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Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinary Perspectives

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About this journal

The *International Journal of African Reflections (IJAR)*, which is housed at iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu, publishes multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary peer-reviewed articles that encourage and support researchers in all fields and disciplines, especially female, black and young researchers, by providing a platform to publish their work with the aim of eventually obtaining an NRF rating. The journal also intends to act as a facilitator in building a cohort of scholars from among the master's, doctoral and postdoctoral graduate students through the articles that are published in the journal. It is hoped that new epistemological ideas will emerge, and that this will contribute to improving the quality of teaching, research and learning.

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Preface

It is my privilege to present Volume 3 (2026) of the *International Journal of African Reflections* (*IJAR*), a scholarly platform that embodies iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu's commitment to disseminating knowledge that is intellectually rigorous, socially responsive and firmly rooted in African realities. This issue brings together researchers from the humanities, social sciences, law, health sciences and economics to examine some of the defining questions of our time: gender justice, historical memory, land governance, Indigenous knowledge, technological change, institutional accountability, public health and sustainable development. Its interdisciplinary reach reflects a fundamental truth: the challenges confronting Africa do not respect disciplinary boundaries and our responses cannot remain confined within them.

At iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu we understand that a university is not simply a place where existing knowledge is transmitted but a public institution with a duty to imagine, test and build better futures. Our Vision 2040+ is anchored in the aspiration to become a technology-infused African university that is locally responsive, continentally consequential and globally engaged. This vision calls upon us to draw intellectual strength from our location while refusing intellectual isolation; to use technology without surrendering human judgement, and to pursue academic excellence in ways that improve the lives of the communities we serve. The *IJAR* contributes directly to this purpose by creating a credible space in which African experiences generate concepts, evidence and solutions of wider significance.

Vision 2040+ is given practical direction through the university's three signature themes: Food Futures; One Health, and Leadership, Justice and Governance. These themes are not separate institutional compartments: together, they recognise that human flourishing depends on the relationship between sustainable livelihoods, healthy communities, ecological resilience, ethical institutions and responsible leadership. The contributions to this volume illuminate these relationships precisely. Research on external debt and agricultural development reveals the fiscal conditions that can advance or impede food security and rural transformation. Scientific enquiry into the bioactivity of medicinal plants brings indigenous and community-based knowledge into productive conversation with experimental research while opening up opportunities for health innovation. Studies of land boards, apartheid regulation, gendered violence and institutional power demonstrate that development cannot be separated from justice, legitimacy and accountable governance.

The volume also engages directly with the technological future of higher education. Artificial intelligence is already altering the way universities teach, learn, conduct research and administer their responsibilities. Yet technology is never transformative merely because it is new: its value depends on whether it advances equitable access, strengthens human capability and serves clearly defined educational purposes. The analysis of AI adoption in South African higher education, together with the dialogue on literary criticism, pedagogy and the digital humanities, underscores the importance of infrastructure, digital literacy, ethical governance and critical judgement. This is central to our Vision 2040+ ambition. A technology-infused African university must be technologically capable, but it must also remain intellectually independent, ethically grounded and attentive to any inequalities that may be reproduced through innovation.

Equally important is the volume's insistence that language and interpretation are forms of social action. The analysis of feminist speech acts in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dear Ijeawele …* shows how language can challenge inherited assumptions and direct new practices. Historical research into the criminalisation of interracial relationships under apartheid reveals the opposite possibility: law and official language can classify, stigmatise and control human beings. These contributions remind us that knowledge is never detached from power. The terms through which society describes gender, race, authority, land, health and development influence what institutions permit, prohibit or neglect. Universities therefore carry a special responsibility to cultivate critical literacy: the capacity to identify the assumptions embedded in dominant categories and to formulate more just ways of understanding the world.

This responsibility is particularly urgent for an institution bearing the name of Walter Max Ulyate Sisulu. His legacy represents principled leadership, disciplined service, social justice and an enduring belief in people's capacity to transform their circumstances through collective action. To honour that name, the university must ensure that its scholarship is measured not only by quantity or visibility, but also by its integrity, relevance and impact. Research must confront the lived realities of rural and historically marginalised communities; strengthen democratic institutions; protect human dignity, and contribute to a more equitable distribution of knowledge and opportunity. *IJAR* serves this mandate by enabling scholars to respond to Africa's problems without reducing the continent to a catalogue of deficiencies. It foregrounds African agency, intellectual creativity and the capacity to produce solutions.

The geographical position of iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu gives this mission particular force. Our campuses are located within communities

that experience the opportunities and contradictions of contemporary development up close. Questions of rural livelihoods, public health, land, educational access, language, technology and governance are not distant research themes; they shape the everyday lives of our students, staff and surrounding communities. Vision 2040+ requires us to transform this proximity into a scholarly advantage. Community engagement must inform research questions; research must strengthen teaching; teaching must prepare graduates to act with competence and social responsibility, and innovation must yield benefits beyond the boundaries of the university.

The *IJAR* is therefore more than a publication outlet. It is part of the knowledge infrastructure through which our university advances research excellence, supports emerging and established scholars, strengthens interdisciplinary exchange and extends African scholarship into international conversations. A strong university journal safeguards rigorous peer review, promotes intellectual independence and preserves a public record of enquiry. It also enlarges the range of voices and contexts represented in global knowledge. For African universities, this work is essential to epistemic justice: not the rejection of global scholarship, but fuller and more equitable participation in its production, evaluation and circulation.

I commend the authors in this issue for having researched and placed on record difficult questions with methodological seriousness and a commitment to evidence-based knowledge dissemination. I thank the reviewers for the careful and often unseen intellectual labour through which the quality of scholarly publication is secured. I also acknowledge the Managing Editor, the Editorial Board, and the production team for sustaining *IJAR* and bringing this volume to completion. Their collective work demonstrates the institutional commitment required to convert research into an enduring scholarly resource.

