The impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in Limpopo, South Africa

Mulatedzi Calvin Rambuda

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The crucial mandate for any state is that learners attain their education in a safe learning environment. Learners’ access to a high-quality, inclusive, equitable education, and their capacity are jeopardised by the pervasive gender-based violence in and around schools. This paper aims to investigate the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in Limpopo Province of South Africa. From the qualitative standpoint, coupled with the case study research design, this study used a purposive sample to select 15 (n = 15) participants. Data were collected through literature reviews and the application of semi-structured Key Informant Interviews and analysed using Thematic Analysis. The findings of this study include (i) low school performance, (ii) learners who are dropping out, (iii) learners’ inability to exercise their human rights and their right to an education, (iv) lack of a well-resourced and strong criminal justice system, and (v) an intervention team to address the impact of gender-based violence on girls. This study concludes that gender-based violence should be taught as a subject in schools to address the persistent issue in South Africa for learners to understand abuse.

Introduction

No matter where you are born, if you are a girl, life will be more difficult for you. Globally, researchers and international organisations have indicated that violence is reflected directly within the school setting and that girls form one of the groups that are most vulnerable to violence (Unicef, 2012; Duque & Teixido, 2016; UNESCO-United Nations Scientific Educational, 2017). South Africa is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for girls, with levels of violence similar to those in war-torn countries. Despite the country’s political response to violence against women and girls, school-going girls struggle with male violence in and out of school (Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). Burton and Leoschut (2013) reasoned and argued that one of the most significant problems facing learners in South Africa is violence in and around schools. Mncube and Harber (2012) pointed out that the high rate of violence in the country, which is frequently seen as a legacy of the apartheid period, has led to an increase in gender-based violence in schools. Over the past three decades, gender-based violence has received international recognition as a form of social and human rights violation (Taquette, & Monteiro, 2019, Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020).

In addition, Jacobs (2012) contends that South African schools are not corresponding with the educational ideal of promoting democracy and the protection of human rights, which is spelled out in various South African policies and legislation. Similarly, Thobejane (2019) argued that gender-based violence is a violation of human rights, yet societies, communities, and local people either experience it firsthand or witness it within their families neighbourhoods, and feel there’s nothing much they can do about it. Singh and Power (2019) revealed that everyone has the right to equal protection, benefit from the law, and equality before the law. Everyone has the fundamental right to respect for and protection of their dignity. Fortunately, since democracy first emerged in South Africa in 1994, advocates for democracy have made the safety and advancement of females a top priority.

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1230-4621

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Again, widespread gender-based violence in and around schools gravely jeopardises all learners’ access to high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education as well as their ability to become empowered and alter their lives (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020). Moreover, in South Africa, Juan, Zuze, Govender & Reddy (2019) reveal that school violence is the order of the day. In addition, gender-based violence in schools negatively affects educational systems, resulting in school dropouts and poor academic results (Leach, Dunne, & Salvi, 2014; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Qwabe, Maluleke, & Olutola, 2022). Moreover, according to Tang, Qu, Li, and Tan (2018), schools are the unsafest place to be for some of our children, crushing many of their dreams and reducing the school experience for these children to a battle for survival rather than academic achievement. It is worrisome because some girls drop out of school, and for many, this has an impact on their social and personal growth. The worst part is that children very often fail to fulfil their ambitions, and the overwhelming majority of these are girls (Scoglio, Kraus, Saczynski, Jooma, & Molnar, 2021). The assertion made by Dunne (2009) that widespread violence in schools has an impact on the accomplishment of Millennium Development Goals related to equal access to education for both girls and boys in developing countries solidified the aforementioned ideas. In the same vein, Motshegra (2020) indicated that schools must inherently be safe havens for learning and nurturing young minds.

Furthermore, Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) both agree that the level of violence in schools is unacceptably high. The governments all across the world experience problems due to gender-based violence against school girls. In many South African schools, the focus has shifted away from places of learning, but rather as arenas of conflict (Asbeh, 2010). Many schools have turned into hostile places for learners, particularly for girls. Similar to schools in other countries, bullying, sexual abuse, sexual assault, verbal abuse, and a host of other antisocial behaviour are common in many South African schools, to varying degrees. According to Mabasa and Mafumo (2017), safety is a burning issue in South African schools despite the interventions that were implemented aimed at resolving these safety problems in the schools. Despite the steps taken to handle the issue by the Department of Education (DoE) and schools themselves, gender-based violence is increasing (Human Rights Commission, 2006). In addition, Scoglio, Kraus, Saczynski, Jooma, and Molnar (2021) agreed that violence against learners is on the rise. According to Urban and Teise (2015), a safe, orderly, and clean school environment is essential for successful teaching and learning. Schools must provide learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to preserve and advance our civilisation, but when people are living in constant fear for their lives, neither learners nor teachers can function effectively.

