

Exploring Students' Experiences of Gender-Based Violence: Reporting and Response Pathways in Ilala Municipality Secondary Schools, Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

This study explores students' experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) and examines reporting and response pathways in Tanzanian secondary schools using a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). GBV threatens students' safety, wellbeing and educational attainment, yet many incidents remain unreported despite existing policies and reporting structures. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from 35 participants: 30 students involved in three focus group discussions and five teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposively selected, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. Data were analysed thematically. Findings show that GBV is gendered and often normalised, particularly among girls, because of power imbalances, fear and social stigma. Students mainly disclosed incidents informally to peers. Formal reporting was discouraged by concerns about confidentiality, victim-blaming and unequal institutional responses. From an HRBA perspective, the findings reveal a gap between students' entitlements as rights-holders and schools' obligations as duty-bearers, particularly regarding accountability, non-discrimination and access to effective remedies. The study highlights the need for rights-based, student-centred reporting and response mechanisms that protect students, build trust and improve access to justice within secondary school environments. Schools should also strengthen confidential reporting channels and ensure timely, fair and supportive responses to all reported GBV incidents.

Keywords: Gender-based Violence, Human Rights-Based Approach, Students, Tanzania

1.0 Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) presents serious problems affecting children and adolescents in various contexts, including school. GBV refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE); Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2025). GBV practices include events which violate human dignity and humiliate individuals through verbal and non-verbal means such as verbal harassment, rape, sexual touch, corporal punishment, and sexual comments towards a person (Islam & Hossain, 2021; Uyanne, 2021). These practices not only harm students but also threaten their ability to attain their educational goals. As it undermines a person's esteem and brings a sense of fear, isolation, depression, and sometimes leads to suicide attempts (Bdier & Mahamid, 2021).

Studies clarify that GBV worldwide is worse for females than for males (Mutasingwa & Mwaipopo, 2023; Muluneh, Stulz, Francis, & Agho, 2020). In most areas, the root causes of GBV are associated mainly with cultural practices and power disparities between genders (Tahsini et al., 2024; Adebayo & Adutayo, 2024). In some cases, in school, curriculum content, student peers and teachers demonstrate gender biases due to the nature of masculine norms (Agarwal, 2020). Several scholars report that GBV in schools affects students' attendance, concentration, retention, and performance (Samak & Manda, 2023; Yates, Nagra, & Mantler, 2024; Lee & Rudolf, 2022; Beyene, Chojenta, & Loxton, 2021).

From a global perspective, the worldwide policies, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four, require all children to access quality education. And one of its targets is to eliminate gender disparities at all levels of education, including secondary and tertiary (Ferguson & Roofe, 2020). Goal

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number five (5) strictly strives to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination while goal number 16 requires all people to have peace, justice and strong institution. It emphasizes protection of human rights including children. Generally, SDGs view GBV as a major barrier to equality, education, health, and sustainable development. Therefore, it calls for government institutions to prevent it through various mechanisms, including ensuring safe reporting, and providing effective responses immediately (Daniel, 2023; Monacco, 2024).

Despite the global commitments to confront GBV, the problem still persists in both developed and developing countries. For example, nations like the UK and the USA experience rape, sexist language, gender stereotypes, threats, bullying, sexual assault, honour-based abuse, stalking and beating (Jones, 2025; DuBois, 2025; Melendez-Torres et al, 2024). However, several initiatives were established by some institutions to respond to such events. For example, in UK, the Department for Education introduced relation and sex education (RSE) to prevent GBV (Cole, 2025; Department of Education, 2025). Common strategies include introducing a safe, confidential reporting system and shifting harmful norms through the curriculum. Also, while teachers in the USA are engaged in creating a safe and gender-responsive learning environment, students are no longer silent in reporting and sharing all information regarding GBV (Debowska et al., 2021)

In developing nations like Africa, especially South Africa, GBV is common in education contexts, including sexual and non-sexual violence. Most adolescent students in primary and secondary schools are victimised, especially girls. Studies describe that 50% of students between 7 and 17 years face GBV either by students themselves or teachers (Parkinson, 2022). Research indicates that the root causes of GBV in South Africa include cultural problems and tolerance of GBV practices, which leads to the absence of a safe place for students to report GBV-related issues in school contexts (Calvino & Matadi, 2023; Naicker, 2025). However, various initiatives against school-based violence in South Africa including the development of clubs in schools that educate students on gender issues (Larson et al., 2020). Likewise, in Nigeria, secondary school girls experiencing various forms of GBV such as psychological violence, sexual violence, and physical violence, and most of these practices are caused by the historical background of the child's family, like witnessing violence at home (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Regrettably, these lead to unexpected pregnancy and unsafe abortion, spread of sexually transmitted infection diseases (STIDs) like HIV/AIDS, dropout from school due to pregnancy, and death (Ibrahim et al., 2024). In schools, Nigeria prevent GBV by ensuring a conducive learning environment, strict school laws, community involvement and using state laws. In Nigeria rape is an offense which is punished for life prison therefor rape perpetrators are imprisoned for life (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Similarly, extant studies in Tanzania demonstrate the widespread prevalence of GBV among adolescent students, mainly caused by economic inequalities, societal norms, and poor policy implementation (Mutasingwa & Mwaipopo, 2022). Schools putting several efforts into combat GBV through various means including introduction of FEMA Club, strengthening the grievance address mechanisms, and abolishing unnecessary corporal punishments in schools (Mwangoka, 2022). Furthermore, there are national frameworks and policies (such as child protection desks and gender desks in schools) that exist to guide GBV prevention and response. However, despite the initiatives to address the problem, evidence still suggests that GBV in Tanzania remains a serious and prevalent problem (Afrobarometer, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics & Office of the Chief Government Statistician, 2023). Furthermore, formal reporting pathways are nominally established in policy documents, but the actual experiences, particularly of students in navigating these pathways, including barriers, facilitators, and outcomes, remain under-researched.

