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Assessing the Effects of Gender-Based Violence on Educational Outcomes Among Adolescents in South Ethiopia Region Secondary Schools

Tsalafo Chaka Chame

tsalafochaka8@gmail.com

Borana University

Research Article

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious challenge to adolescents' safety, well-being, and educational success. Physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence can disrupt students' learning experiences and limit their opportunities to succeed academically. This study examined the effects of GBV on educational outcomes among adolescents attending secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region. A mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design was employed, involving approximately 480 participants, including 422 adolescent students who completed structured questionnaires and about 58 key informants and focus group discussion participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that adolescents who experienced GBV were more likely to miss school, participate less in classroom activities, lose motivation to learn, and perform poorly academically. Poverty, harmful gender norms, weak reporting mechanisms, and limited institutional support are further increased students' vulnerability. Fear, emotional distress, stigma, and inadequate counseling and protection services also affected students' concentration, confidence, and participation in school activities. These challenges undermined both academic progress and students' sense of safety and belonging at school. The study concludes that GBV remains a significant barrier to safe, inclusive, and equitable education. Addressing this problem requires stronger school-based prevention initiatives, accessible reporting and counseling services, greater community awareness, and effective gender-responsive policies. Collaboration among schools, families, communities, and relevant institutions is essential to protecting adolescents, creating safer learning environments, and improving educational participation and achievement.

Keywords: Adolescents, educational outcomes, gender-based violence, secondary schools, South Ethiopia Region

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious human rights, public health, and educational concern affecting adolescents worldwide. It refers to harmful acts directed at individuals because of their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic violence (United Nations, 2023). Adolescents may experience violence in their homes, schools, communities, and digital environments, often with consequences for their safety, dignity, confidence, and participation in social and educational activities (UNICEF, 2023). Although both boys and girls can experience GBV, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, exploitation, and discriminatory practices because of persistent gender inequalities and harmful social expectations (WHO, 2021). Understanding GBV among adolescents is therefore essential for protecting their rights and ensuring that they can learn and develop in safe and supportive environments.

Globally, violence against children and adolescents remains widespread, with many young people experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse before reaching adulthood. Within educational settings, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) takes different forms, including sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation, corporal punishment, and gender-based discrimination. Such experiences can make students feel unsafe and weaken their trust in teachers, classmates, and school authorities (UNESCO, 2023). The consequences often extend beyond the immediate experience of violence. Affected adolescents may struggle to concentrate during lessons, attend school regularly, participate in classroom activities, or maintain satisfactory academic performance. Fear, anxiety, emotional distress, and declining self-esteem can also reduce their motivation to learn and their confidence in pursuing future educational opportunities (WHO, 2021). Preventing GBV is consequently important for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education, and Goal 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls (United Nations, 2023).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescents continue to face gender-based violence despite ongoing efforts to strengthen gender equality and child protection. Poverty, unequal gender relations, harmful cultural practices, early marriage, inadequate protection services, and weak reporting mechanisms can increase young people's vulnerability to violence (UNICEF, 2022). In some communities, traditional expectations concerning gender roles may normalize unequal treatment or discourage survivors from speaking openly about their experiences. Schools may also face difficulties establishing effective prevention programmes, confidential reporting systems, and appropriate counseling services. These challenges demonstrate that addressing GBV requires more than responding to individual incidents; it also requires changes in social attitudes, stronger institutional protection, and supportive environments where adolescents can report violence without fear of blame or retaliation (UNESCO, 2023).

In Ethiopia, constitutional provisions, education policies, child protection frameworks, and initiatives addressing harmful traditional practices demonstrate a commitment to promoting gender equality and protecting children's rights. Nevertheless, gender-based violence continues to raise concerns about adolescents' wellbeing and

educational participation. Evidence from the Ethiopia Mini Demographic and Health Survey highlighted the persistence of gender-related violence and harmful practices, particularly among women and girls in disadvantaged settings (Central Statistical Service Ethiopia & ICF, 2021). Research has also identified socioeconomic circumstances, family relationships, community expectations, and institutional weaknesses as relevant factors in understanding vulnerability to GBV. The studies cited in this research further suggest that exposure to violence can be associated with emotional distress, reduced engagement in learning, and difficulties maintaining regular school participation (Tadesse et al., 2024). These concerns point to the need to examine not only the occurrence of violence but also its implications for adolescents' educational experiences.

The South Ethiopia Region provides an important setting for examining gender-based violence (GBV) because its culturally diverse communities experience varying socioeconomic, geographical, and educational conditions. Poverty, rural livelihoods, gender norms, geographical barriers, and limited access to protection services may increase adolescents' vulnerability to violence and make it difficult for them to seek help. Although schools and local stakeholders have introduced gender clubs, child protection committees, and awareness-raising activities, the effects of GBV on secondary school students' educational outcomes remain insufficiently understood. Moreover, existing studies involving university students, adult women, or selected urban populations may not fully capture the experiences of secondary school adolescents in the region. Educational outcomes extend beyond examination results to include attendance, classroom participation, motivation, learning engagement, school retention and completion, psychosocial wellbeing, and future aspirations. Experiences of violence may undermine students' concentration, confidence, regular attendance, and ability to pursue their educational goals.

