of applying structured disciplinary procedures or referring cases to relevant authorities, some teachers reported using informal methods such as mediation between victims and perpetrators. While conflict resolution is a valuable skill, it is not always an appropriate response to GBV, particularly in cases of sexual violence or severe psychological abuse. Research by UNESCO (2015) warns that informal dispute resolution mechanisms in GBV cases can lead to survivors feeling silenced or pressured into accepting inadequate resolutions. Proper implementation of GBV policies requires structured intervention strategies that prioritise the protection and well-being of survivors, rather than placing equal responsibility on both the victim and the perpetrator.

The lack of accessibility and implementation of GBV mechanisms in Thulamela Municipality schools has significant consequences. If teachers are unable to access policies or receive proper guidance on how to implement them, GBV cases may go unreported or be mishandled, leaving survivors vulnerable to further harm. This is consistent with findings from the South African Human Rights Commission (2001), which noted that many cases of school-related GBV are either ignored or improperly addressed due to a lack of clear procedures and inadequate institutional support. Additionally, ineffective GBV responses contribute to an unsafe school environment, which may lead to increased dropout rates, poor academic performance, and long-term psychological effects on learners (Plan International, 2013).

4.4 The role of training and policy communication

As discussed above, effective implementation of gender-based violence (GBV) mechanisms in schools relies not only on their existence and accessibility but also on the capacity of educators and School Governing Body (SGB) members to understand and apply them. Training programmes and clear policy communication play a crucial role in ensuring that those responsible for addressing GBV are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. As argued throughout the preceding chapters, the findings of this study suggest that teachers in Thulamela Municipality have received little to no formal training on GBV policies, nor have they been adequately informed about the mechanisms available to combat GBV in their schools. As a result, they struggle to implement structured interventions and instead rely on informal disciplinary actions that do not align with national policies or best practices.

The absence of structured training on gender-based violence (GBV) policies and intervention strategies presents a significant barrier to effective implementation in schools. While national frameworks exist, their impact is severely weakened when educators and School Governing Body (SGB) members lack the necessary knowledge and skills to enforce them. This study's findings indicate that teachers in Thulamela Municipality have not received adequate training, leaving them uncertain about how to apply existing GBV mechanisms. The inability to access structured guidance forces educators to rely on personal judgment rather than established procedures, which can lead to inconsistent and ineffective responses to GBV cases.

Teacher 9 reflected on the challenges of responding to GBV in the absence of proper training, stating:

> When violence or abuse occurs, we use our own judgment. I know it is not right, but what can we do? I think we need these mechanisms to guide us because, without clear direction, we sometimes make decisions that may not be the best. If there were proper training and support, we would know exactly how to handle these situations (T9).

This highlights a fundamental gap in professional development, demonstrating that while educators acknowledge the importance of GBV mechanisms, they lack practical knowledge of how to apply them. Morrell, Epstein, Unterhalter, Bhana, & Moletsane (2009) argue that many South African teachers are willing to address GBV but lack the necessary training to do so

effectively, resulting in hesitation or mismanagement of cases. Additionally, Leach et al. (2014) emphasise that when educators are not adequately trained, they may unintentionally reinforce harmful gender norms, contributing to the perpetuation of violence rather than its prevention.

The lack of clarity surrounding the presence of GBV mechanisms was also evident in Teacher 11's statement:

> I think we have the mechanisms, though I cannot state as I haven't seen one here in our school, but I understand that the mechanisms can assist when we are confronted with gender issues. If they were properly introduced and implemented, they could help us handle GBV cases better, but right now, we don't really know how to use them or where to find them (T11).

This response suggests that while teachers may be aware that GBV policies exist at a broader institutional level, their lack of visibility and accessibility within schools renders them ineffective. Gershoff (2017) asserts that policies alone are insufficient unless they are actively communicated and reinforced through structured training programmes. Similarly, Unterhalter (2020) highlights that many GBV policies remain theoretical rather than practical tools for intervention due to poor dissemination and inadequate institutional support. This underscores the urgent need for targeted policy engagement sessions, training workshops, and ongoing professional development initiatives to bridge the gap between policy awareness and practical application.

The perception that GBV mechanisms are largely absent from public schools was further reflected in Teacher 15's response:

> There are no mechanisms here in our school, maybe in private schools and other government institutions. We are left to deal with these issues on our own, and sometimes we don't know the right steps to take. If such mechanisms exist, they are not visible or accessible to us (T15).

This statement reinforces concerns that policy implementation is inconsistent across different types of schools, particularly between better-resourced institutions and underfunded public schools. According to Prinsloo (2006), GBV prevention efforts in South African schools are often unevenly distributed, with rural and township schools receiving less attention and fewer resources than their urban and private counterparts. The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of

1996) mandates that all schools, regardless of classification, must implement policies that protect learners from violence, yet the findings indicate that teachers in Thulamela Municipality feel excluded from such frameworks. Moletsane, Mitchell & Lewin (2010) argue that educators in under-resourced schools are often expected to address GBV without adequate training, financial resources, or institutional support, leading to ad-hoc responses that fail to adequately support survivors.

The absence of structured training is particularly concerning in cases of sexual and psychological violence, where a lack of expertise can lead to harmful responses. Davids and Waghid (2016) note that educators who receive specialised training are more likely to handle GBV cases appropriately, ensuring that survivors receive the necessary protection, counselling, and legal support. However, the findings of this study suggest that most teachers in Thulamela Municipality have not received such training, leaving them ill-equipped to recognise, report, or manage GBV cases effectively. Without structured professional development programmes, educators may fail to identify warning signs of abuse, leading to underreporting or the mishandling of cases.

Beyond individual knowledge gaps, the absence of training also affects the ability of schools to develop internal response mechanisms. While national policies such as the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) and the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) provide a broad legal framework, schools are responsible for translating these policies into localised action plans. However, as the findings indicate, teachers in Thulamela Municipality are largely unaware of the policies available to them, which suggests that schools may not be effectively integrating national legislation into their internal structures. Smit and du Plessis (2011) argue that successful GBV policy implementation requires the appointment of trained coordinators within schools, who ensure that policies are actively enforced rather than merely existing as written documents. The absence of such designated roles in Thulamela schools further weakens GBV intervention efforts, making it difficult for educators to develop and sustain comprehensive response mechanisms.

The lack of training also hinders collaboration between schools, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies, limiting the effectiveness of GBV intervention strategies. Dunne et al. (2006) indicate that GBV prevention requires an integrated, multi-sectoral approach, where schools work closely with social workers, legal bodies, and community-based organisations.

However, the findings of this study suggest that many schools in Thulamela Municipality operate in isolation, with little institutional guidance on how to coordinate responses to GBV cases. Without formal training on multi-stakeholder collaboration, educators may fail to refer cases to the appropriate authorities, leaving survivors without essential support services.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored the understanding, accessibility, and implementation of mechanisms designed to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The primary aim of the chapter was to assess whether teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members are aware of these mechanisms, whether they can access them, and whether they are effectively implemented in school settings. The central argument pursued in this chapter is that while South Africa has established a comprehensive legal and policy framework to combat GBV in schools, these mechanisms are largely ineffective in Thulamela Municipality due to a lack of awareness, poor accessibility, and inadequate implementation.

The findings revealed that many teachers are unaware of the specific policies and interventions designed to address GBV in schools. In cases where teachers acknowledged the possible existence of such mechanisms, they struggled to identify or access them, resulting in inconsistent and informal responses to GBV incidents. Furthermore, the absence of structured training and weak policy communication has exacerbated the problem, leaving educators without the necessary tools to effectively apply GBV intervention strategies. The following chapter builds on this discussion by examining the effectiveness of government and school-based interventions in combating GBV and identifying potential strategies for improving their impact.