Moreover, girls’ silence regarding gender-based violence is not an answer. It only empowers the offenders to carry out more offenses against women and children (Combrinck, 2022). Hossain, Zimmerman, Kiss, Abramsky, Kone, Bakayoko-Topolska, Annan, Lehman, & Watts (2014) point out that the girls do not report cases of gender-based violence because of a lack of faith in the ability of the justice system to properly punish the perpetrators. Nevertheless, Mahlalela (2022) speaks out about her experiences as a young woman growing up in a violent culture and her refusal to remain quiet about gender-based violence in her country. President Cyril Ramaphosa is quoted in Combrinck (2022) as saying that gender-based violence is the second pandemic in South Africa and people should speak up rather than keep quiet. Therefore, schoolgirls cannot continue to remain silent because doing nothing to stop these atrocities is also wrong. According to Joubert (2020), communities should start discussions that will help with detection and prevention rather than collude in silence, encouraging the commission of cowardly acts of chauvinism by vile men. Motshegra (2020) urged society to stand up and report these gender-related crimes to the authorities. She claimed that legislative changes had been made to bolster the battle against gender-based violence. These changes include the requirement that people observe a neighbour or acquaintance committing a crime involving gender-based violence without speaking. In the nationwide campaign to stop gender-based violence against women and children, the Department of Basic Education plays a role. On the other hand, Naidoo (2023) reveals that there is a great deal of silence from our male counterparts about what is happening to females in general.

Gender-based violence in schools is a significant and growing problem throughout South Africa. In light of the aforementioned, this paper investigates the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Therefore, the paper asks: What is the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa? Specifically, the paper interrogates:

i. The South African government’s efforts to address gender-based violence in the selected secondary schools;

ii. The DBE’s intervention strategies for ending gender-based violence in secondary schools in South Africa;

iii. How do South African secondary school principals and teachers respond to the impact of gender-based violence on girls?

iv. How South African girls cope with the impact of gender-based violence in secondary schools

This paper is organised as follows: the introduction part, a second part is a literature review; the third part is theoretical underpinnings that anchor the linkage between theory and practice. The fourth part introduces the study presents design and research methodological approach. After analysis and findings of the study, the author provides discussions and implications. Furthermore, the paper presents its findings, which will be followed by discussions and implications. Finally, this paper concludes with a presentation of the key points, recommendations, and future research directions.
Literature Review

A literature review on defining the term gender-based violence, examining the causes of gender-based violence, examining the effects of gender-based violence in schools, and concluding with the ending of gender-based violence in South African schools are the theoretical underpinnings used for this paper.

Defining the term "gender-based violence"

Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as violence that arises as a result of unequal power dynamics and gender-related normative role expectations in a specific society (Bloom, 2008). Although the study's emphasis is on schoolgirl victims of GBV, boys can also become victims of GBV on occasion. Statistics show, however, that women are more likely than men to become victims (Bloom, 2008; Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Jama Shai, 2010). The prevalence of GBV among South African females is very significant (Abrahams, Mathews, Martin, Lombard, & Jewkes, 2013; Mathews, 2010; Nduna & Nene, 2014). According to Sida (2007), GBV refers to any suffering a female endures.

Causes of gender-based violence

Wilson (2014) points out that situations of inequality and specific cultural attitudes and ideas about gender roles, especially concerning male and female sexuality, frequently lead to violence in schools. People abuse the law's lax implementation because they are confident that nothing will happen. According to Tsewu (2020), people break the law, and the penalty is not as severe as it should be. Heise (2011) asserts that police and justice systems are consistently unable to deliver any justice at all, much less compassionate care to victims of rape and domestic abuse. Due to a lack of sponsorship and the inability to be sustained, police training programmes on children's rights and violence against schoolgirls have little impact. The advocates who participate in these programmes of training also frequently lack an understanding of the inner workings of police culture, making it more likely that they will only be tolerated and indulged briefly rather than treated as legitimate agents of long-term change. According to the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) (2019), boys and men are exposed to violence at an early age, and some even end up becoming victims of it. Heise (2011) supports DCS (2019) by stating that research from both developed and developing countries have shown that children who witness violence between their parents or who are physically abused themselves are more likely to use violence in their relationships as adults. Strong evidence suggests that being exposed to violence at a young age changes individuals. Boys frequently lack good examples of masculinity and healthy role models as they mature, which leaves them open to gangs and criminal activity.