Therefore, this study aimed to assess the effects of GBV on educational outcomes among adolescents in secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region, focusing on their experiences of violence, its relationship with educational outcomes, associated socioeconomic and institutional factors, and possible prevention and response strategies. By addressing the limited context-specific evidence, the study sought to provide useful insights for policymakers, education authorities, school administrators, teachers, parents, and development partners to strengthen adolescent protection, improve school-based support, and promote safer and more inclusive learning environments where students can learn and pursue their aspirations without fear of violence or discrimination.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious challenge to adolescents' rights, wellbeing, and educational development, despite global efforts to promote gender equality and safer learning environments. Adolescence is a critical stage of life when young people develop their identities, relationships, and aspirations for the future. Exposure to physical, sexual, or psychological violence during this period can undermine their confidence, emotional wellbeing, school attendance, classroom participation, academic achievement, and chances of completing their education (WHO, 2021). Although previous studies have examined the prevalence and health consequences of

GBV, less attention has been given to its wider educational effects, particularly among secondary school adolescents in low-income settings.

Schools are expected to provide safe and inclusive environments where students can learn and develop their potential. However, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation, corporal punishment, and gender discrimination can make schools unsafe and discourage students from participating fully in educational activities. UNESCO (2023) and UNICEF (2022) emphasized that violence against children and adolescents can weaken school engagement, reduce educational aspirations, and reinforce existing inequalities, particularly among girls and other vulnerable groups. In Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty, unequal gender relations, harmful cultural practices, early marriage, inadequate protection services, and weak reporting mechanisms further increase adolescents' vulnerability to violence and educational exclusion (African Union, 2022).

In Ethiopia, constitutional provisions, education policies, and child protection frameworks demonstrate a commitment to gender equality and children's rights. Nevertheless, gender-based violence and harmful practices continue to threaten adolescents' safety and educational participation, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Central Statistical Service Ethiopia & ICF, 2021). Previous Ethiopian studies have contributed valuable insights into the prevalence, determinants, and psychosocial consequences of GBV. However, studies such as Tadesse et al. (2022) and Kebede et al. (2023) have left important questions about its broader effects on academic performance, attendance, classroom engagement, motivation, and school continuation. Similarly, Deyessa et al. (2021) highlighted cultural, economic, and institutional factors associated with violence, but further context-specific evidence is needed to understand how these factors shape adolescents' educational experiences.

A significant geographical and methodological gap also remains. Evidence from major urban centres and other established regions may not adequately reflect the experiences of secondary school students in the South Ethiopia Region, where cultural diversity, rural livelihoods, socioeconomic conditions, and differences in access to educational and protection services may influence both exposures to violence and its consequences. Moreover, the predominance of quantitative cross-sectional studies has limited understanding of adolescents' lived experiences, coping strategies, and the responses of schools and communities. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches could, therefore, provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between GBV and educational outcomes.

This lack of localized evidence makes it difficult for education authorities, school administrators, and child protection organizations to design interventions that address not only the occurrence of violence but also its consequences for learning and educational progression. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the effects of gender-based violence on educational outcomes among adolescents in secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region. Specifically, it examined the forms and experiences of GBV, its influence on educational outcomes, the socioeconomic and institutional factors associated with violence, and possible prevention and response strategies. The findings were expected to inform context-sensitive policies and interventions, strengthen school-based

protection mechanisms, and support the creation of safer, more inclusive, and gender-responsive learning environments. Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the prevalence and major forms of gender-based violence experienced by adolescents in secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region?
2. How had gender-based violence affected adolescents' educational outcomes, including academic performance, school attendance, classroom participation, and engagement in learning activities?
3. What socioeconomic, family, school, and community factors had contributed to adolescents' vulnerability to gender-based violence in secondary schools?
4. What prevention strategies and institutional responses could effectively contribute to reducing gender-based violence and improving educational outcomes among adolescents?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Understanding of Key Terms

2.1.1. Understanding Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a social problem rooted in unequal power relations, gender discrimination, and social norms that tolerate or justify harmful behaviour. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm directed at individuals because of their gender. GBV should therefore be understood not simply as an individual act of aggression but as a problem shaped by family relationships, community expectations, institutional practices, and wider social inequalities (United Nations, 2023).

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable because they are still developing their identities, social relationships, and understanding of their rights. Experiences of violence during this stage may undermine their confidence, emotional wellbeing, and ability to participate fully in education. Poverty, social exclusion, harmful gender expectations, and inadequate protection services can further increase this vulnerability (UNICEF, 2023). Understanding GBV among adolescents consequently requires attention to both personal experiences and the social conditions that influence how violence occurs, is reported, and is addressed.

2.1.2. Adolescence and Experiences of Gender-Based Violence

Adolescence, generally defined as the period between 10 and 19 years, is an important stage of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development (WHO, 2022). During these years, young people build relationships, develop independence, and form aspirations concerning education and future employment. However, limited decision-making power and dependence on adults can make it difficult for adolescents to resist violence or seek assistance.

Girls may face sexual harassment, early marriage, and gender discrimination, while boys may experience violence associated with restrictive expectations of masculinity. These experiences vary according to family circumstances, community norms, and access to protection services (UNICEF, 2023). Schools can help protect adolescents through supportive teachers, confidential reporting procedures, and counseling services. Where these mechanisms are weak, however, violence may remain unreported and continue to affect students' wellbeing and educational participation (UNESCO, 2023).

2.1.3. Educational Outcomes and School-Related Gender-Based Violence

Educational outcomes encompass more than examination results. They include school attendance, academic achievement, classroom participation, learning motivation, educational engagement, retention, completion, and students' confidence in pursuing future opportunities (OECD, 2021). These dimensions are interconnected because students generally find it more difficult to learn effectively when they feel unsafe, anxious, excluded, or unsupported.