As readers engage with this third volume of *IJAR*, I invite them to consider not only the individual findings in its articles but also the shared challenge they present. What kinds of universities, technologies, laws, economies and knowledge systems are needed for Africa's people to flourish? Vision 2040+ calls on iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu to help answer that question through courageous scholarship and purposeful action. The future we seek will not be produced by aspiration alone; it will be built on evidence, ethical leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration and sustained accountability to society.

This volume is a meaningful contribution to that undertaking. It affirms our confidence that African universities can generate the highest-quality knowledge while remaining responsive to place, community and history. It also renews our conviction that scholarly

reflection must lead to transformation. May the ideas gathered here stimulate further research, deepen institutional debate and inspire partnerships that advance healthy communities, sustainable livelihoods, justice and human dignity across the Eastern Cape, South Africa, the African continent, and beyond.

Prof Thandi Mgwebi
Vice-Chancellor and Principal
iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu

Africa in transformation

Knowledge, power and institutional responsibility

Editorial for Volume 3 (2026)

This third volume of the *International Journal of African Reflections* (*IJAR*) brings together nine contributions that examine the ways in which knowledge, power and institutional responsibility shape African lives. Moving between history, gender studies, biomedical research, higher education, economics, land law, literary pragmatics, palliative care and the humanities, the volume asks what makes scholarship answerable to the societies it studies. Its coherence emerges from a shared concern with the conditions under which people acquire recognition, exercise agency, secure livelihoods and receive care. The contributions approach these concerns through different methods and at different scales, demonstrating why African scholarship needs both disciplinary precision and sustained conversation across fields.

The volume affirms Africa as a site of knowledge production, theoretical reflection and methodological enquiry. Its studies engage inherited inequalities together with contemporary pressures, attending to the institutions through which both are reproduced or challenged. Read in their published sequence, they move from the coercive regulation of intimate life and the vulnerabilities of university students to questions of scientific investigation, technological change, economic development and land governance. Feminist language, culturally responsive care and the renewal of literary criticism extend this enquiry into the meanings and practices through which social transformation becomes possible. Together, these contributions give substance to *IJAR*'s commitment to multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary scholarship grounded in African realities.

The opening article, AA Marwarwa and M Petse's '"The forbidden fruit": The consequences of interracial sexual relationships in apartheid South Africa', examines the 1952 case of Olaf Abraham Voster and Nomathemba Emily Nomatiti in Umtata. Through this case, the authors trace the operation of the Immorality Act 5 of 1927 and the consequences of racial regulation for those brought within its reach. Their historical analysis shows how racial domination entered intimate life through policing, prosecution and punishment. The case also directs attention to the unequal vulnerabilities of the people involved: racialised law operated within existing differences of status and power. By connecting a particular legal proceeding to a wider system of exclusion, the article demonstrates the value of archival

research to recovering the human consequences of institutionalised discrimination.

Questions of power and vulnerability continue in Keneilwe Wanthitha Mashishi, Mahlodi Monica Rebecca Makupula, Jabulani Gilford Kheswa and Mvuyisi Notole's study of sexual harassment and the mental well-being of female students at a South African tertiary institution. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with ten participants and guided by Power and Control Theory, the authors examine student experiences shaped by poverty, patriarchal norms, alcohol abuse and unequal relations of authority. The accounts reveal the consequences for psychological well-being and academic participation that institutional policy alone cannot adequately describe. The study recommends ongoing counselling, empowerment programmes and education on sexual harassment policies. Its place after the historical article establishes a consequential connection: the protection of dignity requires attention to be given the way power is exercised in everyday relationships, and also to the formal rules intended to govern them. For universities, student safety must surely be integral to the conditions that make learning possible.

The third contribution turns to the investigation of medicinal plants. Azola Zukisani Ntshobane, Elona Ngqayimbane, Suparna Chakraborty, Saif Khan and Talkmore Ngarivhume screen extracts of *Drimia altissima* and *Crinum macrophyllum* bulbs for anticancer, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory activity. Their laboratory findings identify promising responses in selected extracts, including activity against cervical cancer cell lines and strong inhibition in an anti-inflammatory assay. These are results obtained from laboratory screenings; they establish grounds for further investigation rather than clinical effectiveness. The authors accordingly call for the isolation and characterisation of active compounds. Their article contributes to this volume by showing how medicinal plant use can inform research questions that are then examined through controlled experimentation. Its significance rests in the disciplined movement from biological resources and medicinal knowledge towards evidence that can support further scientific enquiry.

ST Pika's exploration of the adoption of artificial intelligence in South African higher education shifts our attention to the infra-structures through which knowledge is taught, assessed and administered. Using Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the article considers relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability in interpreting the emerging trends and barriers. Personalised learning, student engagement and administrative efficiency feature among the potential benefits of adopting artificial intelligence, while infrastructure constraints,

digital literacy gaps, inequality and ethical concerns complicate its adoption. The analysis places institutional readiness central to the discussion: technologies acquire educational value through the conditions of their use. Investment, staff development and appropriate policies therefore belong in the same conversation as innovation. Following the biomedical study, Pika's contribution extends the volume's attention to responsible investigation and adoption, asking how promising developments can serve public purposes in unequal institutional settings.

Nnane Eric Sumelong's study of external debt sustainability and agricultural development in Cameroon broadens this institutional enquiry to national economic policy. Using data for the period 1996–2023, an Engle–Granger co-integration framework and an error-correction model, the article examines the relationships between external debt and agricultural value added. It reports a negative long-run association between long-term external debt and agricultural value added, together with a strong positive association with gross fixed capital formation. The analysis interprets debt pressures in relation to constrained fiscal space and the resources available for agricultural development. Its recommendations emphasise transparent debt governance, the protection of agricultural investment and the productive use of borrowing. By bringing rural livelihoods and agricultural capacity into the debates on debt, the article asks readers to assess macroeconomic choices balanced against their developmental consequences. The practical question is what public finance enables communities to produce, sustain and improve.