CHAPTER 5

Stakeholders' response to gender-based violence

5.1 Introduction

The response to gender-based violence (GBV) in schools requires a collective effort from various stakeholders, including teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, social workers, and parents. These stakeholders play a crucial role in identifying, addressing, and preventing GBV to create a safe and conducive learning environment for all learners. However, the findings of this study reveal that while social workers demonstrate competence in handling GBV cases, teachers and SGB members in Thulamela Municipality struggle to respond effectively. As a result, survivors of GBV may not receive the necessary support, while perpetrators are not held accountable, thereby allowing the cycle of violence to persist.

This chapter argues that although different stakeholders are responsible for addressing GBV in schools, their effectiveness in responding to such cases is uneven. Social workers appear to have the necessary skills, training, and procedures in place to support GBV survivors, as evidenced by their structured approach to intervention, which includes psychosocial support, victim referrals, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies. In contrast, teachers and SGB members often act as bystanders due to their lack of knowledge about existing policies and response mechanisms. This lack of collaboration between key stakeholders undermines the fight against GBV and leaves survivors without adequate protection or support.

This chapter is organised into four key sub-themes. First, it examines the responsiveness of teachers and SGB members to GBV in schools, highlighting their challenges in addressing such cases effectively. The discussion explores the reasons why many educators fail to intervene and the impact of their inaction on school environments. Second, the chapter investigates the role of parents in GBV cases, with a particular focus on how parental defensiveness hinders the enforcement of school policies. Third, the chapter analyses the role of social workers in handling GBV cases, as they appear to be the only stakeholder group with a structured and effective response strategy. The findings show that social workers follow clear protocols when dealing with GBV cases, including removing survivors from unsafe environments, offering psychological support, and collaborating with the police when necessary. In the end, the chapter

explores the need for greater stakeholder collaboration in combating GBV in schools. It argues that a coordinated approach involving teachers, parents, social workers, law enforcement, and community leaders is necessary to develop a comprehensive and sustainable strategy for addressing GBV effectively.

5.2 Responsiveness to gender-based violence in schools

The findings indicate that teachers and SGB members in Thulamela Municipality struggle to respond effectively to GBV due to a combination of victim-blaming attitudes, parental interference, and weak enforcement of policies. The failure to hold perpetrators accountable allows GBV to persist within schools, creating an environment where survivors are silenced, perpetrators act with impunity, and institutional responses remain weak. Victim-blaming narratives discourage survivors from reporting abuse, while parental defensiveness prevents schools from disciplining learners engaged in violent behaviour. These challenges underscore the urgent need for teacher training programmes that address harmful gender norms, strengthen disciplinary measures, and foster collaboration between schools and parents. Without these interventions, GBV will continue to compromise the safety, well-being, and educational success of learners in Thulamela Municipality schools.

The failure to effectively respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is exacerbated by deeply entrenched victim-blaming attitudes, which discourage survivors from reporting incidents and allow perpetrators to act with impunity. Some teachers adopt a bystander approach, minimising their responsibility to intervene and instead placing the blame on victims. Teacher 2 captured this issue, stating:

> No, because teachers act as bystanders; they think victims asked for it. Instead of protecting and supporting the learners, they blame them for what happened, saying things like they were dressed inappropriately or that they put themselves in that situation. This makes it difficult for victims to come forward because they fear being judged or not believed. As a result, many cases go unreported, and the perpetrators continue without consequences (T2).

This response highlights how entrenched gender norms shape perceptions of GBV, leading to inaction and further harm. Victim-blaming narratives often position survivors as responsible

for their own abuse, reinforcing a culture of silence and discouraging disclosure. According to Gqola (2021), such attitudes are rooted in patriarchal structures that frame women and girls as either complicit in or deserving of violence. These perceptions are not only prevalent in broader South African society but also permeate school environments, affecting how educators respond to GBV cases.

The failure to challenge these harmful attitudes perpetuates a cycle where survivors feel unsafe reporting their experiences, knowing that they are likely to be dismissed or judged. Crabtree (2020) argues that victim-blaming is one of the key factors sustaining South Africa's GBV crisis, as it shifts attention away from perpetrators and weakens institutional responses. When teachers take a passive or dismissive stance, GBV is normalised within the school environment, leaving survivors vulnerable to continued harassment, intimidation, and violence.

Beyond victim-blaming, parental interference further weakens schools' ability to address GBV effectively. Several SGB members noted that parents often defend their children, even when they are perpetrators of violence, making it difficult for schools to enforce disciplinary measures. SGB 2 expressed frustration at this challenge, stating:

> Parents usually defend their children, and they do not know how to live with other children at school; I mean, they are always abusive. When their children are accused of wrongdoing, they refuse to believe it and instead blame the school or other learners. This makes it difficult to discipline or correct bad behaviour because parents do not support the school's efforts to address violence. As a result, some learners continue being abusive, knowing their parents will protect them no matter what (SGB 2).

Likewise, SGB 6 noted:

> Yes, we do have challenges, as some of the parents do not believe and accept that their child is the perpetrator. They always advocate for their children, even if they are abusing other children (SGB 6).

These responses reveal a lack of parental accountability, which creates an environment in which GBV perpetrators are shielded from consequences. Moletsane et al. (2010) argue that a key challenge in addressing school-related GBV is the failure of parents to acknowledge the role their children play in perpetuating violence. When parents actively defend their children against

allegations of misconduct, they undermine the authority of teachers and SGB members, making it more difficult to enforce disciplinary measures and protect survivors.

Moreover, this lack of parental cooperation discourages schools from taking strong action against GBV perpetrators. According to Bhana (2019), parents often perceive school disciplinary interventions as personal attacks on their children, rather than necessary measures to maintain a safe learning environment. This creates tension between educators and parents, reducing schools' ability to implement effective GBV interventions. In such cases, teachers and SGB members become reluctant to act, fearing backlash from parents who refuse to acknowledge their children's abusive behaviour.

The failure of educators and parents to hold perpetrators accountable has far-reaching consequences. As Burton and Leoschut (2013) highlight, GBV in schools has a direct impact on learners' rights, academic performance, and overall well-being. When GBV incidents are ignored, mishandled, or dismissed due to victim-blaming or parental interference, survivors may experience heightened levels of psychological distress, disengagement from learning, and even school dropout. According to UNICEF (2001), GBV is a leading cause of school dropouts among female learners, as survivors may feel unsafe, unsupported, or unable to continue their education in environments that fail to protect them.

Beyond its immediate impact on individual learners, the failure to address GBV within schools has broader societal implications. Schools are key sites for shaping social norms and behaviours, and when GBV is tolerated or inadequately addressed, it reinforces the message that gendered violence is acceptable. Jewkes et al. (2015) argue that South Africa's high rates of GBV are partly due to weak institutional responses that fail to challenge or disrupt cycles of violence. If schools do not take decisive action, they risk perpetuating societal patterns in which violence, harassment, and discrimination are seen as normal or inevitable.

5.3 Gender norms and the normalisation of violence

The issue of parental denial is further complicated by gender norms that normalise violence, particularly when committed by boys. Some parents perceive aggressive behaviour as a natural

part of masculinity, discouraging accountability. Teacher 11 described how this dynamic manifests in schools, stating:

> Some parents think that boys being violent is normal. They say, 'boys will be boys,' and they don't think it is a big issue. They excuse aggressive behaviour as part of growing up instead of addressing it, which makes it harder to stop the cycle of violence. This mindset teaches boys that using force is acceptable, and it discourages victims from speaking out because they feel nothing will be done to protect them (T11).

This statement underscores how gender norms contribute to GBV in schools. According to Gqola (2021), patriarchal beliefs reinforce the idea that boys are naturally aggressive and that their actions should not be harshly punished. This perspective, however, not only endangers female learners but also discourages accountability among male learners. By framing violence as an expected part of masculinity, parents indirectly enable GBV in schools, as perpetrators are not held responsible for their behaviour. Bhana (2019), argues that social norms normalise male aggression while discouraging strict disciplinary action against boys, leading to an environment where GBV becomes a routine part of school culture.