Studies have exposed diverse experiences of school-related GBV and highlighted gaps in awareness and educational interventions among students in Tanzanian secondary schools (Massawe et al., 2024; Massawe & Nyangas, 2025). Moreover, studies often reveal that students rarely disclose GBV experiences, and the institutional mechanisms for reporting and response remain poorly understood or insufficiently explored (Zephani, 2023). These structural constraints, which often discourage survivors from coming forward or delay reporting, and yet such occurrences remain largely unreported, ely not well known. Unfortunately, in Tanzania, numerous studies are predominantly quantitative and prevalence-focused, resulting in a scarcity of in-depth qualitative, school-based studies that capture how

students experience, interpret, and navigate GBV reporting pathways (Masibo, 2025; UNICEF, 2024). Additionally, while human rights principles underpin several international frameworks, there is limited empirical integration of a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in analysing school GBV, particularly in relation to students as rights-holders and schools as duty-bearers. This study therefore sought to address these gaps by foregrounding students' voices and examining reporting and response pathways through an HRBA-informed qualitative study: Its focus is on examining students' experiences and perceptions of reporting GBV in Tanzanian secondary schools, including barriers and facilitators to disclosure. It also aims to assess the nature and effectiveness of school-level response mechanisms to reported cases of GBV from the students' perspective.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. How do students in Tanzania's secondary schools experience GBV, and how does this influence their reporting of such incidents?
- ii. How are reporting mechanisms and school response pathways to GBV, as perceived by students in Tanzania's secondary schools?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study is guided by the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). This approach emerged in the 1990s, integrating human rights principles into development practice. It is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other international human rights instruments (Elmas, 2024). This framework demands that all people get rights while it emphasises the work of the government and its institutions, such as schools, to protect people's rights. Moreover, the approach treats GBV as a violation of fundamental human rights rather than just a social or disciplinary issue. In the study, HRB facilitated the interpretation of students' fear, silence, and non-reporting not as individual weakness, but as evidence of structural and institutional failures to safeguard rights. The HRBA also provides a normative lens to assess whether reporting and response mechanisms meet key human rights standards such as accessibility, confidentiality, accountability, transparency, and effectiveness. Through HRBA, the study assesses not only the existence of reporting structures; instead, it functions in a way that genuinely enables students to claim their rights and obtain remedies. Furthermore, this approach supports the first objective by providing guidance on identifying and reporting practices directed at girls that make them feel uncomfortable or humiliated. It also supports the second objective by encouraging students, teachers, school leaders, and other administrators to find ways to eradicate the problem.

2.2 Reporting and Response Mechanism of GBV in School Contexts

Good reporting mechanisms and immediate responses are fundamental to eradicating GBV in school contexts. There are formal and informal ways of reporting GBV-related problems. Informal reporting occurs when victims choose to disclose the incident to someone they trust, such as peers or friends. The most recommended reporting mechanism is formal, whereby victims report the matter to the person responsible, such as a teacher, school leader, or the discipline committee (Together for Girls, 2024; Kalumanga, 2024). However, if not well responded to, the cases may cause students to fear reporting because of uncertainty about privacy, which leads to the spread of gossip and discrimination. Further effective ways of addressing GBV include integrating it into school codes, rules, and regulations (UNGEI & UNICEF, 2023).

Countries worldwide, including developed and developing ones, establish reporting mechanisms and response pathways. However, systems vary depending on each country's legal system, child protection systems, and education policies. Germany, for example, opted decentralisation on system in which schools and legal institutions deal with cases (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024; German Institute for Human Rights, 2026, Munich International School, 2023). This contextual system helps to raise contextual sensitivity and facilitates active responses at the local level. In contrast to Germany, Israel has adopted a centralised system in which GBV cases are referred directly to social services or, in some cases, to the police. The country's support system also includes a dedicated hotline

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and a network of crisis centres. Both rely on strong legal frameworks and institutional coordination. Other countries such as Brazil and Uganda combine formal systems with community-based reporting structures. Example Uganda use Domestic Violence Act and the Children Act, that mandate reporting, protection, and coordinated responses to GBV but also engage local communities such as village health team, local council leaders, community development officers as a first point reporting and referrals (Government of Uganda, 2020, UNICEF, 2021) whereas Brazil uses broad institutional system, including specialized police stations, courts, and public programs to respond the acts through the reporting mechanism like “Ligue 180” hotline, alongside police, health, and social services, supported by coordinated national policies and partnerships (Amor et al., 2022; Piero Bom de Avila et al., 2021). Likewise, DRC uses a formal and institutional framework. There are national laws on sexual violence, and formal institutions such as police, courts, and health facilities provide the legal and procedural backbone. They also engage community actors such as women's groups and NGOs (UNFPA, 2021; UNICEF, 2022; WHO, 2021).

In Tanzania, GBV reporting and response operate through a hybrid system that integrates formal institutional mechanisms with community-based structures. While national laws and policies provide a formal framework for prevention and response (Government of Tanzania, 2016; 2011), community actors such as local leaders, teachers, and religious figures serve as accessible entry points for reporting, particularly in rural contexts (UNICEF, 2020; UN Women, 2021). These community-based mechanisms are linked to formal institutions including police gender desks, health services, and social welfare systems through coordinated referral pathways, enabling a multi-sectoral and decentralised response system that enhances accessibility and survivor support (UNFPA, 2022; World Health Organisation, 2021).

Despite these variations, common challenges include underreporting, stigma, and coordination gaps. This implies that effective systems require clear reporting pathways, confidentiality, and integrated responses, balancing formal legal enforcement with accessible, community-supported mechanisms.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

This study was conducted in urban secondary schools located in Ilala Municipality, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The selection of this setting was informed by evidence from the Tanzania Violence Against Children Survey (VACS, 2024; published 2025), which indicates that although a considerable proportion of young females disclose experiences of violence, relatively few are aware of or utilise formal support services. This highlights critical gaps in reporting pathways and service uptake, justifying an in-depth investigation of how GBV reporting and response mechanisms function within school contexts.

The study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design, focusing on five purposively selected secondary schools. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of students lived experiences and perceptions regarding GBV reporting and response pathways within real-life school environments. The approach is particularly suitable for capturing complex social processes, including barriers, delays, confidentiality concerns, and institutional responses to GBV (Patton, 2015).

3.2 Study Population, Sampling, and Participant Selection

The target population comprised secondary school students and teachers in Ilala Municipality. Students were included because they are the primary subjects of school-based GBV experiences. At the same time, teachers were selected due to their roles as key actors in reporting, response, and student welfare. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience of GBV reporting mechanisms. Selection criteria for students included enrolment in selected secondary schools, willingness to discuss

school-related experiences and variation in gender and school level to capture diverse perspectives. Teachers were selected based on their institutional roles in student welfare, such as class teachers, discipline teachers, matron/patron/counselling teacher or members of school management. The study involved 35 participants: 30 students in three focus group discussions (FGDs) (10 participants per group) and 5 teachers in in-depth, semi-structured interviews from five schools. The five schools were selected to reflect variation in school characteristics and student populations, allowing for comparative insights across cases. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes emerged (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). This approach aligns with qualitative research standards that prioritise depth and richness of data over statistical representativeness.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for both individual and collective perspectives.

3.4.1 In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their experiences, perceptions, and roles in GBV reporting and response within schools. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed based on the study objectives. Interviews were conducted in private settings, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kallio et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). This method generated detailed, context-rich data.

3.4.2 Focus Group Discussions

Three FGDs were conducted with students to capture shared experiences, group dynamics, and collective meanings related to GBV and reporting practices. Each group consisted of ten participants and was facilitated using a semi-structured guide. Discussions were held in safe, confidential environments to encourage openness. Each session lasted approximately 50 to 80 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2019; Saunders et al., 2018).

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated from Kiswahili into English to ensure accuracy. The analysis involved stages such as familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, generation of initial codes, identification and development of themes, review and refinement of themes, familiarisation with the data, where repetitive reading mechanisms were applied; generation of initial codes; identification and development of themes; review and refinement of themes; and definition and naming of themes. Themes were developed in alignment with the study objectives, focusing on GBV experiences, reporting pathways, and response mechanisms (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Findings were organised and presented using thematic summaries supported by illustrative quotations.

3.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

The rigour of the study was ensured through the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation, using both interviews and FGDs, as well as the inclusion of verbatim participant quotations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of

methodological decisions and procedures. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive practices and systematic data analysis, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' accounts. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the study context and participants, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar settings (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Business Education (CBE) Directorate of Research and Consultancy, followed by a research permit from Ilala Municipal authorities. Given the sensitive nature of GBV, appropriate psychosocial support and referral mechanisms were identified before data collection. Because the study included participants under the age of eighteen, consent was obtained from their parents or guardians, together with assent from the students. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding identifying information and using pseudonyms or codes when reporting the findings.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

This section provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the findings in relation to the study's research questions, drawing on data collected from participants in secondary schools in Ilala Municipality, Tanzania as follows:

"How do students in Tanzanian secondary schools experience GBV, and how does this influence their reporting of such incidents"?

4.1 GBV as a Routine and Gendered School Experience

Participants described GBV as a frequent occurrence that is often perceived as a normal aspect of school life, particularly for girls. The experiences usually occurred in school environments like corridors, playgrounds, classrooms, and surrounding toilet areas. Not all acts are reported because they are seen as part of jokes. The most mentioned forms of GBV included beating, verbal sexual harassment, unwanted physical contact, psychological intimidation, and peer coercion linked to relationships.

Several student participants underlined that verbal harassment like sexist jokes and comments such as calling "pisi kali", "kisu" and "nyasi" (local slang terms used to objectify girls as sexually attractive). Body-shaming, like touching, was often dismissed as normal behaviour, especially when perpetrated by male peers. This normalisation distorted the boundary between acceptable conduct and violence, reducing the likelihood that students would recognise such experiences as reportable offences. One of the participants confirmed that.

"Sometimes those which are called jokes make me feel uncomfortable. I just keep quiet because everyone acts like it is normal, so to avoid looking so complicated I decide to take it easy" (FGD with students from Ilala municipality July 8, 2025).

Another participant added by explaining that;

"In our school, behaviours such as touching another student's private body parts such as the hips or breasts without consent are often normalised and treated as jokes. Because these actions are perceived as trivial, it becomes difficult to report them repeatedly to teachers, who may interpret such complaints as childish. As a result, various students feel that the most practical response is to defend themselves rather than seek formal reporting channels." (FGD with students from Ilala municipality July 8, 2025)

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This account demonstrates the normalisation of certain forms of gender-based violence within the school environment, where inappropriate physical contact is trivialised as humour. Such normalisation not only diminishes the perceived seriousness of these behaviours but also discourages reporting, as students anticipate dismissive responses from authority figures. Consequently, informal coping strategies, such as self-defense, tend to replace formal reporting mechanisms, undermining institutional efforts to address GBV effectively.

These findings align with recent scholarly reports which were also argue that the tendency to ignore GBV contributes to fear of reporting and social discrimination against victims (UNESCO, 2023; Leach the et al, 2024). This undermines active responses to address the problem in school contexts and consequently increases human rights violations. Further, the perception of normalising some forms of GBV contradicts the HRBA principle of human dignity and protection from harm in school settings. It undermines students' right to be safe and feel protected in a conducive learning environment. Students' tendency to defend themselves indicates that management fails to uphold accountability, access to justice, and students' empowerment and participation, which are central principles of HRBA.

Overall, this finding demonstrates that although reporting structures may formally exist, they are not functioning in a manner consistent with HRBA standards. This situation informs the school management, policy makers, including the Ministry of Education, and parents of the need for schools to strengthen rights awareness, teacher responsiveness, accountability systems, and safe reporting mechanisms to ensure that students' rights are meaningfully upheld.

4.2 Power Imbalances and Fear as Central Features of GBV Experiences

The findings explain that in school contexts, students, especially girls, experience GBV, which often involves unequal power relations like differences in age, authority and social status. Perpetrators were commonly described as older boys, influential peers like school leaders, and well-resourced boys who felt protected by the school system. However, participants were only partially hinted at GBV involving adults in authority, like teachers and other educational administrators, which also intensified fear and silence. Several participants described difficulty reporting GBV practices conducted by powerful and well-influential people. Therefore, fear emerged as a dominant emotional response due to punishment, social exclusion, retaliation and academic implications. One of the participants confirmed that;

“If you report someone in authority or a popular person, you will suffer more. Because all people may see you as a bad person” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality, July 15, 2025)

Further, another participant added that on the concern of fearing to report;

“Madam, it is highly challenging to report such incidents, especially when a teacher is involved. After reporting, you may be forced to transfer to another school, because remaining in the same environment can make your life even more difficult than before.” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality, July 15, 2025)

This account highlights the fear of retaliation and victimisation, particularly when the alleged perpetrator holds a position of authority. It suggests that reporting GBV involving teachers is perceived as risky, potentially leading to negative consequences such as social isolation, hostility, or forced transfer. From an HRBA perspective, this reflects a serious gap in protection, accountability, and safe reporting mechanisms, as rights-holders cannot report violations without fear of harm.

The findings above align with recent scholarship that unequal power relations trigger GBV, which is sometimes perpetrated by teachers in schools (Mtasigwa & Mwaipopo, 2022). Furthermore, the statement reflects the discouragement of victims from seeking support, especially when the perpetrators hold authority, due to fear and stigma. This finding echoes with previous scholarly reports that survivors often anticipate victim-blaming, social embarrassment, and even further harm if they disclose violence; the implication of this is pervasive under-reporting across contexts (Panneer et al, 2025). These findings

inform parents, teachers and school staff to promote rights awareness among students. Students themselves, NGOs, legal institutions and pressure groups should conduct training to help students understand their rights.

4.3 Silence as a Coping and Protection Strategy

The data justify that students choose to remain quiet instead of reporting the problem formally as a strategy to cope with GBV. Some students explained that being silent, avoiding and ignoring are also strategies used to avoid more harm from perpetrators. It was confirmed that victims who report the problem are affected by feelings of shame, self-blame, because some people may label or judge them, especially peers. So, they decide to be silent, especially when violence experiences and incidents occur within romantic or intimate relationships.

One of the participants said

“Although a few cases are reported, I believe numerous incidents occur among students but remain unreported. Most students choose to remain silent due to societal and cultural influences. In several African contexts, sexual incidents are often perceived as the fault of the girl, who is then blamed. As a result, students tend to treat experiences of gender-based violence as private matters to avoid shame and stigma.” (Interview with school matron from Ilala municipality, July 30, 2025)

This concern was confirmed by one of the participants during the focus group discussion who said:

“Sometimes after reporting the issue what comes is self-blame like... “why didn't I decide to remain silent?”, because they will end up asking why you allowed it to happen.” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality August 5, 2025)

The voice above reflects the influence of socio-cultural norms, particularly victim-blaming and stigma, in shaping students' responses to GBV. Such norms contribute to a culture of silence, where victims internalise blame and avoid reporting incidents to protect their social identity. From an HRBA perspective, this undermines the principles of non-discrimination, dignity, and participation, as affected students are discouraged from claiming their rights and accessing support due to fear of shame and social repercussions.

The normalisation confirm that silence contributes to the normalisation of GBV practices instead of addressing them (UNESCO, 2023; Devries et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The silence finding notifies education stakeholders, including school management, teachers, and NGOs, that there is a failure of the system to protect and empower students. And therefore, it calls for urgent support for safe reporting structures, trust-building, and rights-based interventions.

4.4 Informal Disclosure as the Preferred First Response

It was also confirmed that most victims do not report the incident directly to formal persons/centers instead, they choose to speak to informal channels such as their close friends, peers, and classmates whom they trusted. Several students said informal disclosure was perceived as safer, more confidential, and emotionally supportive than formal school systems. However, other participants said that only severe incidents, and most repeated ones, are preferable to report formally that only severe incidents and the most repeated ones are preferable to be reported formally, with hesitation. One of the participants confirmed:

“You first tell a friend to see if it is serious before going to teachers. And in most cases, the closest persons are the ones pushing to report the incidents to the teachers” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality August 5, 2025).

This evidential statement confirms that peers in school are more trusted than school systems to provide guidance and advice on critical issues like GBV. This practice reflects mistrust toward formal school

reporting mechanisms, where students fear dismissal, blame, or escalation of harm. Recent scholarship indicates that peers often serve as the first point of disclosure, helping victims validate their experiences before engaging authority figures; however, this also delays formal reporting and may normalise harmful behaviours when peers minimise incidents as “not serious enough” (Tanton et al., 2023). From a human rights-based perspective, this reliance on friends signals institutional failure to provide safe, credible, and student-centred reporting pathways, thereby shifting responsibility for risk assessment from schools to vulnerable learners. However, during the interview, one of the participants explained the negative impacts of pathing through informal ways to report and respond to GBV in the school context, who explained:

“In more than a few cases, we first become aware of incidents through informal discussions among students in school corridors, where whispers circulate before any formal report reaches our office. This often occurs because victims initially confide in their peers rather than using official reporting channels, largely due to feelings of discomfort or fear” (Interview with Discipline Master, Ilala Municipality, August 13, 2025)

This statement raises the concern about raising awareness and trust of formal pathways to report and respond GBV in school contexts because informal reporting has several negative implications such as delays of intervention, increases the risk of misinformation and breaches of confidentiality as cases circulate as rumours. Consequently, victims may receive inadequate support and protection, while perpetrators remain unaccountable. From a Human Rights-Based Approach perspective, this undermines effective access to justice, weakens institutional accountability, and compromises the protection of students’ rights. Informal disclosure is a critical entry point for intervention, but without strong linkage to formal systems, cases may remain unresolved or unreported, weakening protection and accountability.

4.5 Mistrust of Institutional Reporting and Response Mechanisms

Another finding was limited trust in school-based reporting systems. Participants expressed uncertainty about where and how to report, whether confidentiality would be maintained, and whether reporting would lead to meaningful action. Numerous participants confirmed that some secret reported incidents were exposed in public without any meaningful actions in which cases in return ended up bringing shame and blame to the reporters. This contributes to hesitation and discouraging the reporting GBV in school:

“The problem is there is no secret assurance some reported cases are spread all over the city and the victim becomes the problem” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality August 5, 2025).

The concern of ineffective responses towards the GBV cases was also raised by another participant during the data collection:

“The reporting process is often very long, especially when a case proceeds to court. It requires substantial evidence and, where possible, witnesses. Once a case is formally reported, one may have to attend court frequently, which can be time-consuming and financially draining, sometimes exhausting one’s limited personal resources” (Interview with class teacher from Ilala Municipality August 2025)

This account highlights structural and procedural barriers to formal reporting, including lengthy legal processes, evidentiary demands, and financial costs. Such challenges may discourage victims from pursuing formal justice pathways. This undermines trust in the reporting systems because it does not guarantee reprimand for the actions on time. The finding also echoes with scholarly reports that highlighted that poor school mechanisms to address GBV is a great barrier for the students to report and supported (Parkes, Heslop, & Unterhalter, 2024; Mtasigwa, 2022). The human rights-based theory

explains that when human rights are not well protected in the school context students lose trust and start to remain silent. If there are accountability and survivor-centred mechanisms to promote human rights principles are strengthened in policy and practice consequently reporting tends to improve. The findings tell school management, legal institutions, policy makers and parents that there is a need to promote accountability in protecting children to build trust in students.

4.6 Impact of GBV and Non-Reporting on Wellbeing and Learning

It was revealed that unreported GBV practices have negative impacts on the victimized students. Some participants linked their GBV experiences and decisions not to report to emotional distress, fear, reduced concentration, which affect their academic performance while others decide to withdrawal from school activities. One participant declared:

“Of course, not reporting the matter leads to more violence, unrest and stress. But also leads to endless conflicts between students themselves and unsupportive learning environment.” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality July15, 2025).

Implicitly, the failure to report violence allows problems to escalate, leading to continued abuse, increased stress, peer conflicts, and a disrupted, unsafe learning environment. This finding highlights the relevance of implementing HRBA theory in a school context. Because if school upholds students’ rights to safety, dignity, and effective remedies to perpetrators in practice, it means establishing transparent, responsive, and rights-sensitive reporting systems that survivors can trust. This facilitates to school environment to be conducive environment for achieving equality. Therefore, teachers, parents, students, school leaders and policy makers should encourage reporting of GBV in school contexts.

Overall, interviews and FGDs revealed several students experienced GBV as pervasive, gendered, and often normalized within school environments. These experiences, combined with fear, stigma, power imbalances, and mistrust of institutional responses, significantly discourage formal reporting. As a result, students rely primarily on informal disclosure or remain silent, limiting access to protection and support. The findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions further indicate that, from students’ perspectives, reporting mechanisms and school response pathways to GBV are fragmented, weakly institutionalized, and inconsistently aligned with human rights principles. Although schools formally acknowledge the existence of reporting structures, students lived experiences suggest significant gaps between policy intentions and everyday practice.

4.7 Limited Awareness of Rights-Based Reporting Mechanisms

The findings elaborate that most students have limited awareness of their rights of protection, reporting and punishment against the GBV. Few participants were aware that reporting “should be done,” however fewer could clearly identify and describe specific procedures to follow, designated officers, or the guaranteed protections. For some participants reporting perceived as implicit mechanism rather than explicit. It was confirmed that students learning about reporting procedures through peers rather than through formally structured rights education. One of the participants said.

“They explain students should report violence, but in our school, there is no specific office or person who is assigned to respond to the cases. Students just choose either report to matron or to any teacher they trust” (FGD with students from Ilala municipality, July 8, 2025).

Another participant added that during the FGD

“We are told that students should report problems, but no one really teaches us about our rights or how the reporting system works. Sometimes we don’t know if the acts are the forms of GBV and if we report they can take it as serious issues. You may hear different things from different people, and that makes it confusing. Because of that, other students just keep quiet since they are not sure if their report will be taken seriously or handled in the right way.” (FGD with

students from Ilala municipality July 15, 2025)

In other words, a gap between formal expectations and practical understanding of reporting mechanisms among students. Although students are generally encouraged to report problems, the absence of clear, consistent, and rights-based education creates confusion about how, where, and under what protections reporting should occur. This lack of clarity weakens students' confidence in the system and contributes to uncertainty about whether their concerns will be handled appropriately. Moreover, this finding indicates a shortfall in fulfilling the HRBA principle of empowerment which highlights that information about the principles of human rights is fundamental in implementing justice and reporting violence. So, this lack of systematic rights-based sensitization constrained students' ability to claim their entitlement to safety and redress. The findings inform school management, teachers, legal institutions, policy makers and civil society organizations to put more emphasis on educating students concerning their rights.

4.8 Fear of Rights Violations within the Reporting Process

Another key finding was the students' fear that reporting GBV could result in school victimization, including exposure, blame, punishment, or social stigma. Students expressed concerns that confidentiality central to the HRBA principle of dignity and safety was not adequately protected. Some of the participants referenced cases where victims were publicly questioned, summoned before disciplinary committees, or labelled as "problematic," discouraging others from reporting. One of the participants said: *"Once it is reported, the world knows, and soon you become the one in trouble."* (FGD with students from Ilala municipality July 8, 2025). One of the participants explained in depth thusly:

"Sometimes reporting can make things worse for you. You may not be treated fairly, and your privacy is not always protected. People start talking, and even teachers may change how they treat you. Because of that, some students are afraid to report, thinking their rights will not be respected during the process" (FGD with students from Ilala municipality August 5, 2025)

This voice reflects the perceptions of fear that instead of taking it to protect themselves from GBV in turn is perceived as exposing them to stigma, distortion of reputation and gossip. The students perceive reporting pathways as informal, unclear, and weakly enforced, with responses characterized by limited confidentiality, victim-blaming, and minimal follow-up, which collectively discourage formal reporting. Like findings in recent SRGBV research, students reported that weak trust in school response systems and fear of negative social consequences discouraged formal disclosure (Parkes, Heslop, & Unterhalter, 2024; Mutasingwa, 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that although reporting structures may exist, they are not fully aligned with HRBA standards. Instead of empowering students, the process is perceived as risky and potentially harmful, thereby reinforcing silence and underreporting. This indicates the need for education stakeholders like legal institutions, ministry of education and education management to make more efforts to create safe and more accessible ways of reporting that students may trust.

4.9 Unequal Access and Power Asymmetries in Response Pathways

Another finding was the students perceived school responses towards GBV as uneven and influenced by power relations, particularly seniority, gender, and social status. Cases involving influential students or authority figures were seen as less likely to result in immediate and meaningful action than others with normal status. This situation contradicts the HRBA principle of non-discrimination and equality before protection mechanisms. This was confirmed by some of participants. Female students reported feeling less protected and more scrutinized during response processes, reinforcing gendered power imbalances within schools. One of participant said:

"Some cases are handled seriously; others are ignored depending on who is involved" (FGD

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with students from Ilala municipality Ilala, July 15, 2025). This concern was repeated by several participants.

Another explained further that;

In our school, even reporting itself is a challenge because there are no clear offices or trusted people to go to. If you try to report, they may tell you to go home with your parents or bring evidence which most of us cannot manage. For students from poor families, it becomes even harder because we don't have support or money to follow the process, so most just give up (FGD with students from Ilala municipality July 15, 2025).

This evidential statement exposes unequal access to justice and power asymmetries within school reporting pathways. From HRBA, all students as rights-holders should have equal access to protection, fair hearing, and support, regardless of the status of the perpetrator. However, the student's experience suggests that institutional responses are influenced by power relations. The perception that some cases are suppressed or delayed indicates a violation of the principle of equality and non-discrimination, where certain students face structural barriers in seeking justice.

The finding relates with recent scholars Parkes et al., 2024 & UNESCO, 2023 that power relation and social influence in schools shape the school responses towards the reported GBV. If school responses pathways perceived to be influenced by power positions, inconsistent and discretionary, rather than following rules and transparent as stipulated by HRBA such practices reflect a failure to uphold the principles of equality before the law, accountability, and non-discrimination, thereby weakening trust in institutional mechanisms and contributing to persistent underreporting of GBV in schools.

4.10 Weak Referral and Remedy Mechanisms

From a human rights perspective, effective remedy and access to justice are essential. However, students reported limited awareness of external referral pathways, such as social welfare officers, health services, or child protection desks. School responses were perceived as largely disciplinary and internal, with minimal follow-up or survivor-centred support:

"When we were in Form Three, my friend reported a case to a teacher, hoping for help. Instead, she was simply told to go to the police, without any guidance on where to start or what to say. She felt abandoned and overwhelmed by the process and eventually gave up because it was too difficult to face alone" (FGD with students from Ilala municipality August 5, 2025)

This quotation illustrates a clear failure in ensuring access to effective remedies, a core principle of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). Although the victim attempted to report the case, the response from the teacher acting as a duty-bearer was limited to a referral without procedural guidance or follow-up support. This reflects a gap in institutional responsibility and accountability, where duty-bearers do not actively facilitate victims' access to justice. From an HRBA perspective, referral mechanisms should be accessible, supportive, and victim-centred, ensuring that individuals are guided through reporting processes in a safe and informed manner. The absence of such support led to the victim's withdrawal, demonstrating how weak referral systems can discourage reporting and ultimately undermine the realisation of rights.

Moreover, the finding demonstrates lack of competence for other teachers in schools on how to handle students' GBV cases. This justifies a need for empowering staff in schools on how to handle violence, including GBV. Research explains that inadequate training on child protection and GBV reporting procedures often leaves teachers uncertain, leading to weak or inappropriate referrals (UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Consequently, victims may not receive timely or effective support, undermining both protection and accountability mechanisms. In that view the findings align with the scholarly report that most education systems lack functional, survivor-centred referral pathways, resulting in fragmented responses that fail to protect victims or hold perpetrators accountable (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2024) reports that weak links between schools and external

protection services contribute to secondary victimization, as survivors are left without psychosocial support, medical care, or justice.

4.11 Partial Fulfilment of Duty-Bearer Obligations

Another finding revealed that through listening to students' narratives that schools are not well implementing their duty for ensuring safety to students. Although there are school policies, rule and well documented regulations participants noted the absence of systematic monitoring, feedback mechanisms, or student participation in shaping GBV these policies. Sometimes their responses were often viewed as reactive rather than preventive. One of the students said:

"In several instances, perpetrators receive only verbal warnings, with no meaningful follow-up or formal action. This allows harmful behaviour to continue and leaves victims without justice or protection" (FGD with students from Ilala municipality, July 8, 2025).

Another voice from a participant said:

"Even when a case is reported, the teacher may just talk to the person and warn them, then everything ends there. After some time, the same behaviour continues because no serious action was taken." (FGD with students from Ilala municipal August 5, 2025).

This evidential statement further reinforces concerns about weak accountability mechanisms, where responses stop at informal warnings rather than progressing to appropriate disciplinary or legal action. From an HRBA perspective, such practices fail to ensure effective remedy and protection, allowing violations to persist and discouraging confidence in the reporting system.

Also, the reasons behind the informal mediation that students seek when they have problems. The temporary disciplinary measures most participants perceived as incomplete, inconsistent, and insufficient responses particularly in cases involving powerful actors. As a result, duty-bearers like teachers were seen as responding selectively rather than systematically. Likewise, the Human Rights Watch (2024) documents that school authorities frequently respond in ways that prioritize institutional reputation over survivors' rights, resulting in weak investigations, limited referrals, and absence of effective remedies. These practices amount to a partial discharge of duty-bearer responsibilities, where obligations are recognised but not fully enforced. The policy makers, legal institutions and the school management teams is informed to promote accountability of the duty bearers.

4.12 Informal and Personalised Reporting Pathways

Another finding was the ways students overwhelmingly described reporting GBV through informal and personalized channels, such as trusted friends, sympathetic teachers, matrons, or counselors. These choices were guided less by institutional design and more by perceived trust, discretion, and emotional safety. One of the participants confirmed: *"It depends on which teacher you approach; some help, others ignore"* (Interview with students from Ilala municipality July 15, 2025). In other words, the personalised reporting pathways were not effective as they provided short-term psychosocial support, they often lacked formal documentation, follow-up, or referral. From a human rights lens, this reliance on informal reporting undermines the principles of accountability and institutional responsibility, as responses depended on individual goodwill rather than enforceable systems. In addition, evidence explains that teachers do not always respond uniformly to cases of school violence despite recognizing their responsibility, mostly do not intervene consistently (UNESCO, 2022). Similarly, research indicates that teachers' responses are shaped by personal beliefs, social norms, and limited training, leading to variations in how cases are handled (Spear, 2019). As a result, students' access to justice becomes dependent on individual teachers rather than a structured and accountable system, which weakens trust in reporting mechanisms and may discourage victims from seeking help.

Generally, students perceived reporting mechanisms and response pathways to GBV in Tanzanian secondary schools as existing formal but fragile in practice. While some supportive actions occur at

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individual levels, institutional systems fall short of fully realizing human rights principles of accessibility, accountability, non-discrimination, participation, and effective remedy. Consequently, students develop low trust in formal reporting pathways, hence lead to low reporting, reinforcing silence and informal coping strategies.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study demonstrates that GBV remains a pervasive and gendered experience in Tanzanian secondary schools, with students' reporting decisions shaped by fear, stigma, power imbalances, and limited trust in institutional responses. Although schools formally acknowledge reporting mechanisms, students perceive these systems as inadequately communicated, inconsistently implemented, and weakly protective of confidentiality and dignity. From a Human Rights-Based perspective, the findings reveal a gap between students' rights as rights-holders and schools' responsibilities as duty-bearers, particularly in relation to participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and access to effective remedy. Consequently, students rely primarily on informal disclosure or remain silent, reinforcing underreporting and continued vulnerability to GBV. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by providing context-specific, rights-based insights into how structural and cultural factors shape GBV reporting pathways in school settings.

5.2 Recommendations

- i. Enhance rights awareness: Schools should institutionalize rights-based education on GBV to empower students to recognize violations and claim protection.
- ii. Strengthen reporting mechanisms: Ministry of education, legal institutions, and school management should set clear, confidential, and accessible reporting structures should be standardized and well communicated within schools.
- iii. Ensure survivor-centred responses: Teachers and school leaders require continuous training in gender-sensitive and rights-based case handling to prevent secondary victimization.
- iv. Promote equality and accountability: Independent oversight and clear procedures are needed to address power asymmetries and ensure non-discriminatory responses.
- v. Improve referral pathways: Schools should strengthen linkages with social welfare, health, and child protection services to ensure access to comprehensive remedies.
- vi. Foster student participation: Meaningful student involvement in GBV prevention and response mechanisms should be institutionalised to enhance trust and effectiveness.

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