The next article, by Akame Winslow Melle and Akwe Ngole Ray Junior, examines four land management boards in Cameroon through the lens of legal pluralism. The Land Consultative Board, Site Board Commission, Inter-Village Boundary Settlement Commission and Farmer–Grazer Commission operate where statutory rules, customary authority and administrative practice intersect. Drawing on legal materials, interviews and comparative African experiences, the authors identify procedural ambiguity, bureaucratic delay and institutional constraints that limit dispute resolution. They argue for reforms that combine customary legitimacy with clearer safeguards, digitisation, gender inclusion and more effective administration. Its position after the agricultural development study renders the relationship between productive investment and land governance particularly visible. Land sustains livelihoods, but it also carries histories of belonging, authority and communal obligation; the institutions responsible for land management must respond appropriately to these overlapping claims if their decisions are to command confidence.

Gabriel Ndamzi Amadi's 'Doing feminism with words: a Searlean speech act analysis of Chimamanda Adichie's *Dear Ijeawele …*' then turns to the capacity of language to challenge inherited authority. Analysing 239 coded units from Adichie's manifesto, Amadi shows how assertives contest naturalised gender assumptions and directives translate feminist argument into practices of parenting and socialisation. Commissives and expressives establish ethical and affective positioning, while quasi-declaratives attempt to rename or reclassify familiar gendered categories. The recognition of hybrid forms also allows the article to test the usefulness and limits of its theoretical framework. This contribution returns the volume to gendered power at the level of ordinary speech and conduct. It demonstrates how feminist writing can intervene in the vocabularies through which inequality becomes familiar and in the practices through which it is passed from one generation to another.

The eighth contribution, K Zweni, A Mavembela and G Mkukuli's 'Decolonising South African palliative care psychosocial services for mental health benefit: eclectic context', brings the relationship between recognition and institutional responsibility into end-of-life care. Guided by an ecological perspective and an eclectic narrative review, the authors examine the ways patients' social, cultural and spiritual environments shape their experiences of care. They argue that the exclusion of African beliefs and knowledge systems can undermine culturally responsive psychosocial support, and they advocate their inclusion alongside allopathic approaches in healthcare training, policy and practice. The article offers a framework for reform rather than a clinical evaluation of a new intervention. Read alongside the earlier biomedical contribution, it widens the volume's understanding of health: research into biological activity and attention to the meanings through which patients experience suffering respond to different complementary dimensions of care. Respect for patient preferences and cultural diversity is central to that relationship.

The volume concludes with 'Beyond the Ibadan School', Mark Ighile's dialogue with Emeritus Professor Dan Izevbaye on literary criticism, pedagogy and digital humanities. Reflecting on six decades of scholarship, the conversation revisits the relationships between text, context, authorship, audience and interpretation. Its discussion of a declining tutorial culture and campus collegiality underscores the social conditions through which critical judgement develops. Its treatment of canon formation asks how intellectual inheritance can remain responsive to changing publics and media. Returning to the questions raised by Pika, the dialogue considers digital tools and artificial intelligence as supports for enquiry whose usefulness depends

on humanistic judgement and ethical interpretation. This is a fitting conclusion to the sequence: an issue concerned with institutional transformation ends by examining the ways in which scholars learn to interpret, evaluate and transmit knowledge responsibly.

Through these contributions, institutional legitimacy emerges as a demanding practical achievement. Courts, universities, land boards, healthcare services and fiscal systems exercise authority in ways that affect people's opportunities and vulnerabilities. Their legitimacy depends on how that authority is justified, scrutinised and experienced. The articles illuminate this problem through distinct forms of evidence, from a historical prosecution and students' accounts to legal analysis and economic modelling. Together, they encourage a conception of reform that is attentive to everyday consequences: access to education, security of livelihood, recognition of claims and dignity in care.

The volume also clarifies why the recognition of African knowledge must be accompanied by methodological care. Archival interpretation, laboratory screening, qualitative interviews, narrative synthesis, speech-act analysis and econometrics support different kinds of claim. Bringing them into conversation requires respect being shown for those differences. Medicinal knowledge can generate research questions; cultural understanding can inform care; literary criticism can examine the terms through which values are communicated. None of these contributions needs to assume the methods of another to acquire intellectual worth. Their collective strength lies in making evidence, interpretation and the limits of inference visible while responding to problems that exceed any single discipline.

We thank the authors for their contributions, the reviewers for their critical engagement, and the editorial and production teams for the sustained work that makes scholarly publication possible. Their efforts support a journal that is committed to widening participation in research while maintaining the rigour on which scholarly trust depends. For emerging and established researchers alike, that commitment entails the opportunity to contribute and the responsibility to formulate arguments that others can examine, question and develop.

Volume Three of *IJAR* invites readers to consider African scholarship through the quality of the understanding it produces and the opportunities it opens up. Its contributions recover histories of exclusion, scrutinise present institutions and propose directions for change without resolving their differences into a single account of Africa. Their shared achievement is to render the relationship between knowledge and responsibility concrete. *IJAR* advances that relationship

by providing a space in which African experiences inform enquiry, African intellectual resources shape interpretation and scholarship remains answerable to the people whose lives give its questions urgency.

Prof Enongene Mirabeau Sone
and
Dr Thoahlane Thoahlane
Editors, *International Journal of African Reflections*

Impact of sexual harassment on the mental well-being of female students at a tertiary institution in South Africa

Keneilwe Wanthitha Mashishi[1]
Mahlodi Monica Rebecca Makupula[2]
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Mvuyisi Notole[4]

Abstract

Globally, the number of cases of sexual assault in higher education institutions (HEIs) has been mounting, mostly affecting female students' mental well-being. This study employed an exploratory qualitative methodological approach to investigate incidents of sexual harassment as perceived and experienced by female students at a tertiary institution in South Africa. The study hinges on Hagan's Power and Control Theory, which seeks to explain patterns of abusive behaviours in heterosexual relationships. Owing to the sensitivity of the topic, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit a small but diverse sample of ten participants. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and later transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's six steps of data analysis, the study revealed that the participants had experienced gender-based violence (GBV) and sexually transmitted infections due to socio-political, cultural and economic factors such as poverty, alcohol abuse, patriarchal norms and campus activities. The power dynamics between male lecturers and female students was cited as compromising female students' mental well-being and resulted in some participants experiencing depression and a decline in their academic performance. The findings of the study recommend the provision of ongoing counselling and empowerment programmes for female students and the implementation of education on sexual harassment policies at the universities.