Beyond defending perpetrators, some parents actively discourage survivors from reporting GBV, fearing that public disclosure will bring shame upon the family. In many traditional and religious communities, GBV is regarded as a private matter, rather than a legal or institutional issue, which results in survivors being pressured into silence. The reluctance to report cases stems from deep-seated cultural values that prioritise family reputation over individual safety. SC1, a social worker, described the challenges of working with families in GBV cases, stating:

> I ask about the performance of a child and also contact the parents of a child and explain the challenge. As a social worker, I probe for more information. I interrogate the parents, father and mother, neighbour, and primary school where the child was attending. (SC1).

This response highlights how parental resistance often prevents cases from being addressed unless external intervention occurs. Many parents refuse to acknowledge GBV unless compelled by social workers, educators, or law enforcement authorities. A study by Fatima (2017) found that religious and cultural norms often place the burden on women and girls to protect family honour, even at the cost of their own safety. In such cases, survivors are either

discouraged from speaking out or actively silenced by their families, fearing social stigma, isolation, or retaliation. This reluctance not only allows perpetrators to continue their abusive behaviour but also creates an environment where survivors lack the necessary support to seek justice.

Parental disengagement from GBV prevention efforts in schools further weakens institutional responses to violence. Despite schools attempting to create platforms for discussion and intervention, many parents fail to participate in these initiatives, making it difficult to develop collaborative strategies for addressing GBV. Teacher 12 described the difficulty of engaging parents, stating:

> Parents don't come to meetings where we discuss gender-based violence, and then they get angry when their child is punished. They don't take the time to understand the issues we are dealing with at school, but when their child faces consequences, they immediately defend them. This lack of involvement makes it difficult to address GBV effectively because there is no support from home, and learners continue with the same behaviour, knowing their parents will stand by them regardless of their actions (T12).

This highlights a paradox in parental engagement: while some parents are quick to defend their children when accused of GBV, they do not participate in school-led interventions aimed at addressing the problem. This lack of engagement leaves educators with limited options, as they cannot effectively implement policies without parental support. Bray (2000) argues that when parents do not engage with school governance structures, institutional mechanisms for addressing GBV become ineffective, as they lack reinforcement at home. Schools cannot fully implement disciplinary measures without the cooperation of parents, meaning that perpetrators often continue their behaviour unchecked.

The failure to acknowledge GBV and the absence of parental intervention have severe consequences for survivors. Many victims face social isolation, academic struggles, and, in some cases, are even removed from schools, while perpetrators are allowed to continue their education without consequence. SC3, a social worker, described how survivors often bear the burden of displacement, stating:

> We used to have victim centres. We removed the survivor from where she was based and took her to the victim centres. It depends on the case; sometimes we involve SAPS depending on the nature of the case (SC3).

This response illustrates the systemic failures in addressing GBV, as survivors, rather than perpetrators, are often the ones forced to leave their schools. Research by UNICEF (2001) found that in sub-Saharan Africa, GBV often leads to school dropouts, with female learners being disproportionately affected. The failure of parents to engage with GBV interventions further exacerbates this problem, as schools cannot provide sufficient support without family cooperation. When survivors lack a support system at home, they may be left with no choice but to leave their school environment, further limiting their educational and future opportunities.

Given the critical role that parents play in shaping children's behaviour, there is an urgent need to improve parental involvement in GBV response efforts. Research suggests that schools should implement targeted parental education programmes to raise awareness of GBV and encourage collaboration with school policies (Harber, 2013). Stronger coordination between schools, social workers, and law enforcement agencies is necessary to hold parents accountable when they obstruct GBV investigations. Parental education must be prioritised as part of a broader GBV prevention strategy, ensuring that families understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for addressing harmful behaviours in their children.

SGB 6 expressed the need for greater parental involvement and government support, stating:

> Maybe if we had more meetings with parents, some of them would understand better. But we also need help from the government. Schools cannot address GBV alone; we need proper training, resources, and clear guidelines to follow. If parents and teachers worked together with support from authorities, we could create a safer environment for learners (SGB6).

This response reinforces the idea that addressing GBV requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. Schools cannot shift deeply ingrained social attitudes on their own, particularly when parents actively resist intervention efforts. A collaborative effort involving government agencies, civil society organisations, educators, and community leaders is necessary to challenge harmful gender norms, improve policy implementation, and ensure that survivors receive adequate support.

The findings of this study reveal that parental defensiveness, adherence to harmful gender norms, and disengagement from school-based GBV initiatives significantly hinder intervention efforts in Thulamela Municipality. Parents frequently shield perpetrators from accountability, discourage survivors from reporting abuse, and fail to participate in school-led prevention efforts. Without a fundamental shift in parental attitudes and stronger collaboration between schools and families, GBV will continue to persist within educational settings, creating a hostile environment for survivors while emboldening perpetrators. Schools alone cannot dismantle the structures that sustain GBV, meaningful change requires active parental participation, greater government support, and a commitment to shifting deeply entrenched social attitudes.

5.4 Social workers' approach to gender-based violence cases in schools

Social workers play an essential role in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools by offering psychosocial support to survivors, facilitating intervention processes, and ensuring that cases are appropriately handled. Unlike teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members, social workers appear to be better trained and equipped to deal with GBV cases, following structured procedures to provide immediate assistance to survivors. The findings of this study indicate that while teachers and SGB members often struggle with identifying and responding to GBV, social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of intervention strategies. Their approach includes victim support, referrals to specialised services, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies where necessary. However, the study also highlights challenges such as limited resources, understaffing, and the lack of male social workers, which restricts the effectiveness of their response mechanisms.

5.4.1 Social workers' approach to GBV cases

The role of social workers in responding to gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is multifaceted, involving legal intervention, psychosocial support, and collaboration with other stakeholders. Unlike teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members, who often reported a lack of training and uncertainty in handling GBV cases, social workers demonstrated a structured and survivor-centred approach to intervention. The findings of this study reveal

that social workers actively assess the survivor's environment, engage with parents and educators, and implement protective strategies that prioritise the well-being of those affected. However, while their intervention strategies align with best practices outlined in policy frameworks, systemic barriers such as underfunding, institutional inefficiencies, and limited accessibility to victim support services constrain the overall effectiveness of their work.

SC1 provided insight into her intervention process, highlighting the comprehensive nature of social work responses to GBV cases:

> I ask about the performance of a child and also contact the parents of a child and explain the challenge. As a social worker, I probe for more information. I interrogate the parents, father and mother, neighbour, and primary school where the child was attending (SC1).

This highlights how social workers take a holistic approach to GBV cases, incorporating educational, familial, and social dimensions when assessing the needs of survivors. This method is consistent with Harber (2013), who asserts that GBV is not an isolated event but a symptom of broader social and structural inequalities that must be understood in context. By engaging with multiple stakeholders, including parents, school officials, and community members, social workers ensure that intervention strategies address the root causes of violence rather than just its immediate consequences.

In contrast to teachers, who expressed uncertainty and a lack of confidence in handling GBV cases, social workers demonstrated a clear understanding of intervention processes. SC4 explained how prioritising survivor safety is central to social work practice, stating:

> Approach the survivor if the survivor is safe where he is, but if he isn't safe, we move the survivor to a safer place, e.g., rehabilitation centres, and then report the case (SC4).

This statement reflects a proactive approach to GBV intervention, ensuring that survivors are removed from unsafe environments and placed in protective care where they can access counselling, medical assistance, and legal support. This aligns with UNICEF (2012), which emphasises that early removal from abusive situations is critical in preventing further victimisation and ensuring the survivor's well-being. However, the effectiveness of this

approach depends on the availability of victim-friendly shelters and rehabilitation centres, which remain scarce in many rural areas such as Thulamela Municipality.

The collaboration between social workers and law enforcement agencies also emerged as an important aspect of GBV intervention. SC3 described how social workers escalate cases to the South African Police Service (SAPS) when necessary:

> I never come across GBV cases. In social development, we used to have victim centres. We removed the survivor from where she was based and took her to the victim centres. It depends on the case; sometimes we involve SAPS depending on the nature of the case (SC3).

