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The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on High School Learners in Eswatini: Analysing Emotional, Psychological, and Academic Consequences

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Abstract

This qualitative study addresses a significant gap in existing literature concerning the emotional, psychological, and academic consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) among high school learners in Eswatini, a context where culturally embedded norms and systemic challenges may shape how GBV is experienced, disclosed, and addressed. While prior research underscores the detrimental effects of GBV, limited attention has been given to learners' accounts within Eswatini's socio-cultural landscape. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 36 learners (18 girls and 18 boys) across six high schools. Thirty learners participated in six focus group discussions, with five learners in each group, while an additional six learners participated in individual semi-structured interviews. No participant participated in both methods. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Three overarching themes were developed inductively: (1) emotional trauma and demotivation, characterised by feelings of worthlessness, fear, anxiety, and withdrawal; (2) psychological effects, including anxiety, shame, isolation, and psychological distress; and (3) a decline in academic performance and engagement, reflected in perceived difficulties with concentration, attendance, participation, motivation, and academic performance. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model was subsequently used as an interpretive lens to examine how individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and broader societal contexts shaped participants' accounts. The study also considers similarities, differences, and contradictions in girls' and boys' accounts and recognises that participants occupy different positions in relation to GBV, including experiences of victimisation, witnessing, and acknowledgement of harmful behaviour. Because the study is qualitative and cross-sectional, the findings describe participants' perceived relationships between GBV and educational and psychosocial experiences rather than establishing causal effects. The study highlights the importance of trauma-informed school environments, accessible psychosocial support, effective safeguarding and referral mechanisms, gender-responsive prevention, and coordinated interventions across ecological levels.

Keywords: gender-based violence; emotional consequences; psychological consequences; academic engagement; qualitative descriptive research; reflexive thematic analysis; Bronfenbrenner; Eswatini

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1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed against individuals because of their gender or acts that disproportionately affect individuals due to gender

inequalities, including physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse, coercion, harassment, and other forms of gender-related harm [1]. Within educational contexts, GBV encompasses violence perpetrated by peers, intimate partners, teachers, school personnel, or community members that threatens learners' safety, dignity, psychological well-being, and educational participation. Across many African contexts, including Eswatini, GBV remains a persistent social challenge influenced by unequal gender relations, cultural expectations, institutional practices, and societal norms that shape how violence is experienced, reported, and addressed [2]. Although extensive international research has examined the prevalence and consequences of GBV, limited attention has been given to how learners experience and interpret gendered violence within specific socio-cultural contexts. Existing literature has largely focused on prevalence patterns, physical consequences, or policy responses, while comparatively less attention has been directed towards learners' emotional, psychological, and academic experiences of GBV and the meanings they attach to these experiences [3,4]. Such limitations are particularly important in contexts where cultural values, gender norms, institutional responses, and community attitudes influence the visibility, reporting, and management of GBV. Understanding GBV among learners requires recognition that violence is not solely an individual experience but is shaped by multiple interacting systems. A socio-ecological perspective highlights that youth violence emerges through relationships between individual experiences, interpersonal interactions, community environments, institutional practices, and broader societal structures [5].This perspective is particularly relevant for examining GBV because learners' vulnerability, coping mechanisms, and access to support are influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, age, socio-economic circumstances, family conditions, and the social environments in which they live and learn [6].Consequently, exploring GBV requires attention to both personal experiences and the wider systems that may either reinforce vulnerability or promote resilience.

In Eswatini, understanding the extent and consequences of GBV among high school learners remains challenging due to limited availability of comprehensive school-based quantitative data. Although broader gender-based violence surveys and institutional reports provide evidence of GBV as a social concern, detailed national statistics specifically documenting incidents, patterns, and consequences of GBV among learners remain limited. This data gap may be influenced by several systemic challenges, including underreporting due to stigma, fear of retaliation, concerns about social consequences, limited disclosure mechanisms, inadequate documentation systems, and variations in institutional responses to reported cases [7,8]. As a result, there is a need for research approaches that move beyond numerical prevalence measures and examine learners' lived experiences within their social and cultural contexts.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the emotional, psychological, and academic impacts of GBV among high school learners in Eswatini. Through narrative inquiry, the study seeks to capture learners' lived experiences and examine how GBV influences their emotional well-being, psychological functioning, and engagement with education [9,10]. By centring learners' voices, the study contributes context-specific knowledge that may inform culturally responsive interventions, school-based support mechanisms, and policies aimed at strengthening safe and inclusive educational environments [6,11].

2. Background to the Study

GBV within educational settings is a complex social phenomenon shaped by individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, institutional environments, community conditions, and broader societal structures. In many African contexts, including Eswatini, deeply rooted gender norms and cultural expectations influence how violence is understood and

addressed, sometimes resulting in the normalisation, minimisation, or silence surrounding experiences of GBV [2]. Schools represent important social spaces where learners should experience safety and support; however, they may also reflect wider societal inequalities and gendered power relations that contribute to learners' exposure to violence. Previous research has established that GBV can negatively affect learners' emotional well-being, psychological health, and educational participation. However, much of the existing literature has concentrated on prevalence rates, physical forms of violence, or institutional and policy-level responses, with less emphasis on learners' subjective experiences of emotional abuse, sexual harassment, intimidation, coercion, and other forms of gendered harm [3,4]. This limitation creates an incomplete understanding of how learners experience the consequences of GBV, particularly how such experiences influence motivation, self-esteem, sense of safety, relationships, and academic engagement.

