



EARLY PATHWAYS TO FEMICIDE AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: HOW TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS SOCIALISE GENDERED HARM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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South Africa's femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) epidemic, characterized by intimate partner homicide rates five times the global average, remains poorly understood in its developmental origins. National responses have focused on legal and adult-oriented interventions, overlooking the need to investigate how ideological and behavioural roots of gendered harm emerge in childhood. This study explores how township schools in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal unintentionally operate as early socialisation spaces that shape relational, emotional and structural precursors of femicide and GBV. Building upon Galtung's theory of structural violence, Connell's theory of gender order, and Chodorow's feminist theory of gendered socialisation, semi-structured interviews with 12 female learners (aged 14–16) and 8 teachers at two schools in violent, socio-economically marginalised communities were conducted. Four pathways emerged: violent community ecosystems that normalise aggression; harmful masculinities that reward dominance; girls' gendered patterns of fear and learned helplessness; and patriarchal power dynamics that shape early romantic relationships. The findings indicate that township schools act as involuntary incubators of gendered harm, where boys are taught dominance while girls internalise subordination. Interventions need to draw on South Africa's current legal and policy landscape including CEDAW, the Domestic Violence Act, the Children's Act, and the National Strategic Plan on GBVF and prioritise school-based psychosocial support and gender-transformative education to address the root conditions that allow toxic norms to coalesce before they become cyclical forms of adult violence. In doing so, the study contributes to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 4 on inclusive, safe and effective learning environments, advancing the global agenda to end violence against women and girls by 2030

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1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa faces an unprecedented crisis of gender-based violence and femicide. The rate of femicide is five times that of the global average, and violence against women is a defining feature of society rather than deviation from the norm^{1 2}. Between April and June 2022, 855 women were murdered, escalating to roughly 12 murders per day by October–December 2022, with another 969 women who died in the first quarter of 2023 alone³. Over two decades after legislative reform, constitutional guarantees of gender equality and a recurring narrative of moral panics in the aftermath of prominent cases, the epidemic has not abated^{4 5}. The mainstream response has been mainly reactive: reform of legislation, femicide watchlists and public awareness campaigns^{6 7 8}. Although these interventions are needed, they frame violence against women as an adult problem needing adult solutions, leaving little exploration on how ideological, relational, and behavioural foundations of intimate partner violence are embedded long before children get into adulthood⁹.

¹N Abrahams and others, 'Two Decades of Tracking Femicide in South Africa: An Analysis of Four National Surveys from 1999 to 2020/2021' (2025) 20(1) *Global Public Health* 2576753 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2025.2576753>>

² Africa Check, 'How Many Men and Women Are Murdered Per Day in South Africa?' (Africa Check, 22 September 2025) <<https://africacheck.org/infofinder/explore-facts/how-many-men-and-women-respectively-are-murdered-daily-south-africa>> accessed 2 June 2026.

³ Bheki Cele, 'Minister Bheki Cele: Quarter One Crime Statistics 2022/2023' (Speech, Pretoria, 19 August 2022) <<https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/minister-bheki-cele-quarter-one-crime-statistics-20222023-19-aug-2022>> accessed 23 November 2025.

⁴ W Buqa, 'Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Narrative Reflection' (2022) 78(1) *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7754>>.

⁵ (n 2).

⁶CM Roy and others, 'Impact of COVID-19 on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Services in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa: A Cross-Sectional Survey' (2022) 2 *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 780771 <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2021.780771>>.

⁷Roy and others (n 7).

⁸MR Mphatheni, 'The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on the South African Economy: A Literature Review' (2024) 5(16) *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 2789 <<https://doi.org/10.38159/ejass.20245168>>

⁹ (n 9).