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) includes sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation, physical punishment, verbal abuse, and discriminatory treatment occurring within or around educational settings. Such experiences can weaken students' trust in teachers and school administrators, reduce classroom participation, and contribute to absenteeism or disengagement. Institutional weaknesses, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and limited accountability may allow these problems to persist (Parkes et al., 2022).

Preventing SRGBV, therefore, requires more than raising awareness about violence. Schools also need clear protection policies, responsive leadership, trained teachers, accessible reporting systems, and appropriate support for affected students. In Ethiopia, gender clubs and child protection committees provide possible mechanisms for prevention, although their effectiveness may depend on institutional commitment and local capacity (Ministry of Education Ethiopia, 2023). These considerations make it important to investigate how GBV affects adolescents' educational experiences in the South Ethiopia Region.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Social Ecological Theory

This study was guided by Social Ecological Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and subsequently applied in violence prevention research. The theory explains that human experiences are shaped by interactions among individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, institutions, communities, and broader societal conditions. It is relevant to this study because adolescents' experiences of GBV cannot be explained adequately without considering the environments in which they live and learn.

At the individual level, adolescents' knowledge of their rights, attitudes, and previous experiences may influence their vulnerability to violence and willingness to seek help. At the interpersonal level, relationships with parents, peers, and teachers may either provide protection or expose adolescents to harmful behaviour. At the institutional level, school leadership, counseling services, reporting procedures, and accountability mechanisms influence how effectively violence is prevented and addressed. At the community and societal levels, gender norms, economic inequalities, cultural expectations, and legal protections shape attitudes towards violence and gender equality (WHO, 2021).

The theory provides a useful basis for examining how these factors interact to influence educational outcomes. It also suggests that effective responses must involve students, families, schools, communities, and relevant institutions rather than placing the entire responsibility for preventing violence on individual adolescents.

2.2.2. Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory complements the ecological perspective by examining how unequal gender relations and social structures contribute to violence and discrimination. It emphasizes that GBV is connected to broader inequalities in

power, decision-making, and access to opportunities rather than being solely the result of individual behaviour (Heise, 2021).

In educational settings, gender stereotypes may influence how students are treated, whose voices are heard, and who receives encouragement to pursue particular educational opportunities. Girls may experience harassment or discrimination that restricts their participation, while rigid expectations about gender roles may affect both girls' and boys' experiences. Feminist Theory therefore helps explain how social expectations and institutional practices can reproduce inequality within schools.

Together, Social Ecological Theory and Feminist Theory provide complementary explanations for GBV. The ecological perspective identifies the different environments influencing adolescents' experiences, while the feminist perspective highlights the unequal power relations operating within those environments. Their combined application supports a broader examination of violence, educational outcomes, and the institutional and social conditions that may protect adolescents or increase their vulnerability.

2.3. Empirical Studies

International research has increasingly recognized GBV as a barrier to educational participation and achievement. Existing evidence links exposure to violence with emotional distress, reduced concentration, poor classroom engagement, and interrupted schooling (UNESCO, 2023). School safety and supportive institutional responses are consequently important for ensuring that students can participate confidently in learning. However, the strength and nature of these effects may differ according to the type of violence experienced, the support available to students, and the wider social context.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty, harmful gender norms, early marriage, and unequal access to protection services continue to create challenges for adolescents, particularly girls. UNICEF (2022) and the African Union (2022) highlighted the relationship between gender inequality, violence, and restricted educational opportunities. Nevertheless, broad regional findings do not necessarily explain how these challenges operate within particular communities or how school-level responses influence students' educational experiences.

In Ethiopia, previous studies have examined the prevalence, determinants, and psychosocial consequences of GBV. Kefale et al. (2021) investigated sexual violence among female students and identified socioeconomic circumstances, family backgrounds, and gender-related attitudes as relevant factors. Adolescents' experiences of violence and associated psychosocial challenges, while Deyessa et al. (2021) discussed cultural, economic, and institutional conditions contributing to GBV. Although these studies provide useful foundations, further investigation is needed into how violence relates to attendance, academic performance, classroom participation, motivation, retention, and school completion among secondary school adolescents.

The geographical distribution of existing evidence also presents a limitation. Much of the available Ethiopian research has focused on selected urban populations or other established regions. The experiences of adolescents in the South Ethiopia Region remain comparatively underrepresented in the literature reviewed for this study. Local gender expectations, rural livelihoods, socioeconomic inequalities, and differences in access to educational and protection services may shape both the experience of violence and its consequences. Findings from other settings may therefore not fully capture the circumstances of students in this region.

Methodological limitations also warrant attention. Quantitative cross-sectional studies can establish patterns of violence and identify associated factors, but they may provide less insight into how adolescents experience violence, respond to it, and seek support. Qualitative evidence from students, teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders can help explain the processes connecting violence with educational outcomes. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches can therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Hence, the literature establishes the importance of addressing GBV but leaves a need for context-specific evidence on its educational consequences among secondary school adolescents in the South Ethiopia Region. This study addresses that gap by examining the forms of violence experienced by adolescents, their relationship with educational outcomes, the socioeconomic and institutional factors involved, and possible prevention and response strategies.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework assumes that GBV influences adolescents' educational outcomes directly and indirectly. The independent variable is GBV, including physical violence, sexual violence, psychological or emotional abuse, harassment, bullying, and gender-based discrimination. These experiences may affect students' emotional wellbeing, confidence, concentration, attendance, and willingness to participate in school activities.

The relationship between GBV and educational outcomes may also be influenced by family support, socioeconomic circumstances, school safety, community attitudes, counseling services, reporting mechanisms, and institutional protection practices. Supportive environments may help reduce the educational consequences of violence, whereas inadequate protection and weak institutional responses may intensify them. The dependent variable comprises academic performance, attendance, classroom participation, learning motivation, educational engagement, retention, and school completion.

The framework is informed by Social Ecological Theory and Feminist Theory. It recognizes that students' educational experiences are shaped by interactions between personal circumstances, relationships, school practices, and wider gender inequalities. Accordingly, improving educational outcomes requires both effective prevention of violence and responsive support systems that enable adolescents to learn in safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive environments.

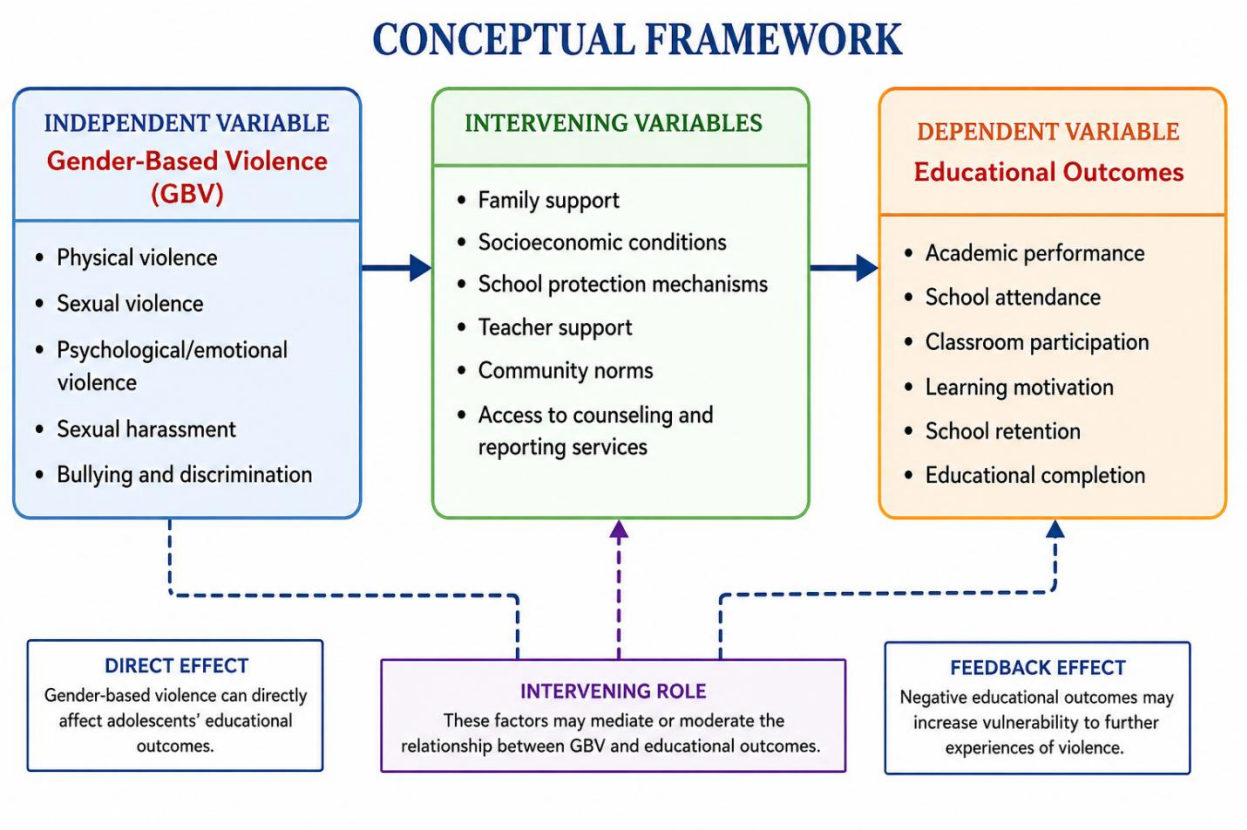


Figure 1: Effects of GBV on Educational Performances of Students

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence and its effects on adolescents' educational outcomes. This approach was appropriate because GBV is a complex social problem shaped by individual experiences, family relationships, cultural expectations, socioeconomic conditions, and institutional practices. Quantitative data helped to establish measurable patterns and relationships, while qualitative data provided deeper insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. Bringing these two forms of evidence together enabled the study to examine both the extent of the problem and the contextual factors that influenced it (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Specifically, the study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same study period, analyzed separately, and integrated when interpreting the findings. The quantitative component examined patterns of GBV and its relationship with educational outcomes, while the qualitative component explored participants' experiences and views on the factors contributing to violence and shaping school responses. The study also used a cross-sectional design, collecting data from selected participants at a single point in time to understand existing conditions and relationships among the study variables. This design was suitable for examining adolescents' experiences and educational outcomes within the study context without requiring long-term follow-up (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2. Target Population

The target population comprised students enrolled in Grades 9–12 in government secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region during the 2025/2026 academic year. To capture the region's cultural, socioeconomic, and educational diversity, four zones: Gammo, Goffa, Wolaita, and Gedeo, were purposively selected, followed by the random selection of two secondary schools from each zone, resulting in eight study schools: Arba Minch and Chencha in Gammo, Sawla and Bulki in Goffa, Boditi and Areka in Wolaita, and Dilla and Yirgacheffe in Gedeo.

These students constituted the primary population for the quantitative component, providing information about their experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) and its relationship with educational outcomes. The qualitative component involved 44 key informants with relevant experience in school administration, student support, and gender-related activities, including eight school principals, eight guidance and counseling coordinators, eight gender club coordinators, sixteen teachers (two from each school), and four district education experts representing the selected zones. Their perspectives helped provide a broader understanding of school responses to GBV and the factors influencing adolescents' educational experiences.

3.3. Data Sources and Types

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected directly from adolescent students through structured questionnaires. In addition, qualitative information was obtained through semi-structured interviews with school principals, teachers, guidance and counseling coordinators, gender club coordinators, and education experts. Focus group discussions were also conducted with selected students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perceptions regarding gender-based violence and its educational implications.

Secondary data were obtained from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, reports of international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and UN Women, Ministry of Education publications, and other relevant academic sources. These documents provided contextual information and supported interpretation of the primary findings. Quantitative data included numerical information regarding the prevalence of gender-based violence, educational outcomes, and associated factors, whereas qualitative data consisted of narratives describing participants' experiences, perceptions, institutional practices, and suggested interventions.

3.4. Sampling Technique and Sample Size Determination

A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure that the selected participants adequately represented the study population. In the first stage, selected zones within the South Ethiopia Region were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure representation of different socioeconomic and geographical contexts. In the second stage, government secondary schools were selected using simple random sampling. Finally, adolescent students were selected using stratified random sampling based on grade level and sex to ensure proportional representation of both male and female students.

The qualitative participants, including school principals, teachers, guidance and counseling coordinators, gender club coordinators, and education experts, were selected using purposive sampling because they possessed relevant knowledge and practical experience concerning adolescent protection and school-based gender issues.

The sample size for the quantitative survey was determined using Cochran's (1977) sample size determination formula for large populations:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2} = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.5)(1-0.5)}{(0.05)^2} = \underline{\underline{384}}$$

Where:

- n = required sample size
- Z = 1.96 at 95% confidence level
- p = 0.50 (maximum variability)
- q = 1 − p = 0.50
- e = 0.05 margin of error

The calculation produced a minimum sample of 384 respondents. To compensate for possible non-response, approximately 10% was added, resulting in a final sample size of approximately 422 adolescent students. For the

qualitative component, approximately 20–25 key informants and four to six focus group discussions, each comprising six to eight students, were selected until information saturation was achieved. The total sample size of the study was approximately 480 participants, including 422 adolescent students for the quantitative survey and about 58 key informants and FGD participants for the qualitative component.

3.5. Data Collection Tools

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on relevant literature and previously validated research instruments. The questionnaire covered key areas including participants' demographic characteristics, experiences of gender-based violence, educational outcomes, contributing factors, and institutional responses. Most items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)**.**

For the qualitative component, semi-structured interview guides were used to collect information from school administrators, teachers, guidance and counseling personnel, gender club coordinators, and education experts. The interviews focused on participants' perspectives, experiences, existing prevention and response mechanisms, institutional challenges, and possible strategies for addressing gender-based violence in schools. Additionally, focus group discussion guides were developed to engage adolescent students in exploring their experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations for creating safer learning environments.

To ensure the quality and relevance of the research instruments, they were reviewed by experts in education and gender-related fields. A pilot study was conducted in schools outside the selected study areas to evaluate the clarity, appropriateness, and reliability of the instruments before the actual data collection. The reliability of the quantitative questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, and a coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered an acceptable level of internal consistency.

3.6. Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were coded, entered, cleaned, and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondents' characteristics, forms of gender-based violence, educational outcomes, and associated factors. Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships among variables. Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to determine the extent to which gender-based violence predicted educational outcomes while controlling for socioeconomic and institutional factors. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$.

Qualitative data obtained through interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, translated where necessary, organized, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Emerging themes were identified, compared across participant groups, and integrated with

quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the results. Finally, findings from both datasets were merged during interpretation to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence, thereby strengthening the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the entire research process. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics body, and necessary permissions were secured from concerned authorities and participating institutions. Participation was voluntary, and participants were provided with clear information about the purpose, procedures, and significance of the study. Appropriate informed consent procedures were followed, including obtaining consent from adult participants and assent from younger participants together with consent from their parents or legal guardians, where applicable.

Participants were informed of their rights to participate freely, decline involvement, or withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. The confidentiality and privacy of participants were protected by using identification codes instead of personal information and ensuring that collected data were securely managed and used only for research purposes. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, data collection was conducted in a manner that respected participants' safety, dignity, and emotional well-being. Necessary support and referral mechanisms were considered for participants who required further assistance. Throughout the study, the researcher adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including respect for persons, avoidance of harm, fairness, confidentiality, and responsible handling of research data, in line with recognized ethical standards for social science research.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Prevalence and Major Forms of Gender-Based Violence among Adolescents

The findings indicate that gender-based violence (GBV) was a substantial concern among adolescents attending secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region. Of the 422 students who participated in the survey, 318 (75.4%) reported experiencing at least one form of GBV, while the overall mean score of 3.12 (SD = 0.83) indicated a moderate level of exposure. This finding suggests that GBV was not an isolated experience affecting only a small group of students; rather, it was part of the social and educational experiences of a considerable proportion of adolescents in the study area. The finding is consistent with Ethiopian evidence demonstrating that violence against adolescents remains an important public health, educational, and social concern.

Table 1: Prevalence and Level of Different Forms of GBV among Adolescents

No	Form of GBV	n	Prevalence (%)	M	SD	Interpretation
1	Verbal and emotional abuse	286	67.8	3.82	0.91	High
2	Psychological intimidation and threats	254	60.2	3.54	0.96	Moderate
3	Bullying and humiliating behavior	231	54.7	3.38	1.02	Moderate
4	Gender-based discrimination	205	48.6	3.21	1.08	Moderate
5	Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances	162	38.4	2.94	1.15	Moderate
6	Physical violence	148	35.1	2.78	1.12	Moderate
7	Pressure to enter unwanted relationships	134	31.8	2.61	1.17	Moderate
8	Sexual abuse and coercion	117	27.7	2.46	1.19	Moderate
	At least one form of GBV	318	75.4	3.12	0.83	Moderate

Note. Individual categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, their percentages should not be summed. Students could report exposure to more than one form of GBV.

Verbal and emotional abuse emerged as the most commonly reported form, affecting 286 students (67.8%) and recording the highest mean score (M = 3.82, SD = 0.91). This finding suggests that violence among adolescents was frequently expressed through everyday interpersonal interactions rather than only through physically aggressive behavior. The qualitative findings add important context to this result: participants described insults, humiliating comments, gender-based name-calling, ridicule, and other forms of demeaning treatment. Such experiences can easily be dismissed as ordinary teasing or peer interaction, particularly when they occur repeatedly and become normalized. This may partly explain why verbal and emotional abuse was more frequently reported than physical violence.

The finding also corresponds with the broader understanding of school-related violence, which recognizes that violence can be psychological and emotional as well as physical. UNICEF (2021) emphasizes that school violence

and bullying can take multiple forms and may negatively influence children's safety, wellbeing, participation, and educational development. In the Ethiopian context, Gebremariam et al. (2021) similarly reported a substantial burden of emotional violence among female secondary-school students, finding that 43.04% had experienced emotional violence. Although this figure is lower than the 67.8% observed in the present study, the two findings point in the same direction: emotional and verbal forms of violence constitute an important part of adolescents' experiences and should not be overshadowed by attention to physical and sexual violence.

Psychological intimidation and threats represented the second most frequently reported form of GBV, affecting 254 students (60.2%), with a mean score of 3.54 (SD = 0.96). The qualitative accounts indicated that fear and intimidation could influence adolescents' willingness to speak, participate in classroom activities, challenge inappropriate behavior, or seek assistance. This is important because psychological violence may remain largely invisible to teachers and other adults even when its effects are significant. School-related GBV includes psychological violence and intimidation as well as physical and sexual forms, particularly where gender norms and unequal power relations shape students' experiences (UNICEF, 2019).

Recent global evidence further emphasizes the hidden nature of violence against children. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) noted that many children who experience violence do not disclose it or receive appropriate support. This helps explain why psychological intimidation may have consequences that extend beyond the immediate incident. Persistent fear can affect students' emotional security, confidence, classroom participation, relationships with peers, and willingness to seek help. In this respect, the qualitative findings give meaning to the quantitative result by showing how intimidation can become part of adolescents' everyday school experiences.

Bullying and humiliating behavior was reported by 231 students (54.7%), with a mean score of 3.38 (SD = 1.02). The qualitative evidence suggested that bullying was not necessarily a one-time event; rather, it could develop into a repeated pattern involving teasing, public embarrassment, exclusion, and negative comments. Adolescents who were perceived as vulnerable, different, or less able to defend themselves could become recurrent targets. Such experiences can gradually weaken students' sense of belonging and make school a less comfortable environment in which to learn and interact.

This finding is consistent with international evidence indicating that bullying remains a widespread problem among adolescents. WHO (2024) identifies peer violence and bullying as important threats to adolescent health and wellbeing, while UNICEF (2021) emphasizes that bullying can affect educational participation and children's broader development. The relatively high prevalence observed in the present study therefore suggests that bullying should not be treated simply as ordinary adolescent conflict. Its repeated nature, gendered dimensions, and potential effects on participation make it an important component of the broader GBV prevention agenda.

Gender-based discrimination was reported by 205 students (48.6%), with a mean score of 3.21 (SD = 1.08). Qualitative evidence indicated that discrimination could take the form of unequal treatment, gender stereotypes,

different expectations for boys and girls, and assumptions about appropriate gender roles. These experiences demonstrate that GBV is not limited to overt physical or sexual acts. It can also be embedded in everyday interactions and institutional practices that communicate unequal value, opportunity, or respect.

This interpretation is consistent with UNICEF's framework on school-related GBV, which emphasizes the role of gender norms, stereotypes, unequal power relations, and discriminatory practices in shaping children's experiences in and around schools (UNICEF, 2019). From this perspective, the relatively high prevalence of discrimination in the present study is important because it suggests that preventing GBV requires more than responding to individual incidents. Schools also need to examine the norms and expectations that may allow unequal treatment of boys and girls to become socially acceptable.

Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances were reported by 162 students (38.4%), with a mean score of 2.94 (SD = 1.15). Although this prevalence was lower than that of verbal abuse, intimidation, bullying, and discrimination, it remains substantial. The qualitative findings indicated that adolescents could experience unwanted sexual comments, sexualized jokes, inappropriate attention, pressure for interaction, and unwanted advances. These experiences may create fear, discomfort, embarrassment, and uncertainty about whether it is safe to report what has happened.

Evidence from Southern Ethiopia further strengthens the importance of examining gender-based violence within the local social and educational context. A recent study among secondary school students in Arba Minch Zuria, South Ethiopia, documented the occurrence of childhood sexual assault among female students and highlighted its substantial psychosocial and educational consequences. The study reported that affected students experienced fear, humiliation, guilt, reduced self-confidence, and disruptions to their education, with some reporting intentions to interrupt their studies following the assault (Dinagde et al., 2025). At the global level, UNICEF (2024) estimated that more than 370 million girls and women alive today experienced rape or sexual assault before age 18. When non-contact forms of sexual violence are included, the estimate rises to approximately 650 million. These estimates highlight the seriousness of sexual violence during childhood and adolescence and reinforce the need for confidential, adolescent-friendly reporting and support mechanisms.

The comparatively lower prevalence of sexual abuse and coercion (27.7%) requires particularly careful interpretation. The qualitative findings suggested that adolescents might hesitate to disclose such experiences because of shame, stigma, fear of retaliation, social judgment, or concerns about being blamed. Therefore, the lower quantitative estimate should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that sexual coercion was uncommon. Rather, it may partly reflect the sensitive nature of the topic and difficulties associated with disclosure. WHO (2024) similarly emphasizes that violence against children is frequently hidden and that many affected children do not tell others about their experiences or receive appropriate assistance.

This issue is especially important in the Ethiopian context, where social expectations surrounding sexuality, gender roles, family reputation, and interpersonal relationships may influence adolescents' willingness to disclose sensitive experiences. UNICEF (2024) further estimated that more than 79 million girls and women in sub-Saharan Africa had experienced rape or sexual assault before the age of 18. While these global and regional estimates cannot be directly compared with the present school-based prevalence, they provide important context for understanding why sexual violence among adolescents requires sustained attention and protection-oriented responses.

Physical violence was reported by 148 students (35.1%), with a mean score of 2.78 (SD = 1.12). The prevalence was lower than that of verbal, psychological, bullying, and discriminatory forms of violence. This pattern is noteworthy because physical violence is often more visible and therefore more readily recognized by teachers, parents, and school authorities. However, the qualitative findings suggest that physical aggression could occur alongside other forms of violence. An adolescent subjected to physical aggression might simultaneously experience threats, insults, humiliation, or exclusion.

Pressure to enter unwanted relationships was reported by 134 students (31.8%), with a mean score of 2.61 (SD = 1.17). Although this was less prevalent than verbal abuse, intimidation, bullying, and discrimination, it represents an important dimension of adolescent vulnerability. The qualitative evidence suggested that pressure could come from peers, intimate partners, or wider social expectations concerning relationships. Such pressure may compromise adolescents' sense of autonomy and emotional wellbeing and can become particularly disruptive when it results in conflict, fear, distraction, absenteeism, or reduced participation in school activities.

The finding supports a broader understanding of GBV in which relationships, social norms, and unequal power are considered alongside direct acts of violence. WHO (2024) emphasizes that violence prevention among adolescents should include interventions addressing healthy relationships, social and emotional skills, supportive parenting, and safe school environments. Thus, preventing GBV requires attention not only to violent incidents but also to the social conditions and relationship patterns that allow coercion and unequal power to develop.

Hence, the quantitative and qualitative findings show that GBV among adolescents was multidimensional and interconnected. The quantitative results demonstrate the magnitude and relative distribution of different forms of violence, whereas the qualitative evidence explains how these experiences were encountered, interpreted, and negotiated in adolescents' everyday lives. The convergence between the two strands of evidence is particularly important because it shows that violence was not restricted to highly visible physical or sexual incidents. Less visible experiences, including verbal abuse, psychological intimidation, bullying, discrimination, and relationship pressure, were frequently reported and could become normalized within peer and school interactions.

The overall finding that 75.4% of students had experienced at least one form of GBV should therefore be interpreted as an indication of a broader school and community protection concern rather than simply as a numerical prevalence estimate. The qualitative findings suggest that adolescents could experience multiple forms of violence

simultaneously. For example, bullying could involve verbal humiliation and threats, while physical aggression could be accompanied by discrimination or psychological intimidation. The individual percentages in Table 1 should, therefore, not be added together because the categories overlap.

The findings also provide an important basis for understanding the potential relationship between GBV and educational outcomes. Previous evidence indicates that violence against children can be associated with emotional distress, reduced wellbeing, difficulties in social interaction, and poorer educational outcomes (WHO, 2024). UNICEF (2021) similarly emphasizes that violence and bullying can undermine children's ability to participate fully and safely in education. In the present study, the qualitative accounts suggest plausible pathways through which violence may influence schooling: repeated humiliation may discourage classroom participation; threats may reduce students' willingness to seek assistance; discrimination may weaken their sense of belonging; and harassment or relationship pressure may contribute to distraction, absenteeism, and withdrawal from school activities.

The findings also indicate that the effects of GBV are unlikely to be uniform across adolescents. Family support, teacher responsiveness, peer relationships, socioeconomic circumstances, and the availability of school protection mechanisms may influence how students experience violence and how they respond to it. This reinforces the importance of interpreting GBV within its broader social and institutional context rather than viewing it solely as a problem of individual behavior.