In Eswatini, the limited availability of comprehensive empirical data on school-based GBV presents challenges for understanding the scope and complexity of the problem. While available evidence indicates that gender inequalities and violence remain significant concerns, school-level reporting and documentation of GBV cases may not fully reflect learners' experiences. Factors such as social stigma, fear of disclosure, cultural expectations regarding gender and authority, limited access to counselling services, and weaknesses in institutional reporting and response mechanisms may contribute to the under-recognition of GBV cases [7,8]. Therefore, qualitative research is necessary to explore experiences that may remain hidden within official statistics and to provide deeper insight into how learners interpret and respond to violence. Existing research also demonstrates the importance of examining GBV through an intersectional lens. Learners' experiences of violence are shaped not only by gender but also by age, socio-economic background, family circumstances, and access to social and institutional support [6]. A socio-ecological understanding of youth violence further demonstrates that violence is produced and sustained through interactions between individual characteristics, relationships, communities, institutions, and broader societal structures [5]. Applying this perspective to GBV among learners allows for a more comprehensive examination of how multiple systems interact to influence exposure to violence, experiences of harm, and pathways towards recovery. While girls often face higher levels of sexual harassment, emotional abuse, and fear of violence, boys' experiences remain relatively unexplored. Boys may experience GBV as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators, yet their emotional and psychological experiences Existing research often overlooks the emotional and psychological experiences of boys, who may experience GBV as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators [12]. Within existing research [12]. Addressing this gap is important because a comprehensive understanding of GBV requires attention to the diverse ways in which gendered violence affects different groups of learners. The need for contextually grounded qualitative research is therefore evident. Narrative inquiry provides an appropriate methodological approach for examining how learners construct meaning from their experiences and how social, cultural, and institutional contexts shape their perceptions of violence, safety, and support [10,13]. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (2005) and supported by socio-ecological perspectives on youth violence [5], this study examines how individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, school environments, community influences, and societal structures interact to shape learners' experiences of GBV in Eswatini. Through this approach, the study seeks to generate contextually relevant insights that can contribute to the development of effective policies, interventions, and educational practices aimed at creating safer learning environments.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

3.1. Main Objective

To explore and understand the emotional, psychological, and academic consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) among high school learners in Eswatini.

3.2. Specific Objectives

- To explore high school learners' experiences and perceptions of the emotional and psychological consequences of gender-based violence in Eswatini.
- To examine the perceived academic consequences of gender-based violence among high school learners in Eswatini, including its influence on academic engagement, participation, attendance, and performance.
- To explore learners' perceptions of how individual, interpersonal, school, community, and societal factors shape their experiences and responses to gender-based violence.

3.3. Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Eswatini's high schools remains a pervasive concern, yet its emotional, psychological, and academic impacts on learners are insufficiently understood within this specific context. While existing studies highlight the prevalence of GBV and its adverse effects broadly, there is a critical gap in understanding how these impacts manifest from learners' perspectives and how they uniquely influence students' well-being and educational trajectories in Eswatini. This study aims to provide new empirical insights by exploring the lived experiences of learners through narrative inquiry, highlighting the depth and complexity of GBV's consequences on emotional health and academic engagement. It addresses the urgent need for context-specific data to inform targeted interventions, as current policies and programmes often overlook the nuanced ways in which GBV erodes learners' self-esteem, mental health, and motivation. By focusing on learners' voices, this research contributes to filling a significant gap in the literature, offering both theoretical and practical implications for designing holistic, culturally responsive strategies that promote safe, supportive learning environments—an essential step toward reducing GBV's long-term impact on youth development and educational outcomes in Eswatini.

3.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Violence (Bronfenbrenner (2005) [14], which explains experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) as shaped by interactions between individuals and their surrounding social environments. The model recognises that violence is influenced by multiple interconnected systems rather than individual factors alone and therefore provides a useful framework for interpreting learners' emotional, psychological, and academic experiences. The framework consists of five interrelated levels: the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The individual level concerns learners' emotional responses, perceptions, coping strategies, and personal experiences. The microsystem concerns immediate relationships and environments, including peers, family members, teachers, and intimate relationships. The mesosystem concerns interactions between immediate settings, such as relationships between home and school and between families and schools. The exosystem concerns institutional and community arrangements that may indirectly affect learners, including support services, referral mechanisms, and community-level structures. The macrosystem concerns broader cultural values, gender norms, legislation, educational policies, and societal beliefs that may either perpetuate or challenge GBV.

The ecological framework was used primarily as an interpretive lens rather than as a predetermined coding framework. Initial codes and themes were developed induc-

tively from participants' accounts. Following theme development, the ecological model was applied to interpret how the identified patterns were situated within interconnected individual, interpersonal, school, community, and societal contexts. This distinction is important because it allows the findings to remain grounded in participants' accounts while providing a theoretically informed explanation of how different contexts may interact. The framework also supports attention to both vulnerability and protection. Individual emotional distress may be influenced by immediate peer and teacher relationships; school-level reporting and support mechanisms may affect access to assistance; community arrangements may shape available services; and wider cultural expectations may influence how GBV is understood, tolerated, disclosed, or challenged. The ecological model therefore provides a basis for examining GBV as an interconnected social and educational issue rather than solely as an individual experience.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. A qualitative descriptive design was appropriate because the study sought to explore learners' experiences, perceptions, and understandings of GBV and the meanings they attached to those experiences within their social and educational contexts. The study does not claim formal narrative inquiry because the analysis did not reconstruct individual life histories or examine narrative structure, plot, temporality, or turning points. Instead, the analysis focused on patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

Data were analysed using [15,16] reflexive thematic analysis. Initial coding and theme development were inductive and data-driven. Following the development of themes, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Violence [14] was used as an interpretive framework to examine how individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal contexts shaped participants' experiences. This constitutes a hybrid analytical approach: inductive theme development followed by theory-informed interpretation. Bronfenbrenner's levels were therefore not used as predetermined coding categories.