Keywords: gender-based violence, GBV, mental health, sexual harassment, university students

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of sexual harassment at institutions of higher learning is an extensive and deeply entrenched problem that has significant implications for students' academic experiences, emotional well-being and overall safety (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Hendricks, 2022). Although universities, as spaces for intellectual and personal development, should provide a secure and conducive learning environment for all students, contradictory evidence suggests that many female students experience various forms of sexual harassment at universities, ranging from verbal and non-verbal harassment to physical assault. These incidents often go unreported due to a fear of victim-blaming, institutional inaction and power imbalances between victims and perpetrators (Khan et al, 2018; Ajayi et al, 2021).

Historically, South Africa has grappled with significant numbers of gender-based violence (GBV) incidents, stemming from the country's colonial and apartheid past, which normalised violence and oppression. Gender inequality remains a deeply rooted problem, with patriarchal norms continuing to influence gender relations in multiple spheres, including education. Several scholars (Gouws & Kritzinger, 2007; Gqola, 2007; Gordon & Collins, 2013; Jewkes et al, 2015) have extensively examined the ways sexual violence at South African universities is shaped by power imbalances, heteropatriarchy and sociocultural norms. These scholars also argue that university campuses are not isolated from the broader society but are instead microcosms in which gendered power relations manifest in ways that expose female students to heightened risks of sexual harassment.

Institutional reactions to sexual harassment are often inadequate, with many policies existing in theory but failing in practice due to weak enforcement, a fear of retaliation and a lack of awareness among students (Gouws & Kritzinger, 2007). These barriers create a culture of silence, discouraging victims from seeking justice or support. This gap between policy and practice necessitated further research into the ways in which female students perceive sexual harassment, what barriers they face in reporting incidents and what measures can be implemented to create safer learning environments.

2. Literature review

Incidents of sexual harassment of female students in institutions of higher learning have become a global epidemic. According to Chairunnisa et al (2022), approximately 150 000 female students worldwide experience sexual harassment on university campuses. The prevalence rates vary across countries, with 21.6% reported in Norway, 33% in the United States, 43.1% in China and 60% in South Africa.

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South African universities seem to bear the brunt of sexual harassment due to the country's political and socio-economic landscape.

The predominance of sexual harassment incidents in universities is shaped by a range of socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors. Whereas poverty and transactional relationships are significant contributors, feminist economic theories provide deeper insights into the way structural inequalities create vulnerabilities to harassment (Crenshaw, 2013a). Feminist economists argue that most women from marginalised backgrounds are often forced by gendered power structures into situations where they are more susceptible to exploitation. In South African universities, black female students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face compounded vulnerabilities as they navigate both gender-based oppression and racial discrimination (Shefer et al, 2012; Crenshaw, 2013b; Ngubelanga, 2021). In addition, Crenshaw (2013a) emphasises that harassment is not experienced equally across all groups – race, class and gender intersect to expose certain women to heightened risks. For instance, black female students who rely on financial aid may feel pressurised to tolerate harassment from male staff members or wealthier peers due to their precarious socio-economic status. Women's financial precariousness increases their exposure to coercion, particularly in academic settings where financial dependence on male staff members or senior students is common (Mutinta, 2022).

Harassment is often perpetrated in situations where power dynamics are at play, making it difficult for victims to challenge or resist (Farr, 2023). Whereas male lecturers and senior students have traditionally been the focus of research studies on sexual harassment perpetrators at universities, recent studies highlight the prevalence of peer-to-peer harassment in various student spaces (Ajayi et al, 2021; Mutinta, 2022; Makhaye et al, 2023). Social environments such as student residences, campus parties and initiation ceremonies create settings in which coercion and exploitation thrive. According to Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), these student spaces often lack sufficient oversight, allowing harmful behaviours to become normalised. Peer harassment is often facilitated by hierarchical structures in student organisations, where younger or socially disadvantaged students may feel pressured to conform to exploitative norms in order to gain acceptance (Ajayi et al, 2022; Anderson & Naidu, 2022). The informal nature of peer-driven harassment makes it difficult for victims to report their experiences, as the perpetrators are often part of their close social networks. Furthermore, survivors may fear social ostracisation or retaliation from their peers, leading to underreporting and the normalisation of such behaviours (Jagath & Hamlall, 2024). Universities must acknowledge that harassment is not solely committed by figures of authority but is also embedded in student interactions and social traditions.

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Sexual harassment in university settings occurs in multiple forms, ranging from the exposure of genitals, assault, aggressive advances and coercion to non-verbal cues of discomfort and intimidation (Swaminathan, 2018). McGinley et al (2016) state that experiences of non-contact sexual harassment, which may involve inappropriate comments or jokes about someone's appearance or sexual orientation, undermine the mental health of students. In addition, in the age of technology, harassment can occur via social media platforms, where individuals may receive unsolicited messages or comments of a sexual nature (Ehman & Gross, 2019; De Araujo et al, 2022). Non-contact sexual harassment is often associated with depression and anxiety and increasing negative health behaviours, for instance, using substances such as alcohol and illegal drugs to cope (McGinley et al, 2016). These actions create a toxic environment that has a negative impact on victims' academic and personal well-being (Paludi & Barickman, 1992; Druhanova et al, 2023). Consequently, families, communities and society at large are not excluded from these effects (Oni & Tshitangano, 2019).