This illustrates the discretionary approach social workers take when deciding whether to involve the police, depending on the severity of the case and the level of risk posed to the survivor. This aligns with South Africa's Domestic Violence Act (1998) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (2007), both of which require law enforcement and social services to work together to provide immediate protection for survivors. However, despite these legal provisions, the effectiveness of police intervention in GBV cases remains questionable.

Matthews (2003) argues that many GBV cases reported to SAPS are not properly investigated due to inadequate training, poor case management, and a lack of urgency among police officers. Similarly, Lorenzo (2014) noted that many police stations lack Family Violence, Child Protection, and Sexual Offences (FCS) units, which are specifically trained to handle GBV cases sensitively. The absence of specialised police services means that social workers often have to navigate institutional challenges when advocating for survivors' rights, further delaying justice and increasing survivors' vulnerability.

Beyond legal interventions, social workers also play a critical role in providing psychological and emotional support to GBV survivors. SC4 highlighted the importance of trauma counselling in the recovery process, stating:

> Approach the survivor if the survivor is safe where he is, but if he isn't safe, we move the survivor to a safer place, e.g., rehabilitation centres, and then report the case (SC4).

This response reflects the need for survivor-centred approaches that prioritise emotional well-being and long-term recovery. Counselling is essential in helping survivors process trauma, regain confidence, and reintegrate into school without fear of further violence. The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (2020–2030) advocates for the expansion of psychosocial support services, recognising that many survivors face long-term emotional distress, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.

However, despite the clear benefits of counselling services, this study found that social workers struggle to meet the high demand for psychosocial support due to resource constraints. Many reported being overwhelmed by caseloads, making it difficult to provide consistent and high-quality counselling to all survivors. This issue was also identified by Ludsin and Vetten (2005), who found that many victim support services in South Africa suffer from chronic underfunding, leading to shortages of trained professionals and limited access to mental health resources. Without adequate funding, social workers are forced to prioritise the most severe cases, leaving many survivors without the necessary psychological support to fully heal and recover.

Another critical challenge identified in this study is the shortage of male social workers, which affect how male survivors engage with support services. All social workers interviewed were women, raising concerns about whether boys feel comfortable seeking help for GBV-related trauma. Ncube (2021) argues that the underrepresentation of male social workers contributes to the perception that GBV is solely a women's issue, rather than a broader societal problem affecting all genders. Given that boys and young men can also be victims of GBV, there is a need for more gender-diverse representation among social workers to ensure that all survivors receive appropriate and accessible support.

Furthermore, the lack of sufficient funding and infrastructure for GBV support services further weakens social workers' ability to intervene effectively. SC3 –as cited above, noted that while victim centres exist, they are not always accessible due to financial constraints and logistical barriers. Lorenzo (2014) notes that many victim-friendly facilities in South Africa lack the necessary resources for renovations, staffing, and case management. Without sustained investment in GBV response services, social workers are forced to work under strained conditions, limiting their ability to provide comprehensive support to survivors.

5.4.2 The need for greater collaboration between social workers and schools

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools requires more than just legal frameworks and policy interventions; it demands a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach that integrates the expertise of social workers with the daily realities faced by educators. Schools are often at the frontline of GBV incidents, yet teachers and SGB members are not always equipped to respond appropriately. Meanwhile, social workers possess the necessary skills and training to handle GBV cases but are often removed from the everyday dynamics of school environments. This disconnect highlights the urgent need for greater collaboration between schools and social workers, ensuring that intervention strategies are not only reactive but also preventative and sustainable.

Teacher 12 underscored the necessity of stronger partnerships between educators and social workers, stating:

> We need more training and support from social workers. Sometimes we don't know what to do, and it would help if they worked more closely with us. They have the expertise to handle sensitive cases, and if they were more present in schools, we would be better equipped to respond to GBV situations in the right way (T12).

One of the major barriers to effective collaboration is the limited presence of social workers in schools, particularly in under-resourced areas such as Thulamela Municipality. Many social workers are responsible for multiple schools, entire districts, or broad community-based interventions, making it difficult to establish strong working relationships with individual schools. This lack of proximity delays intervention processes and leaves educators uncertain about when and how to escalate GBV cases. As a result, schools often lack direct access to professional guidance, leading to inconsistent GBV responses that depend on individual educators' discretion rather than structured policy frameworks (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005).

Despite these challenges, greater collaboration between social workers and schools is not only possible but necessary. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has recognised the importance of school-based social work services, advocating for interdisciplinary approaches to school safety and learner well-being (DBE, 2019). The National School Safety Framework

(NSSF) highlights the need for integrated support systems, where social workers, teachers, and law enforcement officials work together to create safe learning environments. This can be achieved through regular joint training sessions, the appointment of dedicated school social workers, and the development of stronger referral mechanisms.

In addition, cross-sectoral training initiatives are essential in bridging the knowledge gap between educators and social workers. While teachers are often the first point of contact for survivors, they require continuous professional development on how to identify GBV cases, provide initial psychosocial support, and refer cases appropriately. Harber (2013) suggests that joint workshops between educators, social workers, and law enforcement personnel can foster a more coordinated and survivor-centred approach to addressing GBV in schools. These training initiatives can also challenge existing biases, ensuring that all stakeholders adopt a trauma-informed, survivor-focused perspective when handling cases.

Ultimately, the collaboration between social workers and schools is a critical yet underutilised resource in the fight against GBV. Strengthening these partnerships requires policy commitment, structured referral systems, increased social worker presence in schools, and capacity-building initiatives that empower educators to respond effectively to GBV cases. Without these interventions, schools will continue to operate in isolation, leaving survivors vulnerable and allowing GBV to persist unchecked.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the responses of various stakeholders to gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The chapter aimed to explore how teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, parents, and social workers engage with GBV cases and the challenges they face in their attempts to prevent and address such incidents. The findings revealed that while some stakeholders, particularly social workers, have structured intervention mechanisms, others, especially teachers and SGB members, struggle due to a lack of training, resources, and institutional support.

The chapter argued that the effectiveness of GBV response mechanisms in schools is largely undermined by three key factors: teachers' and SGB members' lack of training and policy

awareness, parental defensiveness and reluctance to engage in GBV prevention, and systemic challenges faced by social workers. Teachers and SGB members demonstrated a limited understanding of existing mechanisms to fight GBV, often resorting to informal and ineffective disciplinary measures. The findings suggest that while there are mechanisms in place to address GBV in schools, their implementation is hindered by a lack of awareness, inadequate collaboration among stakeholders, and broader socio-cultural barriers. Addressing GBV effectively requires a multi-stakeholder approach that strengthens cooperation between teachers, parents, social workers, and law enforcement agencies. Schools must prioritise GBV training for educators and SGB members, parental education initiatives, and enhanced support for social workers to ensure a more coordinated and effective response. The following chapter presents conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of the key findings and arguments presented throughout the study, reflecting on how the research has contributed to understanding the effectiveness of mechanisms to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The study set out to explore the extent to which existing GBV interventions in schools are effective, the challenges faced in their implementation, and the lived experiences of teachers, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and social workers in responding to GBV cases. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research engaged with multiple stakeholders to gain insight into the systemic and structural factors influencing the prevalence and management of GBV in schools.

The chapter also synthesises the main research findings in relation to the study's primary research question and sub-questions. It reflects on the limitations of the current GBV interventions in schools, the barriers to their successful implementation, and the role of institutional structures in reinforcing or challenging gender-based violence. The contributions of the study are highlighted, both in terms of intellectual advancements in GBV research and practical implications for policy and school-based interventions. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations for future research, emphasising the need for context-specific, community-driven solutions that account for the diverse experiences of learners, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds.

6.2 Discussion of the overall argument

The central argument of this study is that, despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks aimed at addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in South African schools, these mechanisms remain largely ineffective due to systemic failures in implementation, accessibility, and stakeholder engagement. GBV persists in secondary schools because interventions are either poorly enforced, inadequately understood by key stakeholders, or not contextualised to address

the specific social and cultural factors that sustain violence. Schools, as microcosms of society, reflect the broader patriarchal structures, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic inequalities that underpin GBV. Therefore, tackling GBV in schools requires not only policy interventions but also a transformation in institutional cultures, stakeholder capacity, and social attitudes towards gender and violence.