4.2. Sample Size and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with direct knowledge or experience of gender-based violence (GBV), ensuring diversity across gender, age, and school contexts. Inclusion criteria required participants to be high school learners aged 16–19 years who had experienced, witnessed, or had direct knowledge of GBV within their school environment, including learners who acknowledged engaging in behaviours that constituted GBV. Participants were also required to be willing to participate and to provide informed assent/consent in accordance with the approved ethical procedures, with written consent obtained from parents or legal guardians for learners below 18 years of age. A total of 36 unique learners (18 girls and 18 boys) were recruited from six purposively selected high schools. Thirty learners participated in six focus group discussions, with five learners in each focus group and one focus group conducted at each school. An additional six learners, one from each school, participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The six interview participants were part of the overall sample of 36 but were not among the 30 learners who participated in the focus groups. No participant took part in both a focus group discussion and an individual interview.

The sample size was guided by qualitative principles of depth and information richness [17,18]. Data collection and preliminary analysis were conducted iteratively, with attention to whether additional data were generating substantially new patterns relevant to

the research questions. The adequacy of the dataset was considered in relation to the depth, relevance, and richness of the information generated rather than statistical representation.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through six semi-structured focus group discussions and six semi-structured individual interviews involving 36 learners (18 girls and 18 boys) from six participating high schools. One focus group discussion was conducted at each school, with five learners participating in each focus group (n = 30). An additional six learners (one from each school) participated in individual interviews, resulting in a total of 36 unique participants. No participant took part in both a focus group discussion and an individual interview. Participants were purposively selected because they had experienced, witnessed, or had direct knowledge of incidents of GBV within their schools, including learners who acknowledged engaging in behaviours that constituted GBV. Individual interviews provided a private environment in which learners could discuss sensitive experiences in greater depth, while focus groups enabled participants to reflect collectively on school culture, peer relationships, and support systems. Participants were grouped to encourage open discussion while maintaining confidentiality, mutual respect, and comfort. Before each focus group, participants were informed that confidentiality among group members could not be guaranteed and were asked to respect the privacy of other participants. They were also informed that confidentiality would be maintained by the researcher except where a disclosure indicated ongoing abuse or an immediate risk of harm requiring action under the applicable safeguarding and referral procedures.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed from the literature and aligned with the study objectives and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model. The guide was pilot-tested with a small group of learners to assess clarity, cultural appropriateness, and relevance. The six individual interviews were conducted in private rooms within participating schools and lasted approximately 45 min, while the six focus group discussions were held in private venues within the schools and lasted approximately 60–90 min. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings. Participation was voluntary. Participants could decline to answer any question, pause a session, or withdraw without penalty. Where a participant experienced emotional distress, the session was paused or discontinued according to the participant's wishes. Learners requiring additional support were referred to school guidance and counselling services and, where necessary, appropriate psychosocial support services in accordance with established referral procedures.

Interview and focus group transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 for data management and coding. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated across the dataset, candidate themes were developed and reviewed, and final themes were defined and named. The initial analytical process was inductive. Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels were applied after theme development to interpret the contexts in which the themes were situated. The analysis was reflexive rather than a search for a single objectively correct coding outcome. Analytical discussions, reflexive notes, and an audit trail were used to examine assumptions, alternative interpretations, and the development of themes. Member checking with selected participants was used where feasible to assess whether preliminary interpretations remained recognisable in relation to participants' accounts.

Table 1 presents the progression from participants' original accounts to initial codes, analytical categories, overarching themes, and their subsequent interpretation through Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. The table demonstrates that the analysis was grounded initially in participants' accounts rather than in predetermined ecological cate-

gories. For example, accounts concerning shame, embarrassment and withdrawal were initially coded as emotional distress before being incorporated into the broader theme of emotional trauma and demotivation. Similarly, accounts concerning inadequate teacher responses were coded as lack of teacher support and perceived institutional neglect before being interpreted in relation to the learner's immediate microsystem.

Table 1. Coding process and integration with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of violence.

Sample Participant Quotes	Initial Codes	Categories	Main Themes	Ecological Level
"I felt ashamed to attend school after everyone laughed at me."	Shame; embarrassment; withdrawal	Emotional distress	Emotional trauma and demotivation	Individual
"My classmates constantly insulted me."	Bullying; peer harassment; victimisation	Peer violence	Emotional trauma and demotivation	Microsystem
"Teachers ignored what was happening."	Lack of teacher support; institutional neglect	Weak school response	Psychological effects of GBV	Mesosystem
"There was nowhere to report what happened."	Limited counselling; poor referral systems	Inadequate community support	Psychological effects of GBV	Exosystem
"People say girls should tolerate such behaviour."	Harmful gender norms; cultural silence	Social acceptance of GBV	Psychological effects of GBV	Macrosystem
"I stopped concentrating in class."	Poor concentration; absenteeism	Reduced academic engagement	Declining academic performance	Individual/Mesosystem
"I failed my examinations."	Poor grades; loss of motivation	Educational disruption	Declining academic performance	Individual/Mesosystem

The table also demonstrates how the same broad experience of GBV may have implications across more than one ecological level. Individual experiences such as difficulty concentrating are distinguished from institutional arrangements such as reporting and referral mechanisms, while references to gender expectations are interpreted in relation to the macrosystem. Table 1 therefore demonstrates the movement from data-driven coding to theoretically informed interpretation, rather than suggesting that Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels were imposed on the data at the outset.

5. Findings

The analysis generated three overarching themes concerning learners' experiences of gender-based violence (GBV): (1) emotional trauma and demotivation, (2) psychological effects, and (3) decline in academic performance and engagement. The themes emerged inductively from participants' accounts of their experiences, perceptions, and responses to GBV. The Findings Section focuses on participants' accounts, quotations, and the patterns identified across the data. Interpretation through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model and comparison with previous research are presented separately in the Discussion Section.

5.1. Theme 1: Emotional Trauma and Demotivation

Participants described GBV as having substantial emotional consequences. Four interconnected patterns emerged: loss of self-worth and confidence, anxiety and social withdrawal, impaired concentration and academic disengagement, and internalised guilt and emotional conflict among some learners who acknowledged engaging in harmful behaviours.