The consequence of sexual harassment is multiple effects that range from physical, behavioural, psychological, emotional to professional implications for female students (Oni & Tshitangano, 2019; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). In addition, the major list of adverse effects faced by sexually harassed students includes harm to their self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth. The effects may continue long after the harassment has ended and may even change the course of their lifestyles and lives (Oni & Tshitangano, 2019; Mawere & Seroto, 2022). Apart from the psychological and physical effects that sexual harassment exerts on female students and their families, Finchilescu and Dugard (2018) report that the additional negative impact is on students' academic performance and participation in academic life, which threatens not only female students individually and collectively, but also the general functioning of academic institutions. The predominance of sexual harassment at universities is not only a social justice concern, but also a critical academic and institutional challenge. It undermines the principles of equality and inclusivity in academic spaces (Shefer et al, 2017). Many institutions have implemented policies and awareness programmes to deal with the issue, yet challenges remain in enforcement, reporting mechanisms and institutional accountability (Anderson & Naidu, 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the nature, prevalence and consequences of sexual harassment at a particular South African university, focusing on student experiences, reporting mechanisms and preventive strategies.

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3. Theoretical framework

This study adopted dual theoretical frameworks to analyse and comprehend the dynamics of sexual harassment on university campuses. The Power and Control Theory serves as the primary framework, explaining how hierarchical structures within academic institutions enable harassment (Crenshaw, 2013). The study also employs the Feminist Legal Theory which criticises existing legal and institutional responses to sexual harassment, highlighting the need for more survivor-centred policies (MacKinnon, 1979; Littleton, 1986; Ailwood et al, 2023). By integrating these two theories, a multidimensional analysis of the systemic and structural factors that sustain the sexual harassment of female students in South African universities is provided.

3.1 Power and Control Theory

The power and control theory is a sociological and psychological framework that explores patterns of abusive behaviour in relationships (Chavis & Hill, 2008). It focuses on understanding how power imbalances and control dynamics maintain the occurrence and perpetuation of domestic violence and abuse. According to this theory, the main motivations behind the acts of sexual harassment are rooted in power dynamics and the desire to exert control over others (Popovich & Warren, 2010). The perpetrator uses harassment to assert their dominance and maintain their sense of power over a victim (Maass et al, 2013). This power dynamic can create an environment of fear, intimidation and vulnerability for the victim. In addition, in university settings, power differentials can be significant in a way that both staff members and SRC members abuse their authority and engage in sexually harassing behaviour towards students, threatening their academic progress, grades and other opportunities. This power imbalance can make it difficult for victims to report harassment because they may fear negative consequences or retaliation (Crittenden et al, 2018).

3.2 Feminist Legal Theory

Feminist Legal Theory is critical of the legal and institutional frameworks governing sexual harassment policies, arguing that they often prioritise institutional protection over survivor justice (MacKinnon, 1979). Many South African universities have formal policies against sexual harassment in place, yet their enforcement remains weak due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and reluctance to hold perpetrators accountable (Gouws, 2016). Feminist legal scholars argue that institutions must shift from merely having policies on paper to actively implementing survivor-centred mechanisms. This includes creating clear definitions of harassment, establishing transparent

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disciplinary processes, and ensuring that victims receive legal and psychological support (Ailwood et al, 2023). By incorporating Feminist Legal Theory, the present study examined the shortcomings of current university policies and advocates reforms that prioritise student safety and institutional accountability.

A combination of the Power and Control Theory and Feminist Legal Theory in this study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing sexual harassment at South African universities. Each theory contributes a distinct perspective, from understanding power dynamics to criticising institutional failures. Together, these frameworks enable a deeper exploration of the systemic barriers that perpetuate sexual harassment and inform policy recommendations aimed at fostering safer academic environments.

4. Materials and methodology

4.1 Methodology

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study (Mey, 2022). Qualitative research, which is mostly used to investigate and describe human experiences and perceptions, explores the meanings that individuals attribute to their lived experiences in a particular social and cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Since sexual harassment is a complex and sensitive phenomenon, this approach was best suited to capture the depth and richness of the participants' experiences, allowing them to share their narratives in their own words. In addition, an exploratory phenomenological paradigm which requires an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of female students about the phenomenon of sexual harassment was used. Phenomenological research is appropriate to understanding the lived experiences and feelings of a particular population in relation to the studied phenomenon (Mey, 2022).

4.2 Sampling and procedure

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique used to select participants based on criteria relevant to the research objectives, was used in this study (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Only participants who had direct experiences with the phenomenon under investigation were selected to participate in the study. As illustrated in Table 1, ten female university students between the ages of 19 and 25 years were selected to participate in the study. The participants came from diverse backgrounds with respect to language, ethnicity, degrees they were studying for, and their level of study. Selecting individuals with lived experiences allowed for a richer and more in-depth exploration of their perceptions rather than aiming for broad generalisability

(Mey, 2022). The recruitment of eligible participants was conducted through university networks, student organisations and word-of-mouth referrals.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the study participants

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Nationality	Level of study	Degree
Robyn	25	Shona	Zimbabwean	4th year	Social work
Tamia	22	Xhosa	South African	4th year	Nursing
Qhamisa	23	Xhosa	South African	Final year	PCGE
Emihle	24	Xhosa	South African	4th year	Nursing
Fiona	24	Xhosa	South African	4th year	Nursing
Zintle	19	Xhosa	South African	2nd year	Social work
Bongolethu	25	Xhosa	South African	4th year	Social work
Lolitha	19	Shona	Zimbabwean	4th year	Social work
Amahle	22	North Sotho	South African	3rd year	Communication studies
Sethu	20	Xhosa	South African	2nd year	Communication studies

The decision to include ten participants was guided by the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Although the sample size of ten participants may appear inadequate, it should be noted that qualitative research emphasises depth over breadth, focusing more on the richness of the responses provided rather than on arbitrary quotas. The data collected in this study were detailed and reflective of diverse perspectives from the participants (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Mey, 2022).

The data were collected by means of open-ended semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility in questioning while ensuring that the key themes are covered (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The interview questions were formulated based on an extensive review of the previous literature on sexual harassment in higher education, incorporating insights from studies by Gouws and Kritzinger (2007) and Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020).

4.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed manually, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework, to ensure a structured and rigorous approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used method for identifying and reporting patterns in qualitative data, providing as it does a systematic approach to organising and interpreting participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each of the six steps of thematic

analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was carefully applied to enhance transparency and credibility in the research process.

To ensure that the study findings are credible and reliable, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, which include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, was adhered to. To enhance the rigour of the study even more, strategies such as member checking, triangulation and reflexivity were employed.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Conducting research on sensitive topics such as sexual harassment necessitates strict adherence to ethical guidelines to ensure the safety, dignity and well-being of participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution and the researcher complied with all the institutional and national ethical guidelines, ensuring that the research process upheld the highest ethical standards. The participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and that should they feel uncomfortable at any stage, they were free to withdraw from the study without facing any consequences. Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, the interviews were conducted in a private and neutral location to create a safe and comfortable environment for the participants. To further support participant well-being, referrals to university counselling services were provided for those who needed emotional support after discussing their experiences. However, none of the participants needed to use those services.

5. Findings and discussion

Three themes emerged from the findings of this study. They are discussed below and, where necessary, extracts from the participants' transcribed interviews are included to support the themes and the discussion.

5.1 Female students' understanding and perceptions of sexual harassment

When probed on their understanding of sexual harassment and what it entails, the participants revealed varying levels of awareness, with the majority emphasising the lack of consent as a defining feature. In addition, different types of harassment, including verbal, non-verbal and physical, were identified by the participants. Their responses aligned with the legal definition of sexual harassment, which characterises it as an act of unfair discrimination, an infringement on an individual's personality and *animus iniuriandi* (the consciousness of wrongfulness) (Littleton, 1986).

The South African Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998 and the Code of Good Practice on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases in the Workplace (2005) also define sexual harassment as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates the dignity of a person, including unwelcome sexual advances, inappropriate physical contact and sexually suggestive behaviour. While additional legal frameworks such as the EEA of 1998 and the Code of Good Practice of 2005 provide comprehensive definitions of sexual harassment, the findings suggest that the students often understand harassment primarily in terms of physical and verbal acts, with less emphasis on psychological, digital or structural forms of harassment.

5.2 Verbal sexual harassment

Although verbal sexual harassment is commonly experienced by students in university settings, it is often overlooked as a form of harassment. The participants highlighted the fact that verbal harassment often takes the form of unwanted comments about their appearance, sexually suggestive remarks and persistent advances. The extract below illustrates their experiences:

> I think sexual harassment is when someone says something that you might not like in a workplace or school environment, such as 'you have sexy lips' or something ... to me, that is sexual harassment to be saying that in a workplace or even general. (Robyn)

One of the key challenges that emerged from the study is the difficulty the participants experienced in distinguishing between flirtation and harassment. Whereas some participants clearly identified sexually suggestive remarks as harassment, only one-fifth of the participants explicitly classified verbal harassment as a form of sexual harassment. This suggests that many students do not recognise certain behaviours as problematic until they escalate. Research by Holland and Cortina (2017) supports this, noting that verbal harassment is often normalised in university cultures, making it difficult for victims to identify and report it.

5.3 Non-verbal sexual harassment

Non-verbal sexual harassment encompasses unwanted gestures, inappropriate eye contact, sexually suggestive body language and the distribution of pornographic materials in both physical and digital spaces (Mamaru et al, 2015). One participant in this study described an example of non-verbal harassment, stating:

> When someone uses your pictures or takes pictures of you undressed, it can also be regarded as sexual harassment.

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The rise of digital communication has increased the predominance of visual and non-verbal harassment. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram are being used to perpetuate this form of misconduct (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024). Another participant highlighted the impact of unwanted gestures:

> Sometimes, it happens when other male students or lecturers wink an eye at you without saying anything.

The above extracts reflect a growing concern about digital sexual harassment and inappropriate non-verbal cues, which can create a hostile and unsafe university environment. Oni and Tshitangano (2019) found that non-verbal sexual harassment – particularly unsolicited images, suggestive staring and the unauthorised sharing of explicit content – contributes to a culture of the intimidation and objectification of female students.

5.4 Physical sexual harassment

Physical sexual harassment is widely recognised as the most severe and overt form of harassment experienced by female students at universities (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018). It includes unwanted physical contact, groping, sexual assault and coercive sexual behaviours. Most of the participants in this study identified physical sexual harassment as a common and distressing experience on university campuses. Several participants provided insights into their understanding of physical sexual harassment, which ranged from being forcefully touched on their private parts, despite displaying discomfort, to someone threatening and forcefully engaging in sex with a person unwilling to do so.

These accounts align with global research findings which indicate that university students are at high risk of experiencing physical sexual harassment from their peers, staff members or strangers in the academic environment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Studies conducted at South African universities found that groping, unsolicited touching and sexual coercion are rampant, particularly at student social events and campus residences (Mutinta, 2022; Makhaye et al, 2023).

6. Factors contributing to sexual harassment at universities

The participants in this study offered their opinions on what contributes to sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning. They mentioned, among other contributors, socio-cultural factors; poverty, alcohol consumption and provocative dressing.

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6.1 Socio-cultural factors

Sexual harassment at universities is shaped by various socio-cultural factors, including entrenched gender norms, socio-economic disparities and attitudes towards sexuality. These factors contribute to the normalisation and persistence of harassment in academic settings. The study findings indicate that cultural expectations regarding gender roles often reinforce the power imbalances that allow harassment to thrive (Crenshaw, 2013b).

The participants provided insights into the manner in which cultural values influence the way harassment is perceived and responded to:

> I think that's one thing they were supposed to tell us or to teach us, is to differentiate between submitting and respecting. So, I think our culture failed to differentiate between the two. Also, they failed to tell us that being submissive doesn't necessarily mean you ignore certain things like being disrespected and so on. (Tamia)

> You see, in our culture, they are saying that we have to respect men, so I think that men have that power that you have to respect me, so they think that they have the authority over you and use it against you. (Emihle)

These narratives emphasise how cultural conditioning discourages individuals from speaking out against harassment, particularly in patriarchal societies where male authority is emphasised (Gqola, 2007). In many communities, respect for elders and men is deeply ingrained, often leading victims to silence themselves rather than challenge harassment. This dynamic contributes to a culture of impunity in which perpetrators exploit traditional norms to justify their actions (Shefer et al, 2012).

6.2 Poverty

The impact of poverty on vulnerability to harassment is widely documented. Jewkes et al (2015) argue that financial instability increases the likelihood of sexual exploitation, as women in economically precarious situations may feel pressured to engage in unwanted sexual encounters in order to survive (Jewkes et al, 2015; Ajayi et al, 2021; Mutinta, 2022). Similarly, De Lange and Moletsane (2018) highlight the reality that at many South African universities, financial desperation drives female students into 'sugar daddy' relationships in which older financially stable men exploit their economic power over younger women.

One participant expressed concern about how poverty influences vulnerability to sexual harassment:

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> It can be desperation not to disappoint parents; maybe it might be that you don't have any money, coming from a poor background … anyway our institution has lots of students coming from a poor background and others try to make money or sleep around, but that's not good advice … anyway others find themselves in this sexual harassment because of their background and not having enough knowledge about it. (Fiona)

The Eastern Cape province, which is the site of the institution under study, has one of the highest poverty rates in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Many students come from rural areas where families struggle to afford the cost of higher education. As a result, some female students resort to transactional sex with wealthier lecturers or male students in exchange for financial stability. This phenomenon is reinforced by power imbalances and gender inequalities, making it difficult for victims to resist coercion or seek institutional support (Khan et al, 2018).

6.3 Excessive alcohol consumption

University campuses are designed to foster both academic and social development, providing students with opportunities for growth through various activities (Makhaye et al, 2023). However, certain campus dynamics, particularly first-year registration periods, social events and alcohol consumption, create conditions in which female students become more vulnerable to sexual harassment. Research suggests that social interactions on campus are shaped by power structures, peer dynamics and cultural norms, which can inadvertently contribute to a climate in which harassment is tolerated or goes unchallenged (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Excessive alcohol consumption is a significant contributing factor to sexual harassment on university campuses. Alcohol impairs judgement, increases risk-taking behaviour and can create situations where consent is not clearly given or understood (Campbell et al, 2017; Ajayi et al, 2021; Mutinta, 2022). Khan et al (2018) highlight the fact that perpetrators frequently target intoxicated individuals, knowing that their resistance is weakened and that they may struggle to recall or report incidents of harassment.

The participants in this study also identified alcohol-fuelled social gatherings such as parties and clubbing as high-risk situations:

> I almost forgot to mention something: we drink a lot, and after drinking, they (men), observe who is too drunk and they take that person, go with them and sleep with them without their consent. Some might wake up in the morning not even knowing what had happened but could feel that something happened, and that should

> be considered rape and sexual harassment. In such cases, not much is done about the situation because the police would blame the victim. (Fiona)

Alcohol-fuelled environments create conditions in which perpetrators feel emboldened to act without accountability, knowing that victims may struggle to remember or prove what happened. Furthermore, victim-blaming narratives, which suggest that intoxicated women are responsible for their victimisation, discourage survivors from reporting incidents (MacKinnon, 1979; Ajayi et al, 2021; Mutinta, 2022).

6.4 Provocative dressing and victim-blaming

A controversial issue that emerged from the findings was the perception that women's choice of clothing contributes to sexual harassment. Some participants believed that dressing in revealing clothing increased the risk of harassment, while others rejected this notion, arguing that the problem lies with the perpetrators, not the victims. Otieno et al (2021) support the finding that societal attitudes often place responsibility on women to avoid harassment by dressing conservatively:

> We are to wear specific types of clothes to cover ourselves up and respect men, but if it's hot, what must we do? (Sethu)

These findings highlight widespread misconceptions that women's choice of clothing justifies their being harassed. According to Feminist Legal Theory (MacKinnon, 1979), such arguments are rooted in patriarchal control over women's bodies, reinforcing a culture in which the perpetrators are excused while the victims are blamed. In addition, Shefer et al (2012) argue that placing the blame on women's attire shifts the focus from institutional accountability and the structural factors that sustain harassment.

6.5 Power dynamics

Power dynamics play a significant role in shaping experiences of sexual harassment in university settings. Here, the participants reflected on student–student and lecturer–student power dynamics.

One of the most high-risk periods for female students is during first-year registration, when they are unfamiliar with the university environment, which renders them more susceptible to exploitation. Perpetrators often exploit first-year students' lack of knowledge, housing insecurity and financial dependence, manipulating them under the guise of offering help (Campbell et al, 2017; Anderson & Naidu, 2022). The absence of structured support systems, mentorship programmes and awareness initiatives leaves first-year female students vulnerable to manipulation, coercion and harassment. Universities should therefore

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introduce protective measures such as peer mentorship programmes, first-year orientation on sexual harassment policies and designated safe spaces for new students to minimise these risks.

The participants expressed the view that student political organisations and senior student leaders often take advantage of first-year students' inexperience and desperation for assistance. One participant highlighted how sexual coercion is embedded in student political cultures:

> Yes, I think it does exist because, every year, I think during registrations, we hear that the comrades, which is the political parties, usually violate first years in a sexually harassing manner whereby they will say that if you need a room, you can come to me at night and that's when they will rape the person …. It's not new, and people know about it. (Robyn)

This finding is consistent with those of similar studies by Anderson and Naidu (2022) and Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) which found that peer-to-peer harassment at universities is often linked to hierarchical student networks in which senior students or politically affiliated individuals exploit first-year students. This reflects what Jewkes et al (2015) term 'sexually predatory cultures' in higher education, where senior students manipulate vulnerable first-year students under the guise of offering academic or logistical assistance.