Violence against women is not some casual act, but the result of longstanding processes of gendered socialisation starting from early childhood^{10 11 12}. Schooling, a crucial place for the development of childhood, is a key environment to study and ultimately disrupt these processes. This research explores to what extent school violence, gendered vulnerability and community influences stimulate early socialisation of GBV and femicide in two secondary schools in Umlazi Township, KwaZulu-Natal, a place where apartheid spatial inheritance, entrenched patriarchy and institutional neglect intersect. This study is situated within the global development agenda, contributing directly to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), particularly Target 5.2 on eliminating violence against women and girls, and SDG 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.a on safe and non-violent learning environments. By tracing the early, school-based origins of gendered harm, the study also speaks to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), Target 16.2, which calls for an end to violence against children. The remainder of this article is organised into seven sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on femicide as structural violence, masculinities and the gender order, gendered vulnerability and fear, and South Africa's legal and policy framework. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework, drawing on Galtung's structural violence theory, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and gender order, and Chodorow's feminist theory of gendered socialisation. Section 4 describes the study's methodology, including participants, data collection, ethical approval and analytical approach. Section 5 presents the results, organised around four emergent themes. Section 6 discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature. Section 7 concludes the article and offers recommendations aligned with each of the four themes.

¹⁰E Mayeza and D Bhana, 'Boys Negotiate Violence and Masculinity in the Primary School' (2020) 41(3) *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 426 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1721267>>.

¹¹ L Mshweshwe, 'Understanding Domestic Violence: Masculinity, Culture, Traditions' (2020) 6(10) *Heliyon* e05334 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05334>>

¹² JI Ani and LN Katende-Kyenda, 'Norms of Masculinities and Gender Socialization Among Young Boys in South Africa: Implications for Gender-Based Violence, Policies, and Interventions' (2025) 6(4) *Sexes* 54 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes6040054>>.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Femicide as Structural Violence in South Africa

Studies of femicide in South Africa have increasingly moved away from examining individual pathology and focus on systemic analysis. Intimate partner homicide is deeply rooted in the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, forced removals and the migrant labour system, which collectively formed the structural foundations for endemic GBV¹³ ¹⁴. Apartheid's spatial architecture which constrained Black communities to under-resourced townships and siphoned off cheap labour producing environments characterised by poverty, unemployment, neglect and normalised violence¹⁵ ¹⁶. These violent ecologies are still observed in post-apartheid South Africa, where townships like Umlazi continue to be geographically and economically marginalised¹⁷ ¹⁸.

In applying Galtung's structural violence framework, violence should not be loosely defined in its direct form but also as being social structures that limit individuals' ability to sustain themselves¹⁹. In many South African townships, structural violence is characterised by high rates of unemployment (over 40 percent), poor housing, lack of social services and weak policing²⁰. For women this structural violence intersects with

¹³ R Jewkes and others, 'Relationship between Single and Multiple Perpetrator Rape Perpetration in South Africa: A Comparison of Risk Factors in a Population-Based Sample' (2015) 15 *BMC Public Health* 616 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1889-9>>.

¹⁴ R Jewkes, J Levin and L Penn-Kekana, 'Risk Factors for Domestic Violence: Findings from a South African Cross-Sectional Study' (2002) 55(9) *Social Science & Medicine* 1603 <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(01\)00294-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(01)00294-5)>

¹⁵ (n 14).

¹⁶ A Gibbs and others, 'New Learnings on Drivers of Men's Physical and/or Sexual Violence Against Their Female Partners, and Women's Experiences of This, and the Implications for Prevention Interventions' (2020) 13(1) *Global Health Action* 1739845 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2020.1739845>>

¹⁷ (n 17)

¹⁸ I Manatsa and TP Muringa, '"I Don't Know How to Discipline These Kids": Navigating the Nature of School Violence and Teachers' Responses in South Africa' (advance online publication 2025) 14 *Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics and Business Law*.

¹⁹ J Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research' (1969) 6(3) *Journal of Peace Research* 167 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>>

²⁰ P Burton and L Leoschut, *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study* (CJCP Monograph Series No 12, Centre for Justice and Crime

patriarchal traditions of economic dependency, social inferiority, and physical insecurity.²¹ defined South African femicide and GBV as political violence, a systematic enactment of male power in places where a history of dispossession has eroded alternative sources of social power.