5.1.1. Loss of Self-Worth and Confidence

Many participants described repeated insults, body-shaming, and verbal harassment as experiences that affected their confidence and willingness to participate in school activities. Kayla stated:

> "Sometimes, I feel so useless after the insults and body-shaming. It kills my confidence and makes me not want to go to school."

The account illustrates how participants associated repeated verbal harassment and body-shaming with diminished confidence, feelings of worthlessness, and reluctance to attend school. Participants also described a reduced sense of belonging within the school environment.

5.1.2. Anxiety and Social Withdrawal

Participants frequently described anxiety, fear, and withdrawal following experiences of harassment and humiliation. Some learners reported avoiding classmates, teachers, and classroom participation because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe.

Asher explained:

> "When I get called names and mocked, I start feeling anxious and scared to face people, even teachers."

Participants' accounts indicated that anxiety could influence their willingness to interact with others and participate in school activities. Several narratives similarly reflected avoidance, reduced interaction, and reluctance to speak openly about experiences of GBV.

5.1.3. Impaired Concentration and Academic Disengagement

Participants also described difficulties concentrating on schoolwork following experiences of harassment and threats. Arlo explained:

> "After being harassed and insulted, I find it hard to concentrate in class. My mind keeps wandering, thinking about the threats."

Participants associated emotional distress with difficulty maintaining attention during lessons. Some described their thoughts as being occupied by previous experiences of harassment, threats, or humiliation. These experiences were reported as interfering with classroom participation and engagement with academic tasks.

5.1.4. Internalised Guilt and Emotional Conflict

Emotional consequences were also reported by some learners who acknowledged engaging in behaviours that constituted GBV. These participants described guilt, remorse, and emotional conflict after recognising the effects of their behaviour.

Ziba explained:

> "Sometimes I insult others, but after that, I feel bad and guilty, like I've done something wrong."

This account indicates that some participants who acknowledged harmful behaviour experienced remorse and emotional discomfort. The narratives therefore included experiences of both victimisation and perpetration, although the emotional experiences described differed across participants.

Table 2 presents the emotional consequences identified in participants' accounts and links these experiences to perceived implications for school engagement. The table shows that emotional responses to GBV included shame, fear, anxiety, reduced confidence, guilt and demotivation. Importantly, these experiences were not presented as isolated emo-

tions; participants connected them with school avoidance, reduced participation and difficulties concentrating.

Table 2. Participants' Accounts of the Emotional Consequences of Gender-Based Violence and Their Perceived Effects on School Engagement.

Participant	Illustrative Account	Initial Code	Emotional Consequence	Perceived Educational Implication
Kayla	"It kills my confidence and makes me not want to go to school."	Humiliation; reduced confidence	Low self-worth; demotivation	School avoidance
Asher	"I start feeling anxious and scared to face people."	Fear; anxiety	Anxiety; fear	Reduced participation
Arlo	"I find it hard to concentrate in class."	Mental preoccupation; distraction	Emotional distress	Reduced concentration
Ziba	"Sometimes I insult others, but after that, I feel bad and guilty, like I've done something wrong."	Harmful behaviour; remorse	Guilt; internal conflict	Potential withdrawal or behavioural difficulties

The accounts also reveal different positions in relation to GBV. While several accounts describe experiences of victimisation, Ziba's account illustrates acknowledgement of harmful behaviour followed by guilt and internal conflict. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that participants did not occupy a single, uniform position in relation to GBV.

5.2. Theme 2: Psychological Effects of Gender-Based Violence

The second theme concerned the psychological effects participants associated with GBV. Four patterns emerged: depression and diminished self-worth, anxiety and social withdrawal, shame and self-isolation, and psychological distress among some learners who acknowledged engaging in GBV.

5.2.1. Depression and Diminished Self-Worth

Several participants described feelings of depression, hopelessness, and worthlessness following experiences of insults and threats. Theo stated:

> "After all the insults and threats, I started feeling depressed. Sometimes I think about quitting school because I feel worthless."

Participants linked these feelings with reduced motivation and uncertainty about their educational future. Some narratives suggested that persistent experiences of harassment affected learners' perceptions of themselves and their ability to continue engaging positively with school.

5.2.2. Anxiety and Social Withdrawal

Anxiety and withdrawal were recurring experiences in participants' accounts. Learners described avoiding other people and withdrawing from social and academic activities following experiences of GBV.

Flynn explained:

> "When I was sexually harassed, I felt anxious and would often avoid being around people. It made me withdraw and lose interest in school."

Participants' accounts indicated that anxiety could extend beyond the immediate experience of violence and influence their subsequent interaction with classmates, teachers, and school activities.

5.2.3. Shame, Self-Isolation, and Psychological Vulnerability

Shame was another recurring psychological experience. Participants described feeling helpless, lonely, and concerned about being judged by others. Saarik stated:

> "The emotional scars from GBV made me feel helpless and alone. I didn't want to talk to anyone because I was ashamed."

The narratives indicate that shame was associated with isolation and reluctance to disclose experiences or seek assistance. Some participants described keeping their experiences to themselves because of concerns about judgement or misunderstanding.

5.2.4. Psychological Distress Among Learners Who Acknowledged Engaging in GBV

Some participants who acknowledged engaging in abusive behaviour also described psychological distress. Thomas stated:

> "When I realise what I did, I get so anxious and scared that I want to hide from everyone."

The account illustrates feelings of anxiety, remorse, and emotional conflict following recognition of harmful behaviour. These narratives broaden the findings by demonstrating that participants' experiences included different positions within GBV, including experiences of victimisation and acknowledgement of harmful behaviour.

Table 3 demonstrates the psychological dimension of participants' experiences. The accounts include worthlessness, anxiety, shame, helplessness, isolation and withdrawal, with participants describing these experiences as affecting their willingness or ability to participate fully in school life.