Power imbalances between lecturers and students create opportunities for sexual exploitation, particularly in cases of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment (Finchilelescu & Dugard, 2018).[1] The findings of this study indicate that *quid pro quo* harassment is a concern at the institution, with some participants revealing that students who fail examinations sometimes approach lecturers for help, which can lead to sexual coercion. One participant noted:

> Mm, I am not saying it happened, but I've heard some stories right, of students that they might have failed the exam, so for them to get a better mark, they end up approaching their lecturers and getting close to them, and they end up being sexually harassed. (Bongolethu)

This finding aligns with research by Gouws and Kritzinger (2007), which suggests that South African universities are failing to prevent lecturer–student sexual misconduct due to the weak enforcement of policies. Jewkes et al (2015) argue that hierarchical academic structures reinforce gendered power dynamics, making it difficult for female students to challenge coercion without fear of academic retaliation.

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[1] This Latin term means 'something for something'. In the context of sexual harassment it usually means requiring or offering a sexual favour in return for a benefit, service or assistance of some kind.

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7. Measures to prevent sexual harassment

Despite the challenges that the institution has faced regarding GBV and sexual harassment, various preventative measures have been implemented to address these issues. Prevention strategies include awareness campaigns, policy enforcement, peer education programmes and the use of social media platforms to inform students about GBV and the available support services. The extracts below highlight some of the strategies used by the university to curb the prevalence of sexual harassment:

> There are billboards to address issues of GBV and sexual harassment. We are also encouraged to come out and speak about it. (Emihle)

The presence of GBV awareness programmes, peer educators and a Gender Equity office demonstrates that the institution has systems in place to tackle sexual harassment. Some participants acknowledged these efforts:

> There is also a gender equity office where I am a volunteer there. They also assist victims of sexual harassment. The purpose of that office again is to prevent GBV. As a volunteer there, I was exposed more to the cases of GBV within the university, where we would be required to apply our social work skills. (Tamia)
>
> Firstly, we have the SCU, and the university always tells us that should something happen, we must report it to the SCU, even when we have a peer educator that we know. If you are scared to report it to the SCU, you can report that peer educator, and they will then report on your behalf or find some help for you. (Fiona)

However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on how well they are communicated and enforced. Social media have become vital tools for raising awareness, offering support and information-sharing in the fight against sexual harassment.

The participants in this study acknowledged the role of social media in promoting awareness, as this excerpt reveals:

> I feel like the institution has been very vocal about the issue of GBV because even though I do not spend much of my time here on campus, we always see on social media and Facebook pages where posts have been made about GBV and people speaking out and asking students also to speak out and also raising awareness on how to avoid GBV, so yeah, I think they are very vocal about it. (Bongolethu)

While some participants actively engage with GBV awareness content on social media, others remain unaware or uninvolved in university-led initiatives. Research by Khan et al (2018) suggests that digital engagement can play a crucial role in educating students, creating solidarity and encouraging survivors to come forward. However, it is

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essential to ensure that social media campaigns do translate into real-life action and institutional support.

The institution has implemented various programmes and made available resources aimed at preventing GBV and supporting victims of sexual harassment. These initiatives include peer education programmes, Gender Equity offices, campus security services (SCU) and student support networks. However, some of the participants indicated a lack of awareness of these resources:

> I do not know how the university responds to issues of GBV. (Lolitha)

The findings suggest that while the university has established response mechanisms, not all students are aware of or engage with these resources. De Lange and Moletsane's (2018) study highlights the reality that many South African universities struggle to communicate their anti-harassment policies and services effectively to students. While social media plays a role in disseminating information, it must be complemented by on-the-ground support, institutional accountability and active student engagement. The presence of resources alone is insufficient if students do not know how to access or use them.

8. Summary

This study aimed to gain a closer understanding of the ways in which female students perceive sexual harassment as it occurs in the university setting. The findings provide critical insights into the institutional and socio-cultural dynamics that influence the experiences of female students regarding sexual harassment.

A key finding of this study is the role of poverty as a primary contributing factor to sexual harassment. Given the high poverty rate in the Eastern Cape province, many female students come from low-income backgrounds and rely on NSFAS benefits, which are often delayed. Financial insecurity makes them vulnerable to sexual exploitation in exchange for financial assistance from wealthier students, lecturers or staff members (Ngubelanga, 2021). These findings align with those of research by Moletsane and De Lange (2017), who argue that economic dependency on men in positions of power places female students in precarious situations where refusal to comply may result in academic sabotage or social isolation.

The study also revealed that deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes contribute to the persistence of sexual harassment at South African universities. The pervasive views of male superiority, gender inequality and cultural acceptance of male dominance create an environment in which harassment is normalised and victims are discouraged from reporting cases (Ngubelanga, 2021). The Power and Control Theory

explains how these societal norms create an imbalance of power that enables perpetrators to act with impunity, particularly in environments where victims fear shame, retaliation or disbelief (Crittenden et al, 2018). The study's findings confirm that many survivors choose silence over reporting due to fears of victim-blaming or social stigma. The results reaffirm the Power and Control Theory's assertion that sexual harassment is not solely about attraction but about the exertion of power and control over victims. Furthermore, the study's findings align with the broader literature that identifies financial dependence, social norms and academic hierarchies as key factors that enable sexual harassment in higher education (Shefer et al. 2012; Jewkes et al, 2015; Finchilesku & Dugard, 2018; Anderson & Naidu, 2022; Jagath & Hamlall, 2024).

Another important finding is that existing institutional policies on GBV and sexual harassment, while effective on paper, are not always enforced consistently. Many participants expressed doubt about whether their reports would be taken seriously or even acted upon. Previous studies indicate that this lack of trust in institutional processes results in low reporting rates and increased victim vulnerability (Adams et al, 2013). To improve institutional responses, universities must strengthen the enforcement of sexual harassment policies, enhance awareness campaigns and establish independent reporting mechanisms to ensure that victims are protected from retaliation and that their cases are handled confidentially.

9. Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of shifting institutional culture by strengthening accountability mechanisms, awareness campaigns and survivor-centred approaches. Universities must take decisive action to create safe, equitable learning environments, ensuring that students can pursue their education without fear of harassment or coercion. Resolving these issues will not only improve campus safety but also contribute to broader societal efforts to combat GBV. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring policy implementation across different universities, the experiences of diverse student populations and the long-term consequences of sexual harassment on academic outcomes and mental health.

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