2.2 Masculinities, Violence, and the Gender Order

Connell explains that dominant kinds of manhood are constructed in opposition to femininity, encouraging physical strength, emotional suppression, heterosexual dominance, and authority over women²². Compounding effects of apartheid-era on family structures, the militarisation of political conflict, and post-apartheid unemployment, all of which have disrupted traditional breadwinner masculinities and generated identity crises frequently resolved through domestic and sexual control²³. Research on adolescent masculinity formation has found early emergence within these themes^{24 25 26}, with boys internalising concepts of toughness, risk-taking and dominance from peer role models, family and community contexts. Townships characterized by deprivation, and low

Prevention 2013) <<https://ci.uct.ac.za/violence-schools/monographs/school-violence-in-SA-results-of-the-2012-national-school-violence-study>> accessed 1 June 2026.

²¹Y Sikweyiya and others, 'Patriarchy and Gender-Inequitable Attitudes as Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the Central Region of Ghana' (2020) 20(1) *BMC Public Health* 682 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08825-z>> accessed 2 June 2026.

²² R W Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Polity Press 1987).

²³ (n 17)

²⁴RW Blum, K Mmari and C Moreau, 'It Begins at 10: How Gender Expectations Shape Early Adolescence Around the World' (2017) 61(4) *Journal of Adolescent Health* S3 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.07.009>>

²⁵ R Jewkes and others, 'Masculinities and Violence: Using Latent Class Analysis to Investigate the Origins and Correlates of Differences between Men in the Cross-Sectional UN Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific' (2020) 10(2) *Journal of Global Health* 020439 <<https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.10.020439>>

²⁶T Shefer and K Ratele, 'South African Critical Masculinities Studies: A Scan of Past, Current and Emerging Priorities' (2023) 18(2) *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 72 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2023.2206683>>

socioeconomic status, aggressive masculinity serve as self-defence as well as affirmation of social acceptance^{27 28}.

2.3 Gendered Vulnerability and the Socialisation of Fear

Girls are socialised to accept subordination and vulnerability in opposition to hegemonic masculinity^{29 30}. Femininity is institutionally made out to be passive, emotionally accommodating, and deferential to male authority^{31 32}. Within violent environments, these socialization mechanisms become ever more evident; girls from the gate are taught that certain spaces, times, and responses entail gendered risk, and they adopt survival skills of spatial avoidance, behavioural modification, and silence. This is what Murphy calls learned helplessness, a mental reaction to repeated uncontrollable violence, when you feel powerless and have less ability to fight back³³. When fear and subordination is internalised very early, such patterning practices provide a standardised template for adult intimate partner violence, while also contributing to delayed help seeking and refusal to exit abusive partnerships³⁴. Such vulnerabilities are further compounded by intersecting inequalities: poverty, a lack of policing, absent social services, and patriarchal cultural norms that normalise or condone male violence^{35 36}.

²⁷ (n 19)

²⁸ I Manatsa and others, 'The Impact of School Safety on Learning Outcomes: A Study of Learner Perceptions in Three Umlazi High Schools' (2025) 6(2) *Journal of African Education and Traditional Learning Systems* 23.

²⁹ D Khosa, 'Gender and Police Leadership: An Analysis of Metropolitan Police Departments in South Africa' (2021) 10 *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 1333 <<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2021.10.153>>

³⁰ (n 23)

³¹ (n 30)

³² (n 23)

³³ PN Murphy (ed), *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychobiology* (Routledge 2018).

³⁴ (n 15)

³⁵ LB Howe, 'The Gender–Poverty–Mobility Nexus and the Post-Pandemic Era in South Africa' (2022) 7(3) *Urban Planning* 35 <<https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v7i3.5240>>.