Table 3. Participants' Accounts of the Psychological Consequences of Gender-Based Violence and Their Perceived Effects on School Engagement.

Participant	Illustrative Account	Psychological Pattern	Perceived School-Engagement Consequence
Theo	"I think about quitting school because I feel worthless."	Worthlessness; hopelessness	Reduced educational commitment
Flynn	"I avoid being around people; it made me withdraw."	Anxiety; social withdrawal	Reduced participation
Saarik	"I felt helpless and ashamed, didn't want to talk to anyone."	Shame; isolation	Decreased engagement
Thomas	"I get so anxious and scared that I want to hide from everyone."	Anxiety; internal conflict	Reduced engagement

The pattern presented in Table 3 suggests that psychological distress and educational engagement were interconnected in participants' accounts. Theo's description of worthlessness and uncertainty about continuing school, for example, illustrates how a psychological experience may become linked to educational disengagement, while Saarik's account highlights the relationship between shame, helplessness and reluctance to communicate with others.

5.3. Theme 3: Decline in Academic Performance and Engagement

The third theme concerned the perceived academic consequences of GBV. Four interconnected patterns emerged: impaired concentration and declining academic achievement, fear-based absenteeism and reduced participation, loss of motivation and educational disengagement, and shame, guilt, and emotional barriers to learning.

5.3.1. Impaired Concentration and Declining Academic Achievement

Participants described difficulties concentrating on their studies and associated these difficulties with declining academic performance. Jayce explained:

> "Because of the emotional pain, I can't focus on my studies. My grades have dropped, and I feel like giving up."

Participants described difficulties maintaining concentration, completing academic activities, and sustaining motivation. Some learners linked these experiences directly to declining grades.

5.3.2. Fear-Based Absenteeism and Reduced Participation

Threats, intimidation, and harassment were also associated with reduced attendance and participation. Dion stated:

> "The threats and insults make me afraid to speak up or participate. I often skip classes because I feel unsafe."

Participants therefore described situations in which feeling unsafe influenced their decisions to attend classes or participate in school activities.

5.3.3. Loss of Motivation and Educational Disengagement

Another recurring pattern was reduced motivation towards schooling. Riley explained:

> "After experiencing GBV, I lost interest in school and stopped caring about my results."

Participants associated experiences of GBV with declining interest in schoolwork, reduced concern about academic results, and diminished commitment to educational goals.

5.3.4. Shame, Guilt, and Emotional Barriers to Learning

Participants also described shame, guilt, and emotional distress as barriers to academic participation. Futhi stated:

> "I feel ashamed and isolated because of what happened to me, and I find it hard to talk to anyone about my trauma. It makes me feel helpless and afraid, and I don't believe I can recover or move forward."

Similarly, Ariel stated:

> "Because I feel guilty about what I did, I can't focus in class, and my grades are suffering."

These accounts demonstrate different pathways through which emotional experiences associated with GBV were perceived to affect learning. Participants who experienced victimisation described shame, isolation, and fear, while some participants who acknowledged engaging in harmful behaviour described guilt and difficulty concentrating.

Table 4 presents participants' accounts of perceived academic consequences associated with GBV. The reported patterns include declining grades, absenteeism, reduced motivation, concentration difficulties and diminished interest in academic outcomes. These accounts

provide a direct link between participants' emotional and psychological experiences and their reported engagement with schooling.

Table 4. Participants' Accounts of the Academic Consequences of Gender-Based Violence and Their Perceived Effects on Educational Engagement.

Participant	Illustrative Account	Academic Pattern	Engagement Level
Jayce	"My grades have dropped, and I feel like giving up."	Poor academic performance	Low motivation
Dion	"I often skip classes because I feel unsafe."	Absenteeism	Disengagement
Riley	"I stopped caring about my results."	Apathy; dropout risk	Reduced involvement
Futhi	"I feel ashamed and isolated because of what happened to me, and I find it hard to talk to anyone about my trauma."	Emotional withdrawal	Low engagement
Ariel	"Because I feel guilty about what I did, I can't focus in class, and my grades are suffering."	Impaired concentration	Disengagement

The evidence in Table 4 should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Participants described perceived relationships between GBV experiences and academic difficulties; the data do not establish that GBV was the sole or direct cause of declining academic performance. Other contextual factors may also influence educational outcomes. The value of the table is therefore in showing how learners themselves understand the relationship between safety, emotional well-being and educational participation.

Table 5 presents qualitative patterns rather than statistical gender differences. The equal numbers of girls and boys provide balanced representation but do not establish prevalence differences or statistical comparability.

Table 5. Gendered Patterns, Similarities and Contradictions in Participants' Accounts.

Analytical Dimension	Girls' Accounts	Boys' Accounts	Convergence/Contrast
Emotional consequences	Accounts included fear, shame, anxiety, reduced confidence and emotional distress	Accounts included anxiety, emotional distress, fear, guilt and emotional conflict	Both girls and boys described emotional consequences
Psychological experiences	Accounts included shame, anxiety, vulnerability and social withdrawal	Accounts included psychological distress, anxiety, remorse and emotional conflict	Psychological distress was not exclusive to either gender
Academic engagement	Accounts described concentration difficulties, reduced participation, absenteeism and loss of motivation	Accounts also described concentration difficulties, disengagement and reduced motivation	Convergence in perceived educational consequences
Position in relation to GBV	Accounts included experiences of victimisation and witnessing	Accounts included victimisation, witnessing and acknowledgement of harmful behaviour	Gender did not map neatly onto a survivor/perpetrator binary
Help-seeking and disclosure	Shame, fear of judgement and reluctance to disclose were evident	Emotional vulnerability and reluctance to disclose were also evident	Both genders experienced barriers to disclosure
Contradictions	Some participants described themselves primarily as victims or witnesses	Some participants acknowledged harmful behaviour while also describing guilt or anxiety	GBV experiences were heterogeneous and cannot be explained by gender alone

Table 5 provides an explicit comparison of girls' and boys' accounts, responding directly to the need to make the gender analysis visible in the findings. The comparison indicates substantial convergence: both girls and boys described emotional distress, anxiety, withdrawal, concentration difficulties and reduced educational engagement. At the same time, the accounts demonstrate that gender does not correspond neatly with a simple victim/perpetrator distinction. Some participants described victimisation or witnessing, while others acknowledged harmful behaviour and described guilt or emotional conflict. The gender comparison is qualitative rather than statistical; equal representation of girls and boys does not establish prevalence differences or statistically significant gender effects.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learners' accounts of GBV extend beyond the immediate incident of violence and are perceived to affect emotional well-being, psychological functioning, and educational engagement. Three interconnected themes emerged: emotional trauma and demotivation, psychological effects, and decline in academic performance and engagement. Rather than treating these themes as independent outcomes, the accounts indicate that learners understood them as connected experiences. Emotional distress was associated with anxiety, shame and withdrawal, while these experiences were also perceived to interfere with concentration, attendance, participation, motivation and academic engagement.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as establishing that GBV directly causes particular psychological or educational outcomes. The qualitative and cross-sectional design captures participants' accounts and perceived relationships between experiences of violence and subsequent experiences. The contribution of the study is therefore to illuminate how learners understand these relationships within their everyday social and educational environments.

6.1. Emotional Trauma and Demotivation

Participants described insults, body-shaming, harassment, intimidation and threats in association with reduced confidence, anxiety, fear, withdrawal and loss of motivation. Kayla's account, for example, connects repeated humiliation with reduced confidence and reluctance to attend school. This finding is consistent with [19]), who associate repeated emotional victimisation with reduced self-esteem and school participation. The finding is important because it demonstrates that consequences of GBV may begin with experiences sometimes treated as less serious than physical violence. Verbal insults, humiliation, body-shaming and intimidation may appear minor when considered as isolated incidents, but participants' accounts suggest that repeated exposure can become emotionally significant. The cumulative nature of these experiences is particularly important in school settings where learners interact repeatedly with the same peers and teachers.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective provides a useful interpretation of this process. At the individual level, learners described fear, shame, anxiety and diminished self-worth. At the microsystem level, these experiences were embedded in direct relationships with peers and teachers. Emotional distress should therefore not be understood simply as an individual psychological response detached from the social environment. Rather, learners' emotional experiences were situated within everyday relationships that could either reinforce vulnerability or provide support.

This interpretation reinforces the importance of trauma-informed school environments. As [20] suggest, supportive school environments and positive peer relationships can play an important role in learner well-being. The present findings extend this argument by

showing that learners in the Eswatini context described school safety, peer interaction and adult responsiveness as important components of their emotional experiences.

6.2. Psychological Effects of GBV

The second major finding concerns psychological distress, including anxiety, shame, isolation, diminished self-worth and feelings of helplessness. Theo's account of worthlessness and uncertainty about continuing school illustrates how repeated insults and threats were experienced as psychologically disruptive. Similarly, Flynn described anxiety and withdrawal following sexual harassment. These findings are consistent with [6,13,21,22], who identify psychological distress, stigma, and barriers to support as important dimensions of violence affecting young people. The present study contributes a contextual dimension to this literature. Participants did not describe psychological experiences in isolation from their social environments. Shame was associated with reluctance to disclose, while perceptions of inadequate support appeared to influence whether learners felt able to seek assistance. Psychological distress and help-seeking were therefore interconnected in participants' accounts.

The ecological framework further suggests that psychological experiences may be reinforced or mitigated across different levels. Individual experiences of anxiety and shame may be intensified by negative peer relationships at the microsystem level, limited institutional responses and reporting arrangements at the exosystem level, and cultural expectations surrounding gender and silence at the macrosystem level. Consequently, school-based responses that rely exclusively on individual counselling may be insufficient. Counselling remains important, but it should form part of a wider safeguarding and institutional response [23]. The accounts of learners who acknowledged engaging in harmful behaviour also require careful interpretation. Their reports of guilt, remorse and anxiety demonstrate that participants occupied different positions in relation to GBV. These accounts should not be treated as equivalent to survivor experiences; rather, they indicate that prevention may need to address accountability, empathy, behavioural change and emotional regulation alongside survivor-centred support.

6.3. Academic Performance and Engagement

A central contribution of the study is the identification of the perceived educational consequences of GBV. Participants described difficulties with concentration, absenteeism, reduced participation, declining grades, loss of motivation, and educational disengagement. Jayce associated emotional pain with difficulties in concentrating and declining grades, while Dion described avoiding classes because of feeling unsafe. These findings correspond with previous research linking exposure to violence with educational participation and educational trajectories [3,24]. Similarly, ref. [25] highlights the relationship between trauma-related distress, concentration, and motivation. Nevertheless, these findings require cautious interpretation. Participants' accounts demonstrate perceived relationships between experiences of GBV and educational difficulties; they do not establish that GBV was the sole or direct cause of academic decline. Academic outcomes may also be influenced by family circumstances, socioeconomic conditions, school resources, relationships with teachers and peers, and other forms of psychological stress.

The ecological model helps explain why educational disengagement should not be conceptualised merely as an individual learner problem. A learner experiencing fear may withdraw from peers, which may subsequently reduce classroom participation [26]. Similarly, an unsafe school environment may contribute to absenteeism, while inadequate support may prolong disengagement. Educational difficulties may therefore reflect interactions across several ecological levels. This finding has important implications for

educational practice. Supporting learners affected by GBV requires more than simply encouraging them to remain academically engaged. Schools need systems that ensure attendance and participation are psychologically and physically safe, while simultaneously providing accessible psychosocial support and effective mechanisms for reporting and responding to violence.

6.4. Gender, Similarities and Differences

The equal representation of girls and boys provided an opportunity to examine similarities, differences, and contradictions in participants' accounts. The findings indicate considerable convergence, with both girls and boys describing emotional distress, anxiety, withdrawal, concentration difficulties, and reduced educational engagement. This suggests that the consequences of GBV cannot be conceptualised exclusively as a girls' issue [27]. At the same time, the accounts indicate that gender intersects with the positions learners occupy in relation to GBV. Some participants described experiences of victimisation, while others acknowledged engaging in behaviours constituting GBV and subsequently reported feelings of guilt, remorse, or anxiety. The findings therefore challenge a simple binary in which girls are understood exclusively as survivors and boys exclusively as perpetrators.

This observation is important for both research and intervention. A gender-responsive approach should recognise forms of violence that may disproportionately affect girls while also acknowledging that boys can experience violence, emotional distress, and vulnerability [28]. Where learners acknowledge harmful behaviour, prevention programmes should incorporate accountability, empathy, behavioural change, and gender-transformative education.

The gender comparison should, however, be interpreted qualitatively. The equal number of girls and boys does not constitute a quantitative gender comparison, and the study was not designed to estimate prevalence or statistically test differences. Rather, the value of the comparison lies in identifying patterns of similarity, difference, and contradiction within participants' accounts.

6.5. Victimisation, Witnessing and Acknowledgement of Harmful Behaviour

An additional contribution of the study lies in recognising that learners occupy different positions in relation to GBV. Participants included learners who had experienced violence, witnessed violence, or acknowledged engaging in behaviours constituting GBV. Recognising these different positions provides a more nuanced understanding of school-based violence, moving beyond a simplified distinction between victims and perpetrators. The accounts of victimisation were characterised by fear, shame, anxiety, and withdrawal, whereas some participants who acknowledged engaging in harmful behaviour described feelings of guilt, remorse, and emotional conflict. These experiences are not equivalent and should not be interpreted as such. Rather, they demonstrate that GBV is experienced and understood through multiple relational positions within the school community. This finding has important implications for both prevention and intervention. Responses to GBV should combine survivor-centred safeguarding with approaches that promote prevention, accountability, and behavioural change [29]. For learners who experience violence, effective support requires accessible reporting mechanisms, appropriate psychosocial assistance, and protection from further harm. At the same time, preventing the recurrence of harmful behaviour requires interventions that address peer norms, empathy, conflict management, accountability, and gendered expectations. Such an approach recognises the complexity of school-based GBV while maintaining a clear distinction between supporting those who experience violence and addressing behaviours that cause harm.

Importantly, the accounts of participants who acknowledged engaging in behaviours constituting GBV should be interpreted with methodological caution. Because the study did not independently verify these descriptions, they should be understood as self-reported acknowledgements rather than externally verified classifications of perpetration. This distinction is essential to ensure that the findings remain grounded in participants' accounts and that interpretations do not extend beyond what the data can substantiate.

6.6. GBV Through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

The findings provide empirical support for an ecological interpretation of school-based GBV. At the individual level, learners described experiences of fear, shame, anxiety, guilt, reduced confidence, and difficulties with concentration. At the microsystem level, peer relationships and direct interactions with teachers shaped learners' immediate experiences of safety and vulnerability. The mesosystem becomes relevant where relationships between immediate settings intersect; for example, communication between the school and family may influence a learner's access to support. The exosystem encompasses institutional and community arrangements that indirectly affect learners, including the availability and organisation of counselling and referral services. At the macrosystem level, cultural expectations, gender norms, and broader social attitudes influence how violence is understood, tolerated, disclosed, or challenged.

This interpretation also clarifies the analytical process adopted in the study. The ecological levels were not imposed as predetermined themes. Rather, the themes were first generated from participants' accounts and were subsequently interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. This hybrid approach keeps the findings grounded in the empirical data while providing a theoretical explanation of the relationships among individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and broader societal influences.

6.7. Institutional Responsiveness and the Role of the School

The findings highlight the importance of institutional responsiveness in shaping how learners experience, disclose, and respond to gender-based violence (GBV). Participants' accounts indicated that the effects of GBV were influenced not only by the violence itself but also by the extent to which schools provided safe, supportive, and responsive environments. Inadequate teacher responses, limited reporting opportunities, and difficulties accessing counselling may intensify fear, shame, isolation, and disengagement from learning. Teachers are particularly important because they are often among the first adults to whom learners may disclose experiences of harassment, intimidation, bullying, or other forms of GBV [6]. Where teachers fail to respond appropriately, learners may become reluctant to report incidents or seek assistance. Conversely, responsive teachers can contribute to safer learning environments by taking disclosures seriously, providing support, and activating appropriate safeguarding and referral procedures. The findings also demonstrate the importance of accessible reporting and referral mechanisms. Confidential reporting channels, clear referral pathways, and coordinated responses are essential for ensuring that learners affected by GBV receive appropriate assistance. School-based counselling should therefore form part of a broader safeguarding system that connects psychosocial support with protection, referral, follow-up, and continued monitoring of learners' educational participation. Institutional responsiveness should also extend beyond responding to individual incidents. Schools should adopt preventive approaches that address peer harassment, bullying, harmful gender norms, disrespectful relationships, and the normalisation of violence [30]. Teacher continuing professional development should therefore include GBV prevention, trauma-informed practice, safeguarding, and gender-responsive

pedagogy. From an ecological perspective, schools are not merely sites where GBV may occur but also important spaces for prevention, protection, support, and recovery.

6.8. Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to the application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework by demonstrating how learners' accounts connect personal experiences of emotional and psychological distress with interpersonal relationships, school practices, support systems, and broader gender norms. The findings suggest that the educational consequences of GBV cannot be adequately understood through an individual-level psychological model alone. Rather, concentration difficulties, absenteeism, and declining motivation were described within a broader context shaped by peer relationships, school safety, institutional responsiveness, and cultural expectations. The study therefore strengthens an ecological understanding of school-based GBV by demonstrating that prevention and responses need to operate simultaneously across multiple, interconnected levels.