This study argues that GBV in schools is not simply an individual or behavioural issue but is embedded within broader systemic inequalities. Schools are often unsafe spaces, particularly for female learners, because gendered power imbalances, inadequate policy enforcement, and victim-blaming cultures normalise violence rather than challenge it. This study demonstrates that while GBV is widely acknowledged as a problem, responses to it remain fragmented, inconsistent, and reactionary rather than preventative (*Chapter 3*).

Another key argument pursued in this research is that schools are failing to disrupt GBV because the very institutions meant to protect learners are, in many cases, complicit in perpetuating violence. This is evident in how educators and school administrators sometimes act as bystanders, fail to believe survivors, or even become perpetrators themselves. Teachers, in particular, are often ill-equipped to handle GBV cases, leading to informal and inconsistent interventions that do little to hold perpetrators accountable or protect survivors. The study further argues that GBV in schools cannot be understood in isolation from broader socio-cultural and economic structures (*Chapter 4*). Issues such as poverty, rigid gender norms, and community attitudes that tolerate or excuse violence contribute to the failure of GBV interventions in schools. In many instances, parents defend abusive behaviour by learners, fearing reputational damage or punitive measures, which further weakens school-based efforts to address violence (*Chapter 5*).

Moreover, the study contends that the invisibility of non-physical forms of GBV, such as psychological and emotional abuse, exacerbates the crisis in schools. GBV is often reduced to overt acts of sexual violence, while subtler but equally harmful forms such as harassment, coercion, and emotional manipulation are ignored. This limited conceptualisation of GBV weakens intervention strategies because school policies and educators fail to address the full spectrum of violence that learners experience. The study found that many teachers and SGB members viewed GBV primarily as physical assault or rape, with little attention paid to sexual harassment, verbal abuse, or coercion (*Chapter 4*). This narrow understanding reinforces a

culture of silence and impunity, making it harder for survivors to report abuse and access justice.

Over and above, the research highlights the failure of GBV mechanisms due to poor coordination between key institutions such as schools, social development services, and law enforcement agencies. While policies exist on paper, their enforcement is often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource constraints, and lack of training for frontline responders. Social workers, though better trained in handling GBV cases, are not sufficiently integrated into school-based interventions, creating a disconnect between education policies and social welfare services. This fragmentation results in GBV cases being handled inconsistently, with some survivors receiving support while others are left without recourse (*Chapter 5*).

In the end, this study argues that GBV in schools persists because the mechanisms meant to combat it do not challenge the underlying social and institutional conditions that enable violence. Addressing GBV effectively requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond policy formulation to address systemic barriers to implementation. This includes comprehensive teacher and SGB training, stronger accountability measures for educators, greater involvement of social workers in schools, and proactive community engagement to shift harmful gender norms. Without these structural changes, GBV will remain an endemic issue in South African secondary schools, undermining the safety, dignity, and educational opportunities of learners, particularly girls.

6.3 Theoretical engagements

This study applied a triangulated theoretical framework to explore gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The integration of feminist theory, social ecological theory, and intersectionality theory provided a multi-dimensional understanding of the systemic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors contributing to GBV. These theories worked together to uncover the root causes of violence, the institutional gaps in responding to GBV, and the intersectional vulnerabilities experienced by learners.

Feminist theory was central to the study as it highlights how patriarchal structures sustain gendered power imbalances within schools and society. In South Africa, scholars have

extensively documented how historical and systemic gender oppression manifests in high levels of GBV, particularly in educational settings where male dominance and female subordination are normalised (Gqola, 2021; Ratele, 2015). The study confirmed that school-based power dynamics often place learners, particularly female learners, in vulnerable positions where educators and peers can exploit them. Feminist theory enabled an analysis of how GBV in schools is not merely about individual misconduct but is embedded within institutional cultures that reinforce male authority and female submission.

Social ecological theory complemented this analysis by providing a multi-level perspective on the factors influencing GBV. It illustrated how individual, school, community, and societal-level factors interact to shape experiences of GBV (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The findings confirmed that schools do not operate in isolation but are deeply influenced by broader social structures, including family norms, community attitudes, law enforcement, and government policies. Many teachers and SGB members cited lack of parental cooperation, ineffective policing, and community normalisation of violence as barriers to addressing GBV effectively (see *Chapter 4*). This reinforced the argument that school-based interventions alone are insufficient, there is a need for coordinated, multi-sectoral strategies involving schools, families, legal systems, and social welfare structures.

Intersectionality theory further deepened the analysis by revealing how different social identities such as gender, socio-economic status, rurality, and age, intersect to shape learners' vulnerability to GBV (Crenshaw, 1989). The study found that rural female learners face compounded risks due to economic dependence, cultural norms that discourage reporting abuse, and limited access to support services. Teachers and social workers confirmed that learners from low-income backgrounds often lack the resources and support to escape violent situations, while learners with disabilities or LGBTQIA+ identities face additional layers of discrimination and victimisation (see *Chapter 3*). Intersectionality theory thus emphasised the need for context-specific interventions that recognise the diverse realities of affected learners, rather than adopting one-size-fits-all GBV policies. This triangulated approach allowed the study to critically assess why GBV persists in schools and how interventions must go beyond policy formulation to address deep-rooted social and institutional barriers.

6.4 Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the effectiveness of GBV mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. The qualitative design was appropriate given the study's focus on understanding lived experiences, institutional practices, and stakeholder perceptions. Case study research was particularly useful as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of GBV mechanisms within a specific socio-cultural and educational context (Yin, 2009).

The primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 participants, including 25 teachers, 15 SGB members, and 5 social workers. This method was chosen because it provided flexibility for participants to express their perspectives while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were conducted in either English or Tshivenda, ensuring language accessibility for all participants.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted to assess school policies, government reports, and legislative frameworks related to GBV in schools. This allowed for triangulation, ensuring that findings from interviews were corroborated by institutional and policy documents (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis also helped to identify gaps between policy intent and practical implementation, reinforcing the argument that while South Africa has robust legal frameworks, their application in schools remains weak. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct involvement in GBV prevention and response. This ensured that the data collected was rich, relevant, and specific to the study's objectives (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Participants were chosen based on their roles in the school system, ensuring representation from educators, administrators, SGB members, and social workers.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. This involved familiarisation with the data, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provided a structured yet flexible method for identifying patterns and key themes within the qualitative data. This approach

enabled the study to uncover both explicit and implicit narratives about GBV mechanisms, stakeholder responses, and institutional challenges (see *Chapter 5*).

The methodological approach adopted in this study ensured that the research was rigorous, ethically sound, and contextually relevant. The qualitative case study design allowed for a deep exploration of stakeholder experiences, while the use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis provided a robust dataset for thematic analysis. By ensuring ethical integrity, methodological soundness, and participant safety, the study generated valuable insights that contribute to the broader discourse on GBV prevention and intervention in South African schools.

6.5 Discussion of main findings

The findings of this study confirm that gender-based violence remains a major barrier to education and learner well-being in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. Despite the existence of policies aimed at curbing GBV in schools, their implementation remains inconsistent and largely ineffective. The study revealed that GBV manifests in multiple ways within school environments, including verbal harassment, bullying, physical assault, and sexual violence (see *Chapter 3*). Many learners, particularly female learners, experience ongoing victimisation, which affects their academic performance, school attendance, and overall psychological well-being. Teachers and social workers observed that survivors of GBV often struggle with concentration in class, exhibit signs of emotional distress, and in many cases, drop out of school entirely (see *Chapter 6*). The inability of schools to provide a secure learning environment contributes to poor learner outcomes and perpetuates cycles of gendered disadvantage.

