GBV IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST:
Evidence, Policies and Research Priorities

Gender-based violence (GBV) is highly prevalent in universities and other institutions of higher learning, but still poorly understood in many parts of the world. Most research, to date, has been done on high-income countries, while much less is known about what happens in Africa and the Middle East.To address these gaps, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), conducted an 18-month mixed-method study. The study included:

1. Reviewing published literature (2010–2023) on GBV in HEIs in Africa and the Middle East (in Arabic, English, French and Spanish).
2. Analysing GBV-related policies across universities in Africa and the Middle East.
3. Identifying and establishing key priority research questions or themes on GBV in HEIs for the next five to ten years, with 126 researchers, practitioners, and academics from LMICs

KEY FINDINGS
Scoping Review: Evidence on GBV in HEIs in Africa and the Middle-East

Of the 248 studies reviewed, the majority were concentrated in just five countries - Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, South Africa, and Nigeria - leaving much of the remainder of Africa and the middle east underexplored. The evidence is uneven: studies vary in quality, are often fragmented and methodologically inconsistent, and frequently overlook the experiences of staff and marginalised groups, including students with disabilities and LGBTQI+ populations.

• **Scale of the Problem:** GBV is widespread across higher education institutions in Africa and the Middle East. Prevalence rates are consistently high but vary depending on study design and setting. In Ethiopia, for example, reported rates of sexual violence range from 21% to 61%, and sexual harassment from 52% to 80%[1,2,3]. Similar patterns are found in Egypt, where up to 65.3% of students reported experiencing harassment in one of the studies analysed[4].

Scoping review

4 Languages
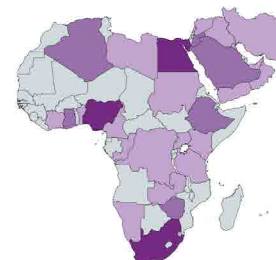Arabic, English, French and Portuguese

13 Years
January 2010 to December 2023

248 papers
Literature concentrated in certain sub-regions and countries, particularly larger, middle-income countries, including Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa

Policy study

Desk review
Of 84 GBV policies from 75 universities

22 KIIs
With university focal points

Research priority setting

5 Domains
- Understanding the issue
- Perceptions, norms and institutional cultures
- Impacts and consequences of GBV
- Interventions and policies
- Measures and methodologies

4 FGDs
In Arabic, English and French, with 33 experts including researchers, practitioners and university focal points

Online ranking survey
In Arabic, English and French, with 93 experts from civil society, universities and other institutions

1 Temesgan, W.Z., Endale, Z.M., Aynalem, G.L., (2021). Sexual violence and associated factors among female night college students after joining the college in Debre Markos town, North West Ethiopia, 2019. Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health 10, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cegh.2020.100689

2 Esayas, H.L., Gemeda, H., Melese, T., Birgoda, G.T., Terefe, B., Abebe, S., Bekele, M., Wolde, F., Birie, B., (2023). Sexual violence and risk factors among night shift female college students in Hawassa city, South Ethiopia, 2020. BMC Women's Health 23, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-02150-w

3 Mamaru, A., Getachew, K., Mohammed, Y., (2015). Prevalence of physical, verbal and nonverbal sexual harassments and their association with psychological distress among Jimma university female students: A cross-sectional study. Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences 25, 29–38. https://doi.org/10.4314/ejhs.v25i1.5

4 Elmohsen Abo el Nour, R.A., Ahmad Shafik, S., Mohamed Saad, A., (2022). Assessment of Female Students Knowledge and Self-esteem regarding Sexual Harassment at Beni-Suef University. Helwan International Journal for Nursing Research and Practice 1, 1–14.

- **Forms of Abuse:** On campus, harassment takes many forms. Students report verbal and physical harassment, "sex for grades" - with about four in ten Nigerian students saying it occurs - and staff-perpetrated abuse[5]. Other harmful behaviours such as bullying, microaggressions, and online abuse are also emerging concerns but remain far less studied.

- **Impact on Survivors:** The effects of GBV in higher education can be profound and enduring. Survivors often face deep psychosocial harm, including shame, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts[6,7,8]. For students, GBV can derail academic pathways leading to poor performance, disrupted studies, or dropping out altogether [9,10]. Staff are not immune, with many experiencing job insecurity and stalled careers as a result.

> *... they [survivors] hesitate to submit written complaints because they fear being summoned with their families involved. They feel they are the ones who will lose in the end. They say, "I will be the one prevented from attending university, and my fate will be to stay at home." So, they only share their experiences to inform me about what is happening, without filing official complaints.* (Key Informant Interviewee)

Policy Review: Existing Policies on GBV in HEIs in Africa and the Middle-East

A review of nearly 1,000 university websites across Africa and the Middle East found only 84 GBV-related policies from 75 institutions – fewer than 10% institutions had policies in the public domain. Even where policies exist, implementation is uneven, hampered by limited resources, stigma, and weak accountability. Institutions that establish student support units, train staff, and run peer-led prevention programmes show stronger reporting and responsiveness.