According to Moody, Cannings-John, Hood, Kemp, and Robling (2018), some principals are under pressure to acknowledge learners' rights but are unsure of when to give learners' opinions a platform. Reynke and Jacobs (2018) and Mothai (2021) assert that teachers have reported that they are uncertain, confused, and afraid of infringing upon learners’ rights, and of being accused of misconduct. The overemphasis placed on learners’ rights may cause a "don't care attitude" and a lack of regard for the teacher’s role in the classroom. This may cause some learners not to strive to excel. Instead, they try to negatively influence their classmates to exhibit the same sexual harassment. When learners have emotional problems, this may cause them to misbehave. They may behave badly in class because they need special attention, want to be leaders, want to be left alone, or want to hurt others as they have been hurt (Maphalala & Mpofo, 2018). Learners with emotional problems are particularly disruptive when certain teaching methods are used.

Again, Makhalo (2016) argues that removing theology as a fundamental component of the school curriculum was a way to remove the underpinnings of universal moral standards because they are based not on common sense knowledge but rather on revelation knowledge. The principles of the universal moral laws, which are obtained from creation (science) or philosophy (metaphysics), are finally revealed as being rooted in and judged by the supreme God, who is the Creator of the universe. They are neither a goal in themselves nor a discovery of reason. The Creator, law, and order are not necessary for the existence of creation. Children gain a proper knowledge of the God principle and the creation principle, the pillars of law and order, and the societal vision, through a comprehension of the Bible.

Once more, negative patriarchal views toward women are most likely the underlying causes of GBV. GBV is a key indicator of a patriarchal culture. The best way to describe the type of society we live in today—one that is characterized by unequal power interactions between men and women—is patriarchal. Men are typically seen as the primary authoritative figures, while women are frequently marginalised and oppressed (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016). Dlamini (2019) asserts that there is an issue with the history and upbringing of men in the country. Men are not allowed to express themselves because they are frequently instructed not to cry when they are hurt, like when they are burned. The prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa is a result of patriarchal attitudes and norms, particularly those that encourage or excuse the use of violence. The South African Constitution emphasises equality and equal rights, although the country is still largely patriarchal (South African History Online (SAHO), 2019). Additional influencing factors include high inequality, unemployment, and poverty rates. South Africa is also burdened by the bloodshed and brutality that apartheid left behind. Insecurities, poor socioeconomic standing, and troubled pasts all contribute to the heinous crime of GBV. A man with trust issues may become overly protective and end up challenging his partner when a relationship is failing, while a woman who is reliant on her husband may find it challenging to end things.
Effects of gender-based violence in schools

Globally, gender-based violence against females is on the rise and affects people of all social classes, cultures, races, and religions (Olalere, 2022). While incidents of violence against girls in schools can take many different forms, including rape, sexual abuse, and harassment, Mayeza and Bhana (2021) point out that these incidents frequently occur in abandoned buildings on school grounds as well as in various parts of the school. Mnacube (2014) argues that when aggressive conduct towards female learners by male learners is normalised and not punished by teachers, an abnormal environment can be created inadvertently where sexual violence could be rife. According to Mahlalela (2022), there are several schools and rumours that the school management team is more preoccupied with the length of girls’ skirts than their actual education. They would rather send the girl home to make sure she isn’t a “distraction” to the boys in her class. They believe in speaking to the girls and telling them that they have no self-respect, instead of addressing the boys.