One of the most concerning findings of this study is that schools, which should function as protective environments, often become sites of violence themselves. Many learners experience GBV not only from their peers but also from teachers, who in some cases use their positions of authority to coerce female students into exploitative relationships (see *Chapter 3*). This confirms broader research in the South African context, which highlights how patriarchal power structures allow educators to take advantage of vulnerable learners, particularly in under-resourced schools. The normalisation of GBV within school spaces, combined with the

reluctance of victims to report incidents, contributes to a culture of silence that allows perpetrators to continue acting with impunity. In addition, some teachers and school governing body members, who are expected to play an active role in preventing GBV, remain passive observers or, in some cases, enablers of violence. The lack of effective intervention mechanisms at the school level means that learners often have nowhere to turn when they experience abuse.

The study also found that while policies and legal frameworks exist to address GBV in schools, they are rarely enforced. Although documents such as the South African Schools Act and the National Strategic Plan on GBV provide clear guidelines on how cases should be handled, many teachers admitted that they are either unaware of these policies or do not implement them due to a lack of training and support. Schools often rely on informal disciplinary measures to address GBV cases, such as making perpetrators clean the school yard or sending them home, rather than taking legal or procedural action (see *Chapter 4*). This failure to apply formal reporting and disciplinary procedures allows GBV to persist unchecked. Some schools do not have functional reporting mechanisms, and where they do exist, learners lack confidence in them due to fears of victimisation or retaliation. This aligns with research that highlights how weak policy enforcement contributes to the continued prevalence of GBV in South African schools, particularly in rural areas where oversight is minimal.

The role of external stakeholders in addressing GBV emerged as another critical gap. While social workers demonstrated a better understanding of how to handle GBV cases and provide psycho-social support to survivors, their engagement with schools is often limited. The lack of collaboration between schools and social services means that learners who experience GBV do not always receive the necessary professional support (see *Chapter 5*). Some social workers noted that although they have the expertise to assist GBV survivors, their capacity is stretched due to high caseloads and limited resources. This highlights the need for stronger coordination between the education sector and social development agencies to ensure that schools have access to trained professionals who can support learners in distress.

Another significant finding was that police responses to GBV cases in schools are often inadequate. Teachers and social workers reported that even in cases of sexual violence, law enforcement officials were sometimes slow to respond or dismissed complaints outright (see *Chapter 5*). This failure of the justice system further discourages survivors from reporting

incidents, reinforcing the perception that seeking justice is futile. The reluctance of law enforcement to prioritise GBV cases reflects broader systemic failures in addressing gender-based violence in South Africa, where survivors frequently encounter secondary victimisation when they attempt to report crimes.

The research findings demonstrate that while GBV in schools is a deeply entrenched problem, it is not insurmountable. Addressing the issue requires a combination of stronger policy enforcement, better training for educators, improved coordination between schools and social services, and a shift in societal attitudes towards gender-based violence. Schools must become proactive in implementing GBV prevention strategies rather than reacting only when incidents occur. Efforts should be made to create safer reporting mechanisms, ensure that disciplinary measures are meaningful and enforceable, and involve all stakeholders including parents, community leaders, and law enforcement officials in tackling the issue collaboratively.

In the end, the study reinforces the argument that gender-based violence in schools is not merely a disciplinary issue but a broader reflection of the deep-seated gender inequalities in society. Without addressing the structural and cultural factors that enable GBV, any intervention efforts will remain inadequate. South Africa has made significant legal and policy advancements in the fight against GBV, yet these measures must translate into tangible change at the school level. Until schools become spaces where learners, particularly girls, can study without fear of violence, the promise of education as a tool for empowerment and equality will remain unfulfilled.

6.6 Contributions of the study

This study makes both intellectual and practical contributions to the field of gender-based violence (GBV) research, particularly within the South African education sector. By focusing on secondary schools in Thulamela Municipality, the research provides an in-depth exploration of the effectiveness of existing GBV prevention mechanisms and highlights critical gaps in policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional accountability. The findings contribute to scholarly debates on GBV in schools by offering a nuanced understanding of how

violence manifests within educational spaces, how it is responded to by various stakeholders, and the systemic failures that perpetuate its existence.

One of the key intellectual contributions of this study is its interrogation of the disconnect between policy and practice. While South Africa has a robust legal framework aimed at addressing GBV in schools, this study demonstrates that these policies often fail to translate into meaningful action at the school level. The research extends existing discussions by illustrating how institutional inertia, lack of training, and limited stakeholder collaboration undermine policy effectiveness (see *Chapter 5*). The findings contribute to feminist and critical education theories by reinforcing the argument that schools, rather than being neutral or protective spaces, often reproduce societal power hierarchies that enable gender-based violence to persist (see *Chapter 1*). In this way, the study aligns with broader feminist critiques of patriarchy and institutional complicity in perpetuating gendered oppression.

On a practical level, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, education officials, and school administrators who are responsible for implementing GBV prevention strategies. The research identifies specific areas where intervention is needed, including the need for teacher training (*Chapter 3*), improved policy enforcement (*Chapter 4*), and stronger collaboration between schools, social services, and law enforcement (*Chapter 5*). Moreover, the study highlights the necessity of moving beyond policy formulation towards concrete, action-oriented strategies that ensure schools become safer spaces for learners. In particular, the research suggests that teacher training programmes should integrate GBV awareness and intervention skills into the broader professional development curriculum. By doing so, educators can be better equipped to recognise, respond to, and prevent instances of gender-based violence within schools.

The study also underscores the importance of community involvement in addressing GBV. It demonstrates that a lack of parental engagement and the protective stance of some parents towards perpetrators contribute to the persistence of GBV in schools. This finding has practical implications for designing more effective school-community partnerships that involve parents in anti-GBV initiatives. By engaging families and broader community structures, schools can challenge the normalisation of gender-based violence and foster a culture of accountability.

In summary, the study makes an important contribution by advocating for the development of school-based GBV reporting mechanisms that prioritise learner safety and confidentiality. One of the key findings of the study is that many learners do not report GBV incidents due to fear of victimisation, lack of trust in reporting systems, or concerns that their cases will not be taken seriously. In response, this research calls for the establishment of anonymous reporting channels, stronger enforcement of anti-GBV policies, and mechanisms to ensure that cases are handled with urgency and sensitivity. These recommendations can help create a school environment where learners feel supported and empowered to report acts of violence without fear of retribution.

6.7 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations emerge that are essential for strengthening gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response mechanisms in secondary schools within Thulamela Municipality. These recommendations are directed at policymakers, education officials, school administrators, teachers, school governing body (SGB) members, and other stakeholders involved in combating GBV in schools. Given the complex and systemic nature of GBV, a multifaceted approach is required to ensure that schools become safe and supportive learning environments for all learners.

A critical recommendation is the need for comprehensive and continuous training for teachers and SGB members on GBV prevention, identification, and response. The study found that many educators and SGB members either lacked awareness of existing GBV policies or had not received adequate training on how to handle cases appropriately. Teacher training programmes should integrate GBV response mechanisms into their professional development curricula, ensuring that educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills to intervene effectively. Specialised workshops and seminars should be conducted to familiarise school staff with legal frameworks, such as the South African Schools Act and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, which outline their responsibilities in preventing and addressing GBV. In addition, training should include awareness on trauma-informed approaches, enabling teachers to provide appropriate support to survivors of GBV.

Another urgent recommendation is the enforcement and proper implementation of GBV policies in schools. While South Africa has a strong legal framework for addressing GBV, the study revealed that these policies are often not enforced at the school level. Schools must establish clear, accessible, and well-communicated reporting mechanisms that ensure survivors can report incidents safely and confidentially. Anonymous reporting channels should be introduced, and all GBV cases should be formally documented and addressed through appropriate legal and disciplinary procedures. School administrators should work closely with the Department of Basic Education to ensure that every school has a functional GBV response strategy that aligns with national policies.

Increased collaboration between schools and external stakeholders, particularly social workers and law enforcement agencies, is also crucial. The study found that social workers demonstrated a greater capacity to handle GBV cases than teachers and SGB members, yet their role in schools remains limited due to resource constraints. Strengthening partnerships between schools and the Department of Social Development can ensure that survivors of GBV receive necessary psycho-social support, counselling, and legal assistance. Social workers should be permanently assigned to schools, or at the very least, be available on a rotational basis to provide professional support to learners affected by GBV. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies must improve their responsiveness to GBV cases reported from schools, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable and that survivors receive justice.