³⁶ N Tlali, D Khosa and J Mofokeng, 'Redefining Law Enforcement: Policy Innovations for Gender Equality in South African Law Enforcement' (2024) 5(16) *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 2750 <<https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20245165>>

2.4 Legal and Policy Framework

South Africa's legal and policy framework provides the normative foundation for tackling GBV and femicide, but how they are applied in schools and communities is critically uneven³⁷. The global commitment to eliminating gender discrimination in all spheres of public life and protecting women from violence through reform of education and transformation of social and cultural norms is articulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that South Africa ratified in 1995³⁸. Domestically, the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998, expands the legal definition of abuse, encompassing emotional, psychological, and economic abuse, thus establishing a legislative structure for early detection and intervention. It provides a protective framework for persons under the age of 18 years, whilst the Children's Act 38 of 2005, under which schools, educators and state institutions are obliged to take affirmative action to report suspected abuse and to ensure that children in all settings are safe.

Above all, South Africa's National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide 2020–2030 (NSP) offers a multi-sectoral framework based on six pillars: accountability, prevention, justice, response, economic power, and research. Pillar Two of the NSP is clear on transformative education and the breaking down of damaging social norms at the inception of early childhood education and throughout schooling. Amid this legislative and policy infrastructure, the township schools in Umlazi, characterized by poorly resourced infrastructure, a lack of school-based counsellors, and weak enforcement of learner safety policies, highlight the continuing and troubling discrepancy between legislative intent and lived experience. This discrepancy also bears on South Africa's commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, since unresolved school-based gendered violence undermines national progress against SDG 5 and SDG 4 targets.

³⁷ (n 19)

³⁸ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 13 (CEDAW).

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is based on three interrelated theoretical frames that contribute to a better understanding of the structural, relational, and institutional elements of gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa: Galtung's structural violence theory, Connell's hegemonic masculinity and gender order paradigm, and Feminist theories of gendered socialisation.

3.1 Galtung's Structural Violence Theory

According to Galtung femicide and gender-based violence arises not from personal pathology, but rather from structural social structures of oppression that are in fact a natural product of the social arrangements within which people are embedded³⁹. Galtung described structural violence as negative effects of the structural structures that keep lives from fulfilling individual needs, through impoverishment, spatial differentiation, institutional neglect, and standardised interpersonal hostility. According to scholars' apartheid's legacy of forced removals, township ghettoisation, systematic dispossessions led to violent ecologies where unemployment, substandard housing, poor social services and failed policing created environments ripe for abuse from a gendered perspective⁴⁰. Structural violence thus operates invisibly, but powerfully, robs women and girls of agency, resources and protection long before direct violence takes place^{41 42}. Thus, this framework frames femicide as political violence, a systemic exercise of power in contexts where historical dispossessions have undermined other forms of social authority.

³⁹ (n 20)

⁴⁰ (n 17)

⁴¹ K Abdulkareem and D Khosa, 'Unmasking Misogyny: Gender Inequality and Discrimination within the South African Police Service' (2024) 13(4) *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development* 95 <<https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2024/v13n4a5>>

⁴² (n 37)

3.2 Connell's Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity and Gender Order

Connell argued that gendered power relationships are institutionally constructed, maintained, and reproduced. Hegemonic masculinity describes dominant categories of manhood that venerate physical superiority, emotional repression, heterosexual conquest, and dominance over women⁴³. This is also a relational activity, defining masculinity as something opposed to femininity and subordinated masculinities. These trends in South Africa are exacerbated by apartheid-era militarisation, forced labour migration that split family structures, and post-apartheid unemployment that undermined traditional breadwinner dynamics⁴⁴. Hence, domestic manipulation and intimate violence reassert a masculine identity that appears under threat.⁴⁵ Furthermore, institutions such as schools purposefully position femininity in class as passive, accommodating, and subordinate⁴⁶. This theoretical model maintains that boys learn dominance on one hand while vulnerability, fear and submission for females, producing scripts that become complementary, leading to roles and scripts of violence which led to violence in sex partner relationships and intimate partner violence⁴⁷.