When rape and abuse cases do make it to court, they are occasionally so poorly probed or prosecuted that they are dismissed, according to The Citizen Editorials (2019). The substantial number of magistrates and criminal defence lawyers who are ignorant of even the most basic rape laws, and in particular, the statutory required mandatory minimum punishments for the crime, may be a more alarming aspect of the legal system (The Citizen Editorials, 2019). Comparatively to non-abused youths, learners who had experienced GBV were more likely to report poor academic performance and a higher percentage of school dropouts (Kennedy & Bennett, 2006). However, educational institutions struggle to adequately handle this problem (Panos Institute Beyond Victims and Villains, 2003). According to DCS (2019), many people no longer adhere to the values that characterise what it means to be an African, including the protection of girls and children and tolerance of difference. The International 16 Days of Activism campaign against women and children started in South Africa in 1991, but according to Gender Links (2012), the campaign has had a little measurable impact, government organisations and civil society organisations don’t work together, and there isn’t enough scientific data to support its claims. One significant drawback of GBV-preventative activities carried out by the state and NGOs is the fact that the efficacy of these interventions in preventing and eliminating GBV has not been fully evaluated (Gender Links, 2012). Since different organisations employ varied strategies to handle GBV, there is no single paradigm to follow. Furthermore, it is difficult to use comparative analysis to develop a comprehensive, fact-based strategy to handle GBV in South Africa. The existence of GBV prevents a country’s economy from operating at its maximum potential: “Aggregate demand is biased toward products and services linked to the effects of violence, diverting resources away from their best use and leading to a slower economic cycle and a lower standard of living. Lower productivity, decreased output and exports, as well as decreased savings and investments, all contribute to a reduction in the total supply. Due to the economic multiplier, where a rand loss equals simply a rand, the production decline is also significantly greater. Instead, it includes the money that was lost in spending and savings that were transferred to others to spend and save heavily.

Ending of gender-based violence in South African schools

Mdaka (2021) suggests that all stakeholders should co-participate in attempts to curb the brutal mentality seedlings in its roots. GBV may be a complicated problem requiring the commitment of all parties involved, including the government, social workers, clergy, civil society, law enforcement, non-governmental organizations, and various voters. Since GBV is a societal problem, all facets of society must take part. With help from parents, community members, teachers, and local and national governments, we can assist in ensuring that our schools are havens for teaching and learning and the institutions where our children grow in all personal, social, and academic dimensions (Mdaka, 2021). Additionally, Helton, Gochez-Kerr, and Gruber (2018) believe that parents play a crucial role in fostering an environment that is favourable to teaching and learning. God's justice permeates every societal sector, framework, and organisation such that each individual is affected by it in dealing with others and carrying out their responsibilities to the rest of creation (Makhado, 2016).

Some protective factors include having both formal and informal education, gaining job-related skills, having more financial resources and opportunities, and having social standards that support gender equality (Heise 1998). One of the most modern constitutions in the world ensures the rights to equality, human dignity, life, freedom, and personal security. The constitution of South Africa creates a framework for several pieces of legislation (Chitsamata & Rembe, 2020).

Schools can be earmarked as the places to put an end to gender-based violence. Beyene, Chojenta, Roba, Melka and Loxton (2019) gave evidence by saying that schools are also venues for discussion and possible implementation of efforts to prevent and end violence. Teachers need to be prepared to fight to end and prevent gender-based violence. Additionally, Mayeza and Bhana (2021) noted that teachers and learners see violence as a behaviour linked to psychological issues that people engage in. To have different viewpoints on GBV, children, men, and women need to receive various forms of education. Both formal and non-formal education are important spaces for normative change, with the capacity to handle gender inequities and stop GBV. The beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that promote societal cohesiveness, nation-building, and international harmony should be taught to young people. With this knowledge, the twenty-first-century youth will be better prepared to comprehend the connection between global and national citizenship (Parker, 2018).

What is more, in South Africa, there is growing attention to the role of the school in addressing and supporting vulnerable learners, as elucidated by the plethora of educational policies (Department of Education, 2005). Schools are places where violence can occur,
but they are also venues for discussion and possible implementation of efforts to prevent and end violence (Beyene, Chojenta, Roba, Melka, & Loxton, 2019). One of the roles required of teachers is the social protection of learners in the context of sexual and gender violence. Teachers need to be prepared to fight to end and prevent gender-based violence in their schools. On the other hand, according to Mayeza and Bhana (2021), some females reportedly complained that the school was too lenient with the misbehaving boys. In addition, Joubert (2020) indicated that people will undoubtedly make progress in the battle once young men are taught that females are on an equal footing with them and that sexual assault is an abhorrent crime. Some violence are more physically and/or emotionally damaging than others, and they may cause suicide, homicide, loss of self-worth, depression, self-harm, lower scholastic attainment, increased risk-taking behaviour, bodily harm, or even death.

Furthermore, as a result of the transformation of the South African curriculum, a new subject area called Life Orientation (LO) was developed to help and prepare learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and altering society (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2002b). With a focus on the development of the self in society, LO is concerned with the full social, personal, intellectual, emotional, and physical development of learners. LO is most qualified to perform a significant role in advancing human rights education. The LO outcomes demonstrate the importance and principle of human rights and call for their inclusion in LO learning programmes and classroom activities. Although LO is now a requirement, Parker (2018) proposed that it should be replaced with History. The DBE reportedly declared that History would become a required topic to replace LO (Tarr, 2018). Breakfast (2018), on the other hand, observes that gender problems haven't received much attention, and that the previous emphasis on great white men has simply been replaced with great black men. Therefore, females are not included in the history curriculum due to their gender. Vanner (2022) argues that gender-based violence issues should be positioned in the curriculum as essential knowledge, and taught with recognition of the gendered, racialised, and colonial influences that shape both risk and response to gender-based violence. Furthermore, according to Dlamini (2020), the South African government laid up a plan to solve GBV that included integrating women's rights within the school curriculum.

Legislation, strict enforcement, and legal action can only go so far in helping the government stop this scourge on its own. Thobejane (2019) contends that legislation prohibiting gender-based violence should be regulated. A community- and school-based intervention initiative is crucial to preventing gender-based violence against children and adolescents in settings like schools and communities. Once more, females must be given the confidence and independence to stand up for their rights and take charge of their own lives.

Theoretical frameworks

This paper firstly is driven by The Social Learning Theory developed by Albert Bandura (Nabavi, 2012), which considers the environment as influential in shaping the behaviour of an individual. The Social Learning Theory is a behaviourist approach that attempts to explain how people learn from one another, how social context affects behaviour, and how gender socialisation and male and female behaviour are influenced (Taole, 2016). According to the Social Learning Theory, individuals acquire new skills through modeling, gender socialisation, and imitation (Bandura, 1977). The studies of Bandura, Ross, and Ross in 1963 demonstrated that children learn to imitate the behaviour that they would have observed in others (Nabavi, 2012). Bandura and his colleagues identified three types of models that shape someone's behaviour (Navabi, 2012). From an early age, parents instill gender roles in their children, and certain behaviours are linked with males and females (Brent & Lewis, 2014). The social formation of gender can be influenced by interactions with parents, institutions, the media, and sports (Brent & Lewis, 2014). Socialisation is the process by which an individual adopts the values, attitudes, and behaviours of his or her neighbourhood (Brent & Lewis, 2014). The social environment has a big impact on how a person grows. In many societies, men are taught to be aggressive and domineering, while women are taught to be submissive and passive (MSI, 2008). Socialisation is what happens when the two factors that affect who we are—the influence of society and the influence of our interactions—combine. Since learners spend a lot of time interacting with peers in schools, those settings are crucial for gender socialisation (Taole, 2016). Schools support broader societal ideals like diversity and multiculturalism through the curriculum and peer interaction. The "corridor" curriculum and the "hidden curriculum" are used by the school to achieve this. The phrases "hidden curriculum" and "corridor curriculum" refer to ideas and knowledge that learners share outside of class along with principles that are subtly conveyed through the delivery of the standard curriculum (Brent & Lewis, 2014).

The Social Learning Theory is appropriate for this study because what goes on in classrooms is a reflection of what is going on in society. Chaos in the neighbourhoods where learners reside is an important catalyst for crime and violence (Taole, 2016). As an illustration, some adults give learners drugs to sell at school, while others in the neighbourhood market drugs to learners. Other times, children grow up in homes where significant adults, such as their parents or other family members, behave violently or aggressively. According to Bandura (1977), the likelihood that violent behaviour will be imitated and repeated rises when the model of the behaviour has a connection with the child or young person they are modeling the behaviour after. The establishment of societal norms and laws by society also serves as a socialisation agent. Given the position of authority men hold in society, for instance, men are permitted to act violently while women are not (Taole, 2016).