Another key recommendation is the inclusion of comprehensive GBV education in the school curriculum. While Life Orientation as a subject currently includes some aspects of GBV awareness, the study found that these lessons are often superficial and fail to challenge the deep-seated gender norms that perpetuate violence. Schools should integrate gender equality education into their teaching practices, encouraging critical discussions on gender roles, consent, and respect. These lessons should be interactive and relatable to learners' lived experiences, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence to challenge GBV in their communities. In addition Additionally, mentorship programmes that pair learners with trained peer educators or counsellors can provide a safe space for students to discuss GBV-related issues and seek support.

Schools should also invest in creating safer learning environments by improving security measures and strengthening disciplinary frameworks. The study revealed that some learners

fear reporting GBV incidents due to concerns about retaliation. Schools must develop strict anti-GBV policies that protect survivors and ensure that perpetrators face meaningful consequences. Increased monitoring of school premises, the presence of trained security personnel, and the installation of surveillance cameras in key areas can act as deterrents to GBV-related incidents. Moreover, schools should establish peer-led anti-GBV committees that empower learners to take an active role in promoting safety and reporting violence when it occurs.

In closing, further research on GBV in schools is necessary to expand knowledge on effective prevention and intervention strategies. This study focused on secondary schools in Thulamela Municipality, but similar research should be conducted in other regions to explore whether the findings are consistent across different contexts. Future studies should also investigate the long-term impact of GBV on learners' academic performance and mental health, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of various intervention programmes implemented in schools. More research on the intersectionality of GBV, particularly how race, class, and disability influence experiences of violence in school settings, would provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

In conclusion, addressing GBV in schools requires a coordinated effort that includes policy enforcement, educator training, learner empowerment, community engagement, and strengthened collaboration between schools and external support services. By implementing these recommendations, schools in Thulamela Municipality and beyond can work towards creating safer, more inclusive learning environments where all learners regardless of gender, can thrive without the threat of violence.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Participation information sheet for teachers

Dear Sir/ Madam

My name is Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries, and I am a student of Masters Management in Governance at the Wits School of Governance (WSG).

In partial fulfilment of my degree, under the supervision of Dr Hlengiwe Ndlovu, I am required to conduct a research study and collect data through interviews.

The topic of this study is the effectiveness of the mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at secondary Schools: The case of Thulamela municipality, Limpopo, South Africa.

The research intends to come up with a proposal to minimise the existing problem of Gender based violence in schools which has resulted in low pass rate and dropouts of learners.

I ask your support in carrying out the interview to support the outcome of my research and the accomplishment of my master's degree.

What will the study entail?

What is involved?

I request you to take part in this study as an individual in a face-to-face interview based on your experience and observation on gender based violence. The interview may take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. Through your consent, I will request to record the interview to manage or control the time and for future reference.

Risks:

There are risks associated with participation as the study is seeking to uncover any sensitive information. If you are not comfortable to answer any questions, please be free to tell me.

Benefits:

It is not expected that you will directly benefit from this study as this research does not involve payment. But your participation and feedback may possibly contribute to large extent in decreasing gender based violence in schools.

Costs:

There are no direct costs linked to this research project. The interview will take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time.

How will your privacy be protected?

Because I will be the one conducting the interviews, your identity will be known to me since you will not be required to state your name; for that reason your confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. You may pull out from this project at any juncture if you feel that you are no more at ease with the interview; and that will not affect you regardless. In case where a need arise to refer to a participant in the research report, I will be using a pseudonym such as Participant A, B or C to exemplify participant expression.

Data Storage:

The interview recordings will be uploaded and stored in my laptop with a password. No one else will have an access to the data. The data will then be destroyed after a year from submission of the report.

Availability of Study:

This research report will be submitted to the University of Witwatersrand at the School of Governance for partial fulfilment of my degree.

Please note that by signing the consent form you are assenting to participate in the research. Though your responses are of the paramount significance to this study, your involvement is completely voluntary.

Should you need further details regarding this research, do not hesitate to contact me at 2624814@students.wits.ac.za, alternatively use my mobile number: 0766637505. Should you

wish to make reference, you may contact my supervisor via email: hlengiwe.ndhlovu1@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely.

Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries

Appendix 2: Participant consent form for teachers

I.....hereby agreeing to participate in this research project and fully comprehend that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. The research has been well expounded to me and I appreciate what my participation will entail. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

1. I agree that I have read and understood the research information sheet.

Yes	No

2. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw my participation from the research at any time when I so choose.

Yes	No

3. I understand that some of the information provided by me will form part of the research report/thesis and journal articles that may be available online.

Yes	No

4. I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report.

Yes	No

5. I agree that any data gathered from my participation may be retained, destroyed or re-used.

Yes	No

6. I understand that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

Yes	No

Participant Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Researcher Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 3: Interview schedule for teachers

Demographics

What are your roles and responsibilities in this school? Kindly expound.

When have you started working as an educator? Kindly state the date and number of years.

Teacher's knowledge of the meaning of Gender based violence

Do you have knowledge on gender based violence? Kindly share the details.

Where have you heard about gender based violence?

How would you define gender based violence? Kindly explain.

Have you received training on gender based violence in the past? If yes, when and what were the main discussions?

Are you aware of any policy for gender based violence? If yes, kindly state the name of the policy.

In your view, do you consider gender based violence policies effective to can address GBV issues? If yes, kindly state how and if no also explain why?

What are some other mechanisms are there to fight GBV in schools? Kindly state them.

What would you consider to be the main cause of GBV at schools? Kindly share the details.

Where would you say is the best place to refer a child who is the victim of GBV? Why do you consider such place to be the best?

Would you say gender based violence are handled properly at schools? Kindly support your answer.

Who would you consider to be most vulnerable victim of GBV at schools between educators and learners?

Between male and female learners who would you consider to be more likely a victim of GBV at schools? Kindly support your answer.

Who would you consider to be the perpetrator of GBV at schools? Without mentioning names, Kindly state roles and gender of a perpetrator only for ethical reasons.

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 4: Participation information sheet for School Governing Body

Dear Sir/ Madam

My name is Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries, and I am a Masters student in Management in Governance at the Wits School of Governance (WSG).

In partial fulfilment of my degree, under the supervision of Dr Hlengiwe Ndlovu, I am required to conduct a research study and collect data through interviews.

The topic of this study is the effectiveness of the mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at secondary Schools: The case of Thulamela municipality, Limpopo, South Africa.

The research intends to come up with a proposal to minimise the existing problem of Gender based violence in schools which has resulted in low pass rate and dropouts of learners.

I ask your support in carrying out the interview to support the outcome of my research and the accomplishment of my master's degree.

What will the study entail?

What is involved? I request you to take part in this study as an individual in a face-to-face interview based on your experience and observation on gender based violence. The interview may take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. Through your consent, I will request to record the interview to manage or control the time and for future reference.

Risks:

There are risks associated with participation as the study is seeking to uncover any sensitive information. If you are not comfortable to answer any questions, please be free to tell me.

Benefits: It is not expected that you will directly benefit from this study as this research does not involve payment. But your participation and feedback may possibly contribute to large extent in decreasing gender based violence in schools.

Costs: There are no direct costs linked to this research project. The interview will take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time.

How will your privacy be protected?

Because I will be the one conducting the interviews, your identity will be known to me since you will not be required to state your name; for that reason your confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. You may pull out from this project at any juncture if you feel that you are no more at ease with the interview; and that will not affect you regardless. In case where a need arise to refer to a participant in the research report, I will be using a pseudonym such as Participant A, B or C to exemplify participant expression.

Data Storage:

The interview recordings will be uploaded and stored in my laptop with a password. No one else will have an access to the data. The data will then be destroyed after a year from submission of the report.

Availability of Study:

This research report will be submitted to the University of Witwatersrand at the School of Governance for partial fulfilment of my degree.