20 key informant interviews with focal staff on GBV policies in various universities reveal several barriers to successful implementation of policies. This include lack of funding, poor buy-in from senior management, and concerns about reputational risk that can drive cover-ups and a reluctance to act decisively on cases of staff-perpetrated GBV.

> *Recently a student filed a complaint against a professor through the university presidency. There were messages from the harassing professor. The university asked the professor to submit his resignation to avoid being expelled.* (Key Informant Interviewee)

Studies from South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe highlight the promise of peer education and bystander engagement in shifting attitudes and behaviours, particularly among male students[11,12,13]. Digital tools piloted in the MENA region, such as e-learning platforms and gaming apps, have improved cyber safety awareness and reduced online bullying[14,15]. Yet most policies still neglect intersectionality, with minimal inclusion of LGBTQI+ people and students with disabilities.
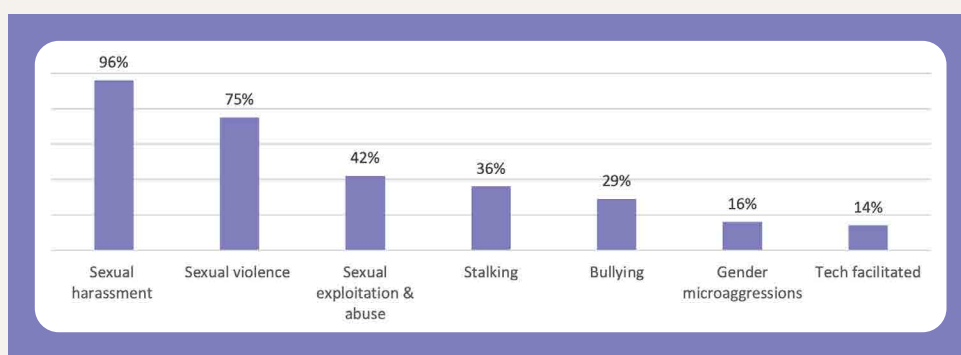

Figure 1: Type of GBV addressed in policies

5 Aina-Pelemo, A.D., Oke, O.A., Alade, I.T., 2021. Quid pro quo sexual harassment: Comparative study of its occurrences in selected institutions in South-West, Nigeria. Current Research in Behavioral Sciences 2, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2021.100031
6 AlMulhim, A.A., Nasir, M., AlThukair, A., AlNasser, M., Pikard, J., Ahmer, S., Ayub, M., Elmadih, A., Naeem, F., 2018. Bullying among medical and nonmedical students at a university in Eastern Saudi Arabia. J Family Community Med 25, 211–216. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfcm.JFCM_92_17
7 Ben Salem, K., 2020. The psychological effects of cyberbullying and proactive coping strategies: from the perspective of media and communication students at Adrar University. Journal of Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences 3, 75–107.
8 Omar, Z.O.A.J., 2020. Cyberbullying and its relationship to some psychological disorders among university students: a predictive study. The future of Arab education 27, 319–362.
9 Imonikhe, J., Aluede, O., Idogho, P., 2011. A Survey of Teachers' and Students' Perception of Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions of Edo State, Nigeria. ASS 8, 268–274. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n1p268
10 Makhaye, M.S., Mkhize, S.M., Sibanyoni, E.K., 2023. Female students as victims of sexual abuse at institutions of higher learning: insights from Kwazulu-natal, South Africa. SN Soc Sci 3, 40. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00611-z
11 de Villiers, T., 2016. Engaging male university student leaders in the adaptation process of the one man can intervention (OMCI) to inform sexual violence prevention strategies in student residences: a case study. PhD Dissertation, University of Cape Town.
12 Rominski, S., Darteh, E., Munro-Kramer, M., 2017. An intervention to reduce sexual violence on university campus in Ghana: a pilot test of Relationship Tidbits at the University of Cape Coast. The Lancet Global Health, CUGH 8th annual conference 5, S25. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(17)30132-8
13 Machisa, M.T., Mahlangu, Pinky., Chirwa, Esnat., Nunze, Ncediswa., Sikweyiya, Yandisa., Dartnall, Elizabeth., Pillay, Managa., Jewkes, Rachel., 2023. Ntombi Vimbela! Sexual violence risk reduction intervention: pre and one-year post assessments from a single arm pilot feasibility study among female students in South Africa. BMC Public Health 23, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16149-x
14 Fares, N.M., 2013. The effectiveness of self-directed e-learning in developing the concepts of protection from electronic bullying and the ability to self-organize among students of the Faculty of Specific Education at South Valley University. College of Education Journal 29, 232–279.
15 Sadati, Hani., Mitchell, C., 2021. Serious Game Design as Research-Creation to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. International Journal of Qualitative Methods 20, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211046130

Priority Setting Process: Shared Research Priorities for GBV in HEIs

Research priority setting exercise adapted the Child Health and Nutrition Research Initiative (CHNRI) approach, that pools individual rankings of research priorities and reduces the dominance of the voices of a few, powerful stakeholders. The CHNRI was adapted through four key methodological steps:

1. **Domain development:** Developing a set of domains to guide the classification of research questions.