This paper also used The Power Control Theory which is a sociological theory that aims to explain gender differences in delinquency by focusing on the power dynamics present in families and the parental restraints placed on boys as opposed to girls (Taole, 2016). The role that power disparities play in gender-based violence is heavily stressed by one school of thought. According to the power control principle (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004), a violent party willfully uses violence to exercise and maintain control and power over another person. Additionally, Badr, Naser, Al-Zaabi, Al-Saeedi, Al-Munefi, Al-Houli, & Al-Rashidi (2018) reported that sexual
harassment is frequently committed as a display of dominance by one person over another in situations where there is already an unequal power relationship between the parties involved. Power can be used in a variety of ways, such as through decision-making, leadership, and rule-making (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). The Power Control Theory is appropriate for this paper because power could be used in more unfavourable and discriminatory ways, with varying degrees of severity. The taking of labour or services, psychological cruelty, silencing, verbal abuse, physical force, and sexual assault are just a few instances of how people can be silenced or excluded from society. Feminist scholars claim that males actively seek to maintain their power and control over women through acts of domestic violence, which are based on gender and power dynamics (Anderson, 1997).

Violence is thought to be a tactic used by males to maintain their dominance over women and keep them in their place. According to Foucault (1972), power is not a possession but rather something that is obtained through specific acts. This suggests that to act in a certain manner, power depends on the knowledge that is already widely accepted in society. Society socialises boys and girls to become macho and feminine adults because some behaviours are okay in males but not in females. The aforementioned theories provided the qualitative study with a useful analytical framework. As a result, the researcher perceived students as active participants in the construction of gender norms and identities.

Research design and methods

Based on the interpretive paradigm, an exploratory case study, which employed a qualitative research design, was adopted for this paper. Qualitative research was employed to obtain the information to explore rich information from the participants’ viewpoints, experiences, meanings and opinions on the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East district in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The exploration of the case study takes place through detailed, in-depth data collection methods, involving multiple sources of information that are rich in context, including semi-structured Key Informant Interviews and literature reviews (Mohajan, 2018; Qwabe et al., 2022). The literature review was conducted to identify the different forms of GBV, definition, causes, effects and ending of GBV in South African schools. The researcher positioned himself inside an interpretative paradigm based on Neuman’s (2006) views, who contends that an interpretive researcher's objective is to acquire knowledge of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural contexts. Moreover, this study used the purposive sample to select 15 participants, distributed as follows: 1 retired official from the DBE in the Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province; 3 retired Life Orientation teachers; 2 former principals; 2 previous members of school governing bodies (SGBs); 5 victim learners who were dropouts from secondary schools; and 2 retired social workers in the Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province.

The following reasons were used for the selection of participants in this study:

i. Victim learners who were dropouts were selected because they had rich information as they were eyewitnesses to the gender-based violence in their schools.
ii. Members of school governing bodies were selected on the basis that they are responsible for the governance of their schools and they witnessed what happened in their schools.
iii. Teachers were selected because they are frequently the first to observe girls being subjected to gender-based violence.
iv. Principals were selected because they are responsible for engaging with the relevant stakeholders for assistance and they are in charge of the schools where gender-based violence occurs.
vi. Social workers were selected on their placement at the school, where they assist learners with social, emotional, and growth issues. They also provide information to learners, parents, and employees.
v. An official from the DBE was selected because the office where he worked had received reports of gender-based violence against girls in the selected schools.

Data were collected through literature reviews and the application of semi-structured Key Informant Interviews by interviewing individuals with informed and rich views on understanding the impact of gender-based violence (Taylor & Blake, 2015) on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province and analysed using Thematic Analysis by pinpointing, examining, and recording themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study took advantage of these platforms as sources for its data. Themes and sub-themes were developed to assist the researcher in recording the collected information without difficulty (see Table 1).
Findings and discussions

The following themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa: Girls’ inability to exercise human rights and their right to an education, Lack of a well-resourced and strong criminal justice system in a country, possible dropouts in secondary schools, the rise of poor school performance; and strategies to curb gender-based violence in secondary schools.

Theme 1: Girls’ inability to exercise human rights and their right to an education

Results showed that girls could not exercise their human rights or their right to an education. Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2020) argued that the accessibility of all learners to a high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education as well as their capacity to become empowered and change their lives are severely jeopardised by the pervasive gender-based violence in and around schools. Additionally, Jacobs (2012) indicated that despite what is stated in various South African educational documents, South African schools do not promote democracy and the preservation of human rights. Similarly, Thobejane (2019) pointed out that gender-based violence is a violation of human rights. Thobejane (2019) also noted that even though gender-based violence violates human rights, societies, communities, and residents either personally experience it or observe it in their families and neighbourhoods and feel helpless to stop it. When women are abused, human rights are violated. On the other hand, The South African Constitution emphasises equality and equal rights, although the country is still largely patriarchal (South African History Online (SAHO), 2019). All people have the right to equal security under the law, access to justice, and equality before the law, according to Singh and Power (2019). Girls need to be treated fairly. Schools have been challenged by the proliferation of GBV among learners. The prevalence of GBV among learners has presented difficulties for schools. Gender socialisation should be emphasised in our schools as learners spend a lot of time interacting with one another. Thus Social Learning Theory should be the answer to teach learners how to learn from one another.

Theme 2: Lack of a well-resourced and strong criminal justice system in the country

The findings showed that a country’s criminal justice system lacked both resources and strength. There are serious problems with the criminal justice system in South Africa. According to Tsewu (2020), offenders are frequently not handled harshly enough. South Africa needs a strong and well-funded criminal justice system because its current one is inefficient at protecting the system. The Citizen Editorials (2019) revealed that when rape and abuse cases do make it to court, they are occasionally so poorly probed or prosecuted that they are dismissed. Unfortunately, judges may release the perpetrators for gender based violence while magistrates seem to be corrupt. As a result learners keep quiet or lose faith in the authorities since they fail to apprehend the offenders. South Africa requires legislation to safeguard children as many young people have little faith in the legal system, much less the police. It is challenging to believe that the legal system will adequately meet the needs of victimised girls. A review of the criminal justice system is necessary. It would seem that the best way to combat GBV against learners in South Africa is to reform the criminal justice system. The absence of police reports from females in these incidents is a blatant sign of lawlessness in the country. Protection of learners in schools needs to be looked into. Human Rights violations against girls should be considered.

Table 1: Data collection template designed from public opinion

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<th>Theme</th>
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<th>Designation</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Lack of a well-resourced and strong criminal justice system in the country</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td>Possible dropouts in secondary schools</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>The rise of poor school performance</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>Strategies to curb gender-based violence in secondary schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Researcher’s design

From the platforms, comments were entered in appropriate columns in the notebook following the theme category as provided in Table 1. The themes (1–5) were to provide the framework for the analysis and subsequent discussion of the study results. The idea was to capture as much data as possible until saturation was reached. As the reviewed comments were unpredictable in their data sources, no fixed number of data sources for a given theme could be determined in advance. In other words, the data sources were not even organised by respective themes. The researcher observed that the method enabled the paper to collect data from a broad base of data sources. Although the researcher did this for interest’s sake and not for capturing in the study, most of the data sources emanated from both previous members of school governing bodies, followed by the retired social workers, girls dropping out of school, retired LO teachers and former principals and retired official from DBE in the Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The captured data were analysed using a thematic analysis. Results were captured and documented as the main report.

Table 1: Data collection template designed from public opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Girls’ inability to exercise their human rights and right to an education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Lack of a well-resourced and strong criminal justice system in the country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Possible dropouts in secondary schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>The rise of poor school performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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Theme 3: The rise of poor school performance

The study found that girls score poorly academically. Leach et al. (2014) and Mayeza and Bhana (2021) both find that South Africans’ academic achievement is impacted. South African girls in particular are susceptible to gender-based violence. Girls may be discouraged from engaging fully in class and striving for academic success out of concern that they will draw unwanted attention from their peers. According to Mayeza and Bhana (2021), learners who experience bullying at school frequently perform poorly academically. The detrimental effects of gender-based violence include poor school performance. Learners’ rise of poor school performance is a concern to all stakeholders. Leach et al. (2014) revealed that the negative impact of gender-based violence includes low performance in schools by learners. A notable example is how teachers’ tolerance of boys’ dominance of the physical and verbal space in the classroom and on the playground, verbal abuse, and the fear of punishment makes learning stressful and intimidating for girls, reduce concentration and motivation, and contribute to low self-esteem and poor performance. Low achievement in turn increases the risk of dropout.