Please note that by signing the consent form you are assenting to participate in the research. Though your responses are of the paramount significance to this study, your involvement is completely voluntary.

Should you need further details regarding this research, do not hesitate to contact me at 2624814@students.wits.ac.za, alternatively use my mobile number: 0766637505. Should you wish to make reference, you may contact my supervisor via email: hlengiwe.ndhlovu1@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely

Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries

Appendix 5: Participant consent form for School Governing Body

I.....hereby agreeing to participate in this research project and fully comprehend that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. The research has been well expounded to me and I appreciate what my participation will entail. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

1. I agree that I have read and understood the research information sheet.

Yes	No

2. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw my participation from the research at any time when I so choose.

Yes	No

3. I understand that some of the information provided by me will form part of the research report/thesis and journal articles that may be available online.

Yes	No

4. I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report.

Yes	No

5. I agree that any data gathered from my participation may be retained, destroyed or re-used.

Yes	No

6. I understand that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

Yes	No

Participant Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Researcher Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 6: Interview schedule for members of School Governing Body

Demographics

What would you consider to be a role of SGB member to fight gender based violence at Schools?

Have you in the past receive training on GBV? Kindly explain.

Members of SGB on GBV Knowledge

What situations could be viewed as gender-based violence? (Give examples)

Where have you heard about gender-based violence and how were you informed about it?

What would you do in the circumstances of gender-based violence at home or at school?

What would be the reasons many children and adolescents don't ask for help when they suffer gender-based violence at home or at school?

How would you like to receive information about gender-based violence?

Who are the other stakeholders to fight gender based violence in your school?

In your view, do you consider other stakeholders in fighting GBV doing enough? Kindly support your answer.

Do you have any challenge when handling GBV cases? If yes, what are the challenges?

Do you know school policy and procedure for gender based violence? If yes, kindly explain.

Do you sometimes attend meetings pertaining GBV at your school? If yes, how many times in a year?

Do you consider the outcomes of the meetings on GBV helpful? If yes, kindly explain and if no why the meetings are not helpful?

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 7: Participation information sheet for local social workers

Dear Sir/ Madam

My name is Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries, and I am a Masters student in Management in Governance at the Wits School of Governance (WSG).

In partial fulfilment of my degree, under the supervision of Dr Hlengiwe Ndlovu, I am required to conduct a research study and collect data through interviews.

The topic of this study is the effectiveness of the mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at secondary Schools: The case of Thulamela municipality, Limpopo, South Africa.

The research intends to come up with a proposal to minimise the existing problem of Gender based violence in schools which has resulted in low pass rate and dropouts of learners.

I ask your support in carrying out the interview to support the outcome of my research and the accomplishment of my master's degree.

What will the study entail?

What is involved?

I request you to take part in this study as an individual in a face-to-face interview based on your experience and observation on gender based violence. The interview may take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. Through your consent, I will request to record the interview to manage or control the time and for future reference.

Risks:

There are risks associated with participation as the study is seeking to uncover any sensitive information. If you are not comfortable to answer any questions, please be free to tell me.

Benefits:

It is not expected that you will directly benefit from this study as this research does not involve payment. But your participation and feedback may possibly contribute to large extent in decreasing gender based violence in schools.

Costs: There are no direct costs linked to this research project. The interview will take up to 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time.

How will your privacy be protected?

Because I will be the one conducting the interviews, your identity will be known to me since you will not be required to state your name; for that reason your confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. You may pull out from this project at any juncture if you feel that you are no more at ease with the interview; and that will not affect you regardless. In case where a need arise to refer to a participant in the research report, I will be using a pseudonym such as Participant A, B or C to exemplify participant expression.

Data Storage: The interview recordings will be uploaded and stored in my laptop with a password. No one else will have an access to the data. The data will then be destroyed after a year from submission of the report.

Availability of Study: This research report will be submitted to the University of Witwatersrand at the School of Governance for partial fulfilment of my degree.

Please note that by signing the consent form you are assenting to participate in the research. Though your responses are of the paramount significance to this study, your involvement is completely voluntary.

Should you need further details regarding this research, do not hesitate to contact me at 2624814@students.wits.ac.za, alternatively use my mobile number: 0766637505. Should you wish to make reference, you may contact my supervisor via email: hlengiwe.ndhlovu1@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely.

Nethononda Khathutshelo Andries

Appendix 8: Participant consent form for local social workers

I.....hereby agreeing to participate in this research project and fully comprehend that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. The research has been well expounded to me and I appreciate what my participation will entail. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

1. I agree that I have read and understood the research information sheet.

Yes	No

2. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw my participation from the research at any time when I so choose

Yes	No

3. I understand that some of the information provided by me will form part of the research report/thesis and journal articles that may be available online.

Yes	No

4. I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report.

Yes	No

5. I agree that any data gathered from my participation may be retained, destroyed or re-used.

Yes	No

6. I understand that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

Yes	No

Participant Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Researcher Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 9: Interview schedule for local social workers

General Questions

Please state your role as social worker?

How many years you have worked as a social worker?

What is your understanding of gender based violence?

Why did you decide to become a social worker?

What do you consider makes you the greatest fit for this social worker role?

Social worker's GBV knowledge

How do you handle reported gender based violence cases? Kindly explain.

Was the abuse physical or psychological? Explain which one is prevalent.

Who would you consider mostly affected gender at school?

Who are the most perpetrators between male and female?

Where would you say gender based violence occur and what time?

How many cases of GBV have been reported so far in the province and at Thulamela Municipality?

Are cases regressing or surging? Please share the details (Figures).

Social worker's capacity to deal with GBV cases

Were you trained on issues relating to gender based violence? If yes, when and what were the topic about?

Do you think gender based violence training and awareness are important? If yes explain how and if no explain why.

Can you assist someone who has been abused? If yes kindly state how will you assist him or her.

What are the common signs of abuse?

Would you say victims of gender based violence are getting help accordingly?

Do you know any policy or Act that talks about GBV? If yes, kindly mention them.

In your view, are the current policies and Acts effective to curb GBV? If Yes explain how and if no give reasons of your answer.

How do you work with other stakeholders to fight gender based violence?

How do you counsel a person under trauma from gender based violence?

Do you think counselling is essential post gender based violence attack? If yes how? Kindly elaborate.

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 10: Permission to conduct the research from (Limpopo Province DoE)

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

CONFIDENTIAL

Ref: 2/2/2 Enq: Makola MC Tel No: 015 290 9448 E-mail:MakolaMC@edu.limpopo.gov.za

Nethononda KA
P.O BOX 584
MUTALE
0956
Nethonondaandries1@gmail.com

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

1. The above bears reference.
2. The Department wishes to inform you that your request to conduct research has been approved. Topic of the research proposal: **"Exploring the effectiveness of mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at schools: The case of Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa."**

3.The following conditions should be considered:

3.1 The research should not have any financial implications for Limpopo Department of Education.

3.2 Arrangements should be made with the District or Circuit Office and the School concerned.

3.3 The conduct of research should not in anyhow disrupt the academic programs at the schools.

3.4 The research should not be conducted during the time of Examinations especially the fourth term.

3.5 During the study, applicable research ethics should be adhered to; in particular the principle of voluntary participation (the people involved should be respected).

3.6 Upon completion of research study, the researcher shall share the final product of the research with the Department.

Cnr 113 Biccard & 24 Excelsior Street, POLOKWANE, 0700, Private Bag X 9489, Polokwane, 0700
Tel:015 290 7600/ 7702 Fax 086 218 0560

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Appendix 11: Ethics clearance certificate from Wits University School of Governance

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE: **WSG-2023-21**

PROJECT TITLE: Exploring the effectiveness of mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at Secondary Schools: The case of Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa

INVESTIGATOR	Khathutshelo Andries Nethononda
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	School of Governance
DATE CONSIDERED	22 March 2023
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 09 February 2023

CHAIRPERSON Rekgotsofetse Chikane
Rekgotsofetse Chikane

cc: Supervisor:

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature **Date** 09 / 02 / 2024

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES