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GBV IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Evidence, Policies and Research Priorities

Gender-based violence (GBV) in higher education institutions (HEIs) is a pervasive but underresearched issue in low - and middle-income countries. While HEIs in high-income countries, particularly the U.S., have received extensive scholarly attention, low - and middle-income countries contexts in Africa and the Middle East remain understudied. 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:

- Review published literature (2010–2023) on GBV in HEIs in Africa and the Middle East to identify main research gaps.
- Analysis of GBV-related policies and interviewing university staff across HEIs in Africa and the Middle East.
- Identification of key gaps and research directions through a priority-setting exercise with 126 of researchers, practitioners, and academics.

WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US

Prevalence is high, but evidence is limited



- **Scale of the Problem:** Sexual violence and harassment are widespread in universities. According to our [scoping review](#), in Ethiopia, up to six in ten female students report sexual violence, and in Egypt almost all female students report harassment. In Nigeria, staff harassment is common, with some studies finding nearly all female staff affected. Yet, evidence from the Middle East and North Africa remains very limited, leaving major gaps in understanding and prevention.
- **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. Other harmful behaviours such as bullying, microaggressions, and online abuse are also emerging concerns but remain far less studied.
- **Impact on Survivors:** The consequences are severe and long-lasting. Survivors often struggle with shame, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. Gender-based violence can derail academic pathways, disrupt studies, endanger careers, and steal futures for both students and staff.

POLICY REVIEW: UNIVERSITIES SHOULD BE INCUBATORS OF GOOD PRACTICE

As spaces of research and innovation, universities are uniquely placed to pioneer and model effective responses, generate policy frameworks, and promote research that addresses key evidence gaps. They also shape the next generation of leaders, professionals and policymakers, serving as role models for other sectors. Therefore, universities and colleges should embody the highest standards of ethics, responsibility and care. Yet, too often they fail to provide survivors with safety, support, and justice.

- **Policy scarcity:** Fewer than 10% of more than 1,000 universities reviewed across Africa and MENA had policies in the public domain. Fewer policies were found in Central and North Africa; GBV policies were harder to find in Central and North Africa, but more common in Southern and East Africa, and in Egypt and Jordan in the Middle East.
- **Policies and services exist but are weak:** Survivors are too often failed by systems that lack accountability, are not consistently implemented, and do not deliver justice.
- **Weak inclusivity:** Less than 40% of the policies mention disability; LGBTQI+ protections are largely absent.
- **Policy implementation:** Policy success is linked to leadership commitment, trained staff, and peer education. Yet most policies still neglect LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities.



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URGENT NEED FOR RESEARCH

- There is an urgent need for stronger research to understand what works, for whom, and in which contexts. Current studies are fragmented and inconsistent, with major gaps on staff experiences, students with disabilities, LGBTQI+ populations, and on perpetration. Without better evidence, universities cannot design effective responses or prevent future harm.

WHAT SHOULD FUTURE RESEARCH FOCUS ON?

One of the top research priority areas identified by experts in the priority setting exercise is **understanding perceptions, norms, and institutional cultures - specifically, how institutional cultures** either support or block efforts to prevent and respond to GBV. A key focus is on how stigma, victim-blaming and denial of GBV within higher education institutions shape harmful norms, hinder progress, and discourage survivors from seeking help.

[Check our research agenda](#)

“The blame is always placed on the student—people assume she must have initiated it [...] He remains untouched.”
Policy review participant

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities must lead on evidence and action

- Strengthen survivor-centred policies:** Put survivors at the heart of university responses by ensuring access to support and justice, tackling denial and victim-blaming, and creating safe spaces for dialogue and redress.
- Establish accountability systems:** Use universities' structured environments to model best practice with transparent reporting, trained staff, and clear lines of responsibility that can be monitored and enforced.
- Support research to expand the evidence base:** Universities are the perfect place to advance this research agenda: with the right investment, they can build the evidence, strengthen capacity, and create the infrastructure needed for higher education institutions in low- and middle-income countries to generate and apply knowledge for lasting change.

Governments and funders must back policy embedded in research

- Invest in building evidence:** Fund research to advance the research agenda and fill critical knowledge gaps. Provide universities with the capacity and infrastructure to generate evidence and apply the findings into models for prevention and response.
- Embed evidence in GBV frameworks:** Ensure laws, policies, and procedures are grounded in evidence and consistently implemented so survivors can access real protection and justice.
- Support scaling effective interventions:** Use successful pilots to inform national and institutional programmes and policies.

More information and all research outputs from this work are available online [here](#).



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