Theme 4: Possible dropouts in secondary schools

According to Qwabe and Maluleke and Olutola (2022), gender-based violence in schools negatively impacts educational systems, leading to possible dropouts. It emerged from the study that unsatisfactory drop-out rates for girls in secondary schools prevailed. The rise of dropouts brings the end of learners’ vision and their future. An intimidating classroom environment and fear of sexual advances by other learners can lead to a loss of interest in school, truancy, and dropout among girls, resulting in lost opportunities for cognitive development, future careers, and improved socio-economic status. Additionally, Mayeza and Bhana (2021) pointed out that some learners drop out of school, and for many of them, this has an impact on their social and personal growth. The dropouts can also involve themselves in crimes, robberies, theft, and gangsterism. The benefits of education can also be enjoyed by the few. The Bill of Rights and education and the Constitution of South Africa should be emphasised so that the right to education and the violation of human rights should be taken into account. Similarly, Leach et al. (2014) echoed that the negative impact of gender-based violence on girls includes skipping school or dropping out.

Theme 5: Strategies to curb gender-based violence in secondary schools

All of the participants agreed that GBV should be taught as a subject in schools and that the curriculum should be revised to reflect this. According to Vanner (2022), gender-based violence issues should be included in the curriculum as fundamental information and taught while acknowledging the gendered, racialised, and colonial influences that shape gender-based violence risk and response. Dlamini (2020) asserts that the South African government should lay up a plan to solve GBV that included integrating women’s rights within the school curriculum. GBV should be taught in schools to address the persistent issue in South Africa and the rest of the globe. If GBV is taught in schools, it is believed that learners will grow up understanding what it means to abuse in the future. It is thought that if GBV is taught in schools, children will grow up knowing what it means to abuse and violate in the future. The rights of children should be taught in schools, and respect for women and girls must be expected. GBV against learners must be handled from a different viewpoint and through a different curriculum rather than using the same ineffective strategies. Urban and Teise (2015) cautioned once more that a safe, orderly, and clean school environment is essential for successful teaching and learning. However, Thobejane (2019) argues that to combat gender-based violence, policymakers must control the laws that will be implemented. Thus the Power Control Theory will be the solution. Additionally, social workers could contribute by developing early intervention techniques that could be used to stop the epidemic of gender-based violence against girls in schools (Thobejane, 2019).

Again, it emerged from the study that girls should break the silence and start reporting the perpetrators to law enforcement agencies. Mahlalela (2022) speaks out about her experiences as a young woman growing up in a violent culture and her refusal to remain quiet about gender-based violence in her country. Naidoo (2023) contends that there is a great deal of silence from our male counterparts about what is happening to females in general. Gender-based violence has a terrible overall effect on females. Similarly, Combrinck (2022) and Joubert (2020) pointed out that girls should speak out rather than keep your mouth shut and they cannot continue to remain silent because doing nothing to stop these atrocities is also wrong. According to Joubert (2020), communities should start discussions that will help with detection and prevention rather than collude in silence, encouraging the commission of cowardly acts of chauvinism by vile men. Finally, Motshokega (2020) urged society to stand up and report these gender-related crimes to the authorities. In the nationwide campaign to stop gender-based violence against women and children, the Department of Basic Education plays a role.

The study also suggests that the school could alter some policies to prevent GBV. It will continue to be tough to stop violence because the country’s judicial system is inefficient. Participants made it abundantly obvious that the campaigns to raise consciousness about gender-based violence should be strong enough or theory-driven enough to change people's behaviour. Even though there are many awareness campaigns, they are poorly executed. The Social Learning Theory is relevant because what goes on in the classrooms is a reflection of what is going on in society.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to investigate the impact of gender-based violence on girls in the selected secondary schools in the Vhembe East District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. An interpretive paradigm was used to frame this qualitative case study. In this
paper, gender-based violence in schools was examined using the Social Learning Theory and Power Control Theory. GBV should be covered in the South African school curriculum because it was claimed that the only way to end GBV is through formal education in the Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province. There is an urgent need for a country with a well-resourced and robust criminal justice system because there isn’t now one. Legislation, strict enforcement, and legal action can only go so far in helping the government stop this scourge on its own. To end gender-based violence against girls, all stakeholders in our society and law enforcement authorities should collaborate more closely than they currently do. Equally, every school should have an intervention team to deal with the impact of gender-based violence on girls in secondary schools in the Vhembe East District. To prevent impeding children’s rights to education and the core of human dignity, the government should step up its quest for a reliable way to integrate gender-based violence as a subject into the South African school curriculum. Teachers should examine their attitudes and experiences about gender and violence to effectively address gender-based violence. Schools can be efficiently turned into places of safety and learning as well as into settings where learners feel protected, valued, and nurtured by using numerous tactics. Again, girls, teachers, and principals should break the silence and start reporting the perpetrators to law enforcement agencies.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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