2. **Generation of questions:** Drawing from the systematic review and policy study results to generate a set of research questions to address evidence gaps.

3. **Focus group discussions:** Conducting four focus group discussions (FGDs) in Arabic, English and French with 33 experts in the field to validate research questions and expand understanding of research priorities.

4. **Online ranking survey:** Disseminating an online survey to rank research questions, completed by 93 experts (researchers, academics and practitioners) in the field.

Top Two Research Priority Questions per Domain

Domain	Research Questions
1. Understanding the issue	What is the prevalence of and risk and protective factors for different types of GBV in higher education institutions, including under-researched forms of GBV (e.g., 'sex for grades', gender micro-aggressions, and technology-facilitated GBV) and among under-researched groups (e.g., LGBTQI+ individuals and people with disabilities)? What are the demographic and contextual characteristics of GBV perpetrators in higher education institutions (distinguishing between staff and student offenders), and which risk and protective factors predict their likelihood of perpetration?
2. Perceptions, norms and institutional cultures	What is the impact of normative barriers—measured through indices of stigma, shame, and victim-blaming attitudes on GBV survivors' help-seeking, case reporting, and access to services in higher education institutions, and how does this vary across different intersectional groups (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic background)? What role do peer norms and informal social networks play in reinforcing or mitigating GBV within higher education settings, and how do these social dynamics affect the willingness of individuals to report incidents or intervene in potential cases?
3. Impacts and consequences of GBV	What are the quantifiable short- and long-term educational and professional consequences of GBV for students and staff in higher education institutions, as measured by indicators such as academic performance, retention and graduation rates, and career progression? How do the health, psychosocial, and educational impacts of GBV differ according to intersectional characteristics (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, and disability) in higher education settings?
4. GBV interventions and policies	How effective are GBV prevention interventions in reducing the incidence of GBV in higher education institutions, including those targeting social norms and behaviour change, and how does this vary across intersectional groups (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity)? To what extent do GBV awareness-raising interventions, including targeted communications campaigns, in higher education settings affect the frequency of GBV reporting and the utilisation of support services?
5. Measures and methodologies	What are the most reliable / valid / sensitive standardised tools for measuring sexual harassment in higher education settings, including online and offline forms of harassment? Which research methodologies including non-experimental approaches, qualitative methods, and participatory designs provide the most robust and actionable evaluation of the effectiveness of GBV prevention initiatives in higher education settings?

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: PLATFORMS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

As centres of higher learning, universities and colleges should embody the highest standards of ethics, responsibility and care. They are places where new ideas are tested and knowledge is generated, but this innovation must happen in environments that are safe for all. Universities shape the next generation of leaders, professionals and policymakers; if they fail to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, they risk perpetuating harmful norms into the wider world. With their resources, research capacity, and global influence, higher education institutions are uniquely placed to pioneer and scale solutions, serve as role models for other sectors, and fulfil their duty of care to students and staff.

Yet despite this potential, higher education institutions remain underutilised platforms for systemic change. Their structured environments offer defined settings where policies, programmes and accountability mechanisms can be systematically applied and monitored. With large populations of young people at formative stages of adulthood, universities are well-positioned to challenge harmful social norms and ensure that women and girls can pursue their education free from violence and discrimination.

Governance and administrative systems provide clear lines of responsibility for prevention, safeguarding and redress, while health and counselling services, student organisations and communication channels can be harnessed for support and awareness. As centres of knowledge production and innovation, universities and colleges should also be leading in generating, evaluating and adapting interventions, modelling best practice for other sectors.

While some promising initiatives exist—including peer-led programmes and digital tools—these remain too few, too small in scale, and inadequately evaluated. Survivors continue to face stigma and weak institutional support, underscoring the urgent need for stronger, more accountable systems. HEIs must rise to the challenge and serve as bridges linking schools, workplaces and communities in broader efforts to end gender-based violence.

Moving Ahead Requires Coordinated Action and Investment

- **Implement survivor-centred policies and accountability systems** backed by trained staff and clear lines of responsibility.

- **Challenge stigma and silence** through visible leadership and safe spaces for open dialogue.

- **Fund research** to expand the evidence base, addressing gaps and overlooked groups, including staff and patterns of perpetration.

- **Scale proven interventions** beyond pilots into sustainable institutional and national frameworks.

- **Invest in research capacity and infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries,** enabling local scholars and institutions to lead and apply evidence for long-term change.

Without sustained funding and a stronger commitment, higher education institutions will remain underutilised and fail to fulfil their potential as engines of systemic change. We must expect—and demand—more of them.

More information and all research outputs from this work are available online here.