6.9. Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have implications for education policy and school practice. First, schools should provide accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms so that learners can disclose GBV without fear of retaliation or stigma. Second, school-based counselling should be strengthened and linked to clear referral pathways for cases requiring specialised psychosocial or protection services. Third, teacher preparation and continuing professional development should include GBV prevention, trauma-informed practice, learner safeguarding, gender-responsive pedagogy and appropriate responses to disclosures. Fourth, prevention programmes should address peer norms, bullying, harassment, empathy, accountability and respectful relationships. At the community level, parents, community organisations, traditional leaders, faith-based organisations and civil society should be engaged in challenging norms that normalise or silence GBV. At the policy level, monitoring and reporting systems should be strengthened to generate better evidence for intervention planning.

These implications are consistent with the recommendations already developed in the manuscript and reinforce the need for coordinated action across ecological levels rather than isolated interventions.

6.10. Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the findings show that learners experience GBV within interconnected emotional, psychological, educational, and social contexts. Participants' accounts indicate that the consequences of GBV extend beyond the immediate experience of violence, affecting confidence, emotional well-being, social participation, concentration, attendance, and educational motivation. These experiences suggest that the educational consequences of GBV are closely intertwined with learners' psychological well-being and the social environments in which they learn. The findings therefore support the need for a multi-level response to GBV that combines survivor-centred psychosocial support, effective school safeguarding, prevention, accountability, and community engagement. Such responses should also address harmful gender norms that may contribute to the persistence or silencing of GBV. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, the findings indicate that effective prevention and response cannot be located at a single level but require attention to the interconnected contexts in which learners experience and respond to GBV.

6.11. Recommendations

Addressing GBV in schools requires a comprehensive response that extends beyond individual support services to encompass educational, safeguarding, community, and policy

interventions. The Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini should institutionalise trauma-informed education by integrating psychosocial support services, school-based counselling, confidential reporting mechanisms, clear referral pathways, and multidisciplinary response arrangements within high schools. These measures would help ensure that learners affected by GBV receive timely and appropriate support. Teacher education and continuing professional development should incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy, GBV prevention, learner safeguarding, gender-responsive practice, and appropriate responses to disclosures. School leaders should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of child-protection and anti-GBV policies and establish clear procedures for reporting, documenting, responding to, and referring cases. Prevention programmes should also recognise that learners may occupy different positions in relation to GBV. Accordingly, survivor-centred support should be complemented by prevention and accountability interventions that address harmful behaviour, empathy, respectful relationships, conflict management, and gender-transformative education.

At the community level, awareness initiatives should actively engage parents, traditional leaders, faith-based organisations, civil society, and relevant service providers in challenging harmful gender norms and strengthening coordinated support for learners. Educational institutions should also strengthen systems for monitoring the prevalence and perceived impacts of GBV and improve documentation practices while safeguarding confidentiality and learner safety. At the policy level, policymakers should adopt ecological and multi-sectoral approaches that address the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal factors associated with GBV. These measures are consistent with the broader objectives of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, the African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, and the SADC Regional Strategy and Framework of Action for Addressing Gender-Based Violence. Overall, the recommended interventions should aim to improve learner well-being, strengthen educational participation, enhance institutional responsiveness, and create safer and more inclusive schools across Eswatini and comparable Southern African contexts.

7. Conclusions

This study explored learners' experiences and perceptions of the emotional, psychological, and academic consequences associated with GBV across six high schools in Eswatini. Three interconnected themes emerged: emotional trauma and demotivation, psychological effects, and decline in academic performance and engagement. Participants described fear, shame, anxiety, reduced confidence, withdrawal, concentration difficulties, absenteeism, reduced participation, declining motivation, and perceived academic difficulties. Taken together, these accounts indicate perceived relationships between experiences of GBV and learners' emotional, psychological, and educational experiences. However, given the nature of the study, the findings do not establish causal effects. The findings also highlight the importance of moving beyond simplistic gender binaries in understanding school-based GBV. Both girls and boys described emotional and educational difficulties, while participants occupied different positions in relation to GBV, including victimisation, witnessing, and acknowledgement of harmful behaviour. This variation suggests the need for a gender-responsive but inclusive approach that recognises differences in experiences while avoiding assumptions that girls are exclusively survivors and boys exclusively perpetrators. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework provided a useful interpretive lens for understanding how learners' experiences were situated within interconnected individual, interpersonal, school, community, and broader societal contexts. The findings indicate that effective responses to GBV therefore require coordinated action across these interconnected levels rather than interventions focused solely on individual learners.

The study contributes contextually grounded evidence on school-based GBV in Eswatini by centring learners' accounts and demonstrating the connections between emotional and psychological experiences, educational engagement, and institutional responsiveness. The findings support the need for trauma-informed, safeguarding-focused, gender-responsive, and ecologically informed interventions while recognising the contextual and non-causal nature of the evidence. Ultimately, addressing GBV in schools requires responses that not only support learners affected by violence but also strengthen school-based prevention, accountability, and wider community and institutional mechanisms for creating safer educational environments.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (protocol code: 12338). The study also received clearance and approval from the Director of Education in the Ministry of Education, Eswatini, who is the sole officer responsible for authorising research studies conducted within schools. Prior to data collection, consent was obtained from guardians and parents for learners below 18 years of age, ensuring ethical compliance with minors' participation. Participants themselves provided informed consent after the study's purpose and procedures were explained to them in an understandable manner, emphasising voluntary participation. The principals of the participating schools were approached and granted permission to conduct the research as gatekeepers, facilitating access to learners and ensuring institutional support.

Informed Consent Statement: Confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity of all participants were strictly maintained throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was securely stored. Psychological support services were made available to participants who experienced distress during data collection, ensuring their well-being. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions, safeguarding their autonomy and rights.

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