3.3 Chodorow's Feminist Theory of Gendered Socialisation

Chodorow posits that gender is something not natural, but constructed, performative, and patrolled under social conditions⁴⁸. In society females are socialized into subordination over spatial limitations, changes in behavioural patterns, and silence out of a desire to survive⁴⁹. This kind of socialisation is more potent in violent worlds where interlocking inequalities such as poverty, bad policing and cultural rationalizations for

⁴³ (n 19)

⁴⁴ (n 26)

⁴⁵ (n 15)

⁴⁶ (n 23)

⁴⁷ (n 23)

⁴⁸ NJ Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (University of California Press 1978).

⁴⁹ (n 49)

male violence amplify gendered vulnerability⁵⁰. The idea of learned helplessness describes how repeated exposure to uncontrollable violence leads to psychological adaptation that is marked by powerlessness and decreased resistance an adaptation that helps mould adult responses to intimate partner abuse⁵¹. These frameworks collectively frame schools as key sites in which structural violence, destructive masculinities, and gendered socialisation coincide and generate the ideological and behavioural precursors to femicide and gender-based violence long before adulthood. Accordingly, this study does not argue that schools reproduce gender-based violence, but how they possibly do it and identify potential structural conditions for transformation.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design to explore how school-based violence, gendered vulnerability, and structural elements in the community impact early socialisation on GBV and femicide in two Umlazi Township high schools, KwaZulu-Natal. The first school was chosen randomly whilst the second was snowballed following an educator's advice.

4.1 Participants and demographics: Twenty participants were purposively sampled. Female learners (n = 12) aged 14–16 years (in Grades 10 across both schools) were selected. Educators (n = 8; five females, three male) had between 4 and 22 years as educators from the township schools in Umlazi. All participants lived or worked in communities with high rates of unemployment, poverty, limited access to social services, and chronic exposure to community violence.

4.2 Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with individual learners and educators on school safety perceptions, the structural causes of violence, gendered patterns of behaviour, community dynamics, and emotional reactions and outcomes associated with violence. Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent, transcribed by an isiZulu-proficient native-speaking assistant, and anonymised using

⁵⁰ J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge 1990).

⁵¹ (n 34)

pseudonyms (L-1 through L-12 for learners; T-1 through T-8 for educators).

4.3 Ethical approval: In accordance with the institutional requirements, ethical clearance was obtained in relation to data collection. Since the study sample included participants under the age of 18 years, a two-tiered consent process was used: written informed assent was obtained from each learner and written parental/guardian consent was accepted according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Participation was entirely voluntary with no pressure, and the participants were informed they could cease any time without penalty or punishment. A trauma-informed interview approach was used with respect to sensitive topics. Referrals to school-based and community psychosocial support services were made and shared with all participants prior to data collection to ensure anyone who had reported harm or distress could find appropriate support.

4.4 Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted using six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework. Analysis entailed reading transcripts repeatedly, inductive coding of participant accounts, and step-by-step abstraction of codes into overarching themes⁵². Reflexivity was preserved through the consideration of how the researcher's positionality and wider structural and sociodemographic context surrounding South African GBV influenced interpretation.

5.0 RESULTS

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed four major themes that demonstrate how school-based experiences reflect early patterns associated with gendered violence and femicide exposure. These themes were supported by participant verbatims drawn from teachers and learners.

⁵² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (2006) 3(2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77 <<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>>.

5.1 Theme 1: Violent Community Ecosystems and Normalisation of Aggression

Participants across all two schools described the environment surrounding the schools as highly violent, with daily exposure to shootings, stabbings, gang activity and drug-related crime. This external violence permeated the school environment and shaped learner behaviour. This was reflected in the following statements.

L-1 *“Umlazi is dangerous my brother. You see these children see violence everyday people fighting, killing, shooting, and stabbing each other. So being violent becomes part of them.”*

L-5 *“We are also surrounded by violent community members... we have hostels and informal settlements surrounding us. These learners witness violence daily; as a result, violent behaviour is part of their life.”*

L-12 *“The same community encourages some learners to vandalise school property... They steal chairs and other things for their homes.”*

Teachers noted that gang dynamics outside the school directly influenced conduct inside the school:

T-5 *“One teacher tried to discipline a child; the child went to get an inkabi who came to threaten the educator in front of the learners.”*

The violence of the surrounding community has become normalized in school. Teachers reported that learners imitate the aggressive behaviours they observe in their own neighbourhoods daily, and that external gang

dynamics have direct impacts on school behaviour and erode teacher authority^{53 54}.

5.2 Theme 2: Harmful Masculinities and the Construction of Male Dominance

Findings showed that boys adopted masculinity norms that emphasised toughness, dominance, and emotional suppression. Male learners often ridiculed peers who showed vulnerability or reported victimisation, reinforcing the belief that “*real men*” do not express weakness. The following statements captured the belief system.

L-3 “*Male learners mock each other for being victims... being beaten means you are weak.*”

L- 7 “*Some of these boys are violent... they can threaten you and get away with it.*”

L 11 “*Older males influence younger ones; they copy that behaviour and the aggression continue.*”

Teachers also expressed fear of certain boys, describing them as unpredictable and emboldened by peer dynamics:

T-3 “*I am just afraid of correcting them because they are capable of doing anything.*”

T 7 “*As a male teacher, I can stand my ground... but imagine the female teachers?*”

Male learners showed compliance with aggressive masculinity norms that equate vulnerability with weakness and dominance with respect. It was argued that peer ridicule and intergenerational modelling upheld such

⁵³ (n 19).

⁵⁴ V Mncube and N Madikizela-Madiya, 'Gangsterism as a Cause of Violence in South African Schools: The Case of Six Provinces' (2014) 5(1) *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 43 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2014.11885608>>

norms, producing an environment in which boys' violent behaviour was both expected and feared in classrooms ⁵⁵.

5.3 Theme 3: Gendered Vulnerability and Emotional Harm Among Girls

Female learners exhibited higher levels of fear, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal compared to males. Participants noted that girls often avoided confrontation, remained silent during victimisation, and internalised feelings of helplessness. This was captured in the following excerpts.

L-1 *"Learners do not feel safe in our school, most of the time they are scared—especially those doing the lower grades."*

L-3 *"There is a general atmosphere of anxiety around the school. This affects learners and the staff too."*

L-4 *"As a woman I let them be. They respect some male teachers, but they give women little respect."*

L-5 *"Some learners want to leave the school and be in a better environment, but they don't have the money."*

Teachers observed that girls' emotional distress also affected their academic engagement:

T-1 *"Others want to concentrate but the environment does not allow them to... they have poor grades in the end because of all the disruptions."*

Instead of overt aggression, female learners presented more vulnerability by means of fear, anxiety, and withdrawal. Moreover, girls internalised their distress, remained silent during victimisation, and experienced

⁵⁵N Nongalo and EN Ciske, 'Risky Learning Spaces: The Impact of Environmental Hazards on Teaching and Learning in Rural Eastern Cape Secondary Schools, South Africa' (2025) 20(4) *TWIST* 161 <<https://twistjournal.net/twist/article/view/943>> accessed 20 June 2026.

academic disengagement due to the pervasive atmosphere of insecurity within the school environment ⁵⁶.

5.4 Theme 4: Early Romantic Power Imbalances and Normalisation of Gender-Based Violence

Participants highlighted the presence of early romantic relationships that reflected adult-like gender dynamics rooted in inequality, emotional dependence, and expectations of male dominance. Girls expressed deeply emotional attachments to partners, sometimes tolerating harmful behaviours:

L-3 *“These young girls... they are emotionally invested in relationships they don’t fully understand.”*

Teachers noted the early adoption of patriarchal expectations in romantic dynamics:

T-2 *“Some young girls talked about ‘indoda must’ they already have expectations of what a man should do for them.”*

There were also subtle indications of sexual exploitation and underreported gendered harm:

T-5 *“Some girls shared experiences of unwelcome comments and physical touches from older students.”*

T-6 *“Sexual partner violence may remain unreported due to emotional bonds hiding the misconduct.”*

L-8 *“Low reporting does not mean it is not happening; victims need trust and confidence to open up.”*

It was observed that early romantic relationships among learners manifested patriarchal power relations and gendered standards of behaviour expected in adult relationships. Female learner emotional

⁵⁶ X Sui and others, 'Violence Typologies and Sociodemographic Correlates in South African Adolescents: A Three-Wave Cross-Sectional Study' (2020) 20(1) *BMC Public Health* 221 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8332-6>>

investment in these relationships often resulted in tolerance towards harmful behaviours, sexual harassment and intimate partner violence which were mostly underreported due in part to emotional attachments and a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms ⁵⁷.

6.0 DISCUSSIONS

This study established that township schools in Umlazi are acting as unintended incubators of GBV and femicide behaviours. Violence against women is not a problem that exists only in adulthood, but it is a result of the gendered socialisation occurring from an early age ^{58 59}. Four interconnected enablers were reorganized: violent community environments, toxic masculinity scripts, girls' gendered vulnerability, as well as early patriarchal romantic dynamics.

6.1 Structural Violence and Community Ecology

Widespread community violence that learners reported was consistent with Galtung's argument that structural violence is a condition of the larger environment rather than an individual pathology ⁶⁰. Intimate partner violence in South Africa is deeply entrenched in colonial dispossession, migrant labour systems, and prolonged socio-economic marginalisation ^{61 62}. In Umlazi, unemployment rates exceed 40%, housing is insufficient, inadequate policing, and schools that have been infiltrated by gangs '*inkabis*' to intimidate teachers on the school property ⁶³. This shows how formal agencies have been transferred to criminal organizations. For female learners, this structural violence is intensified by patriarchal systems that uphold economic dependency and physical insecurity, which reiterates contention that femicide and GBV are forms

⁵⁷ S Arrojo and others, 'The Perceived Severity of Adolescent Dating Violence (PS-ADV) Scale: A Validation Study' (2024) 16(1) *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context* 27 <<https://doi.org/10.5093/ejpalc2024a3>>

⁵⁸ (n 9)

⁵⁹ (n 13)

⁶⁰ (n 20)

⁶¹ (n 14)

⁶² (n 17)

⁶³ (n 55)

of political violence, conscious assertions of male power in frameworks where historical lack has eroded alternative sources of power ⁶⁴.

6.2 Constructing Masculinity and Male Control

Male learners develop toxic masculinity norms from early adolescence. Male learners being teased about victimisation, '*being beaten means you are weak*,' while teachers fear aggressive boys, which aligns with Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory. Militarisation during the Apartheid era, disruption of breadwinner identities, and unemployment post-apartheid have produced masculine identity crises that are partly resolved through domestic and sexual control ^{65 66}. The intergenerational transmission of these norms, where older males model violence for younger boys, creates a self-perpetuating cycle that sets boys up to grow older for adult intimate partner violence.

6.3 Gendered Vulnerability and Socialisation of Fear

This increased fear, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, and silence among female learners reflects Connell's gender order at work, placing women as passive counterpoints to hegemonic masculinity ⁶⁷. Even female teachers, '*as a woman I let them be*' is evidence that male dominance extends into how they are treated in even professional, institutional relationships and perpetuates its perceived permanence. The learned helplessness concept is directly applicable: girls who internalize fear and subordination from early on into their adult intimate partner relationships are more likely to replicate that fear, leading to greater risk with help-seeking and exit ^{68 69}.

6.4 Early Romantic Interests and the Patriarchal Legacy

Female learners talk of '*indoda must*' language that patriarchal roles of male provision, protection and control are internalised before adulthood. Emotional investment of female learners in the status quo is linked to

⁶⁴ (n 22)

⁶⁵ (n 17)

⁶⁶ (n 26)

⁶⁷ (n 23)

⁶⁸ (n 34)

⁶⁹ (n 15)

under-reporting of both sexual harassment, and tolerance towards harmful behaviour, all of which are forms of psychological bondage seen in adult abuser relationships. This is not shocking within South Africa, where femicides mostly happen in intimate relationships.^{70 71}

6.5 Institutional Abandonment and State Neglect

Schools in the township are under resourced, they do not have adequate number of counsellors, no social workers, no proper safety systems, and bureaucratic paralysis. When the state does not implement the law, provide psychosocial support, and intervene early when violence is in the works, early warning signs of GBV, coercive behaviour, emotional injury, trauma are overlooked and untreated. Evidence from Umlazi, NSP on GBVF (2020–2030) in South Africa, where multi-sectoral prevention and early intervention are mandated with school-based programmes, does not mitigate the disparity between policy rhetoric and institutional practice. Reactive legal reforms and awareness campaigns are not enough unless the underlying structural underpinnings of poverty, impunity and institutional neglect are dealt with.⁷²

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study illustrated that South Africa's femicide and GBV epidemic is no coincidence but a way of life instilled from early childhood. In Umlazi, township schools become unwilling incubators of violent community ecosystems, harmful masculinities, gendered vulnerability, and patriarchal relational scripts that creates generational behaviour and ideological precursors of violence in adult intimate partner. Male learners are taught that aggression is the currency of dominance; girls learn that subordination and silence are survival strategies. These scripts, which are practiced during adolescence without support or intervention, are relational structures, where violence becomes an ordinary fact of life, an expectation and lethal one in some instances. Addressing this crisis requires meaningful intervention in line with South Africa's entrenched legal and

⁷⁰ (n 58)

⁷¹ (n 2)

⁷² (n 7)

policy framework. Four specific recommendations were developed based on the themes identified in this study.

- **Theme 1** (violent community ecosystems), the DBE must quickly operationalise the Safe Schools Programme in all townships secondary schools and allocate dedicated budgets to schools in relation to Pillar Two of the NSP on GBVF 2020–2030, prioritising schools located in high crime areas, including Umlazi.
- **Theme 2** (harmful masculinities), gender-transformative life skills education needs to be formally embedded into the national curriculum from Grade 8, replicating South African models of gender-transformative learning such Stepping Stones and Peace Clubs which align to the CEDAW legal provision that seeks to change discriminatory cultural norms through education and activism.
- **Theme 3** (gendered vulnerability and learned helplessness), the Children's Act 38 of 2005 calls for mandated employment of a school-based social worker and counsellor at all townships secondary schools (not a dual teacher) to give them trauma-informed psychosocial support and ensure referral of learners who disclose abuse.
- **Theme 4** (early romantic power imbalances), age-appropriate healthy relationships education including coercive control, consent, and reporting route should be a part of the Life Orientation curriculum with trained trusted educators. There should be secure, confidential learner-centred reporting mechanisms corresponding to the broader definitions of abuse in the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 within schools.

Without such interventions, township schools will be places where the seeds are sown and watered when it comes to intimate partner violence and South African women will continue to die at levels that reveal the failure of constitutionally guaranteed rights. Prevention of femicide and GBV requires early school-based interventions from the very places where gendered violence is first learned, rehearsed and normalized. Collectively, these recommendations operationalise South Africa's obligations under SDG 5 (Target 5.2), SDG 4 (Target 4.a), and SDG 16 (Target 16.2),

positioning township schools as a critical, underused lever for achieving the country's 2030 gender-equality and child-protection commitments.