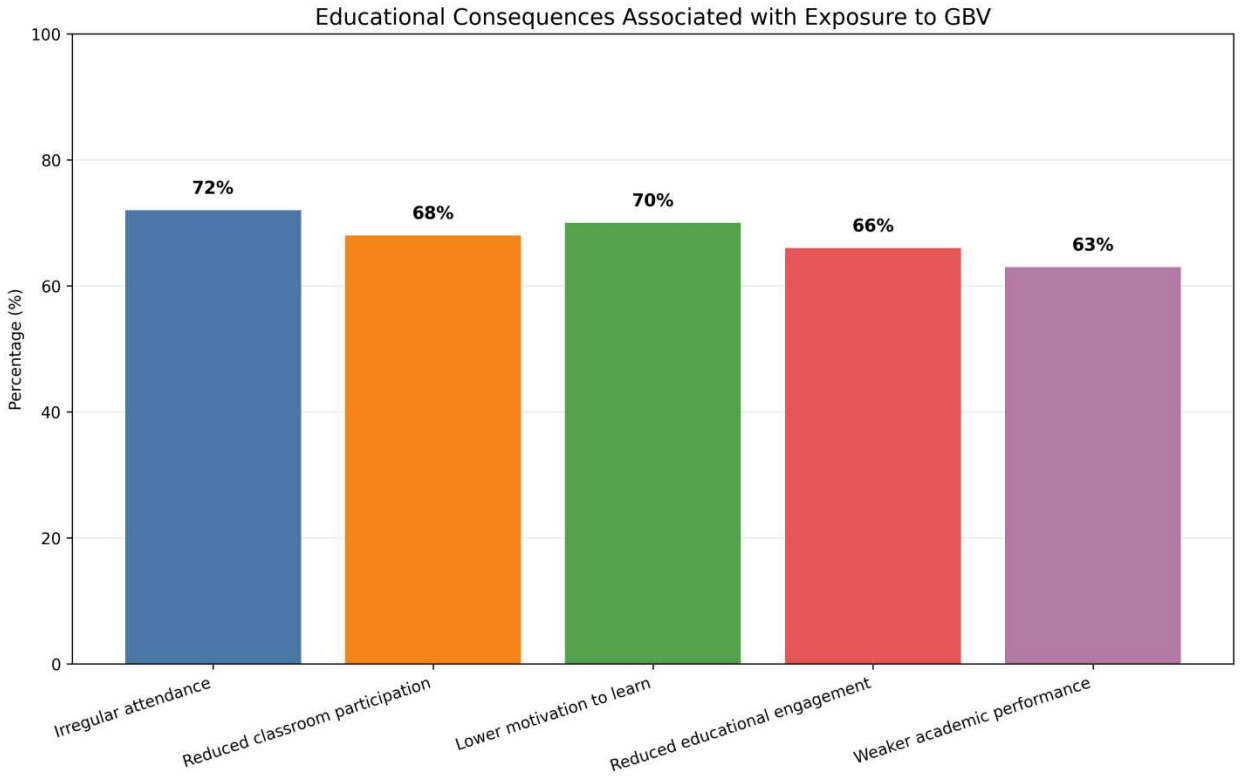
Thus, the evidence suggests that GBV among secondary-school adolescents in the South Ethiopia Region represents a school, family, and community protection issue. The findings support the need for confidential reporting mechanisms, accessible counseling and referral services, gender-responsive school policies, teacher capacity building, peer-support systems, family engagement, and community awareness. Such interventions should address not only physical and sexual violence but also the less visible forms of harm identified in this study, particularly verbal and emotional abuse, psychological intimidation, bullying, discrimination, and relational pressure. A comprehensive approach is more likely to create school environments in which adolescents feel safe, respected, supported, and able to participate fully in their education.

4.2. Effects of Gender-Based Violence on Educational Outcomes

The study found a clear negative relationship between exposure to GBV and adolescents' educational experiences. Students who reported experiencing violence were more likely to demonstrate irregular school attendance, reduced classroom participation, lower motivation to learn, diminished engagement in educational activities, and weaker academic performance. The qualitative findings helped to explain the mechanisms through which violence affected these outcomes.

The bar graph 4.1 below suggests that GBV was associated with disruption across several aspects of adolescents' educational experiences. Irregular attendance (72%) was the most prominent concern, followed by lower motivation to learn (70%) and reduced classroom participation (68%). Reduced educational engagement (66%) and weaker

academic performance (63%) were also notable. As a result, the pattern suggests that exposure to violence may undermine students' ability to attend regularly, participate confidently, and remain motivated in their education.



Bar graph 4.1: Educational consequences associated with exposure to gender-based violence among secondary school adolescents

4.2.1. School Attendance and Retention

One of the most visible educational consequences of GBV was reduced school attendance. Participants explained that student who experienced violence sometimes avoided school because they feared encountering perpetrators, being ridiculed by peers, or facing further harassment. In some cases, emotional distress following an incident made students reluctant to participate in normal school activities.

This finding demonstrates that school attendance is influenced not only by physical access to education but also by whether students perceive the school environment as safe. A student may technically have access to a school but still be unable or unwilling to attend regularly when the journey to school, the classroom, school compound, or peer environment is associated with fear or humiliation. UNESCO similarly reports that violence in and around schools can contribute to absenteeism, dropout, poor academic performance, and psychological distress.

The finding is particularly important in the South Ethiopia context, where educational participation may already be affected by poverty, household responsibilities, distance to school, gender norms, and other structural barriers. UNICEF Ethiopia has noted that traditional gender norms, domestic responsibilities, long distances to school, conflict, and other vulnerabilities can compound barriers to children's continued participation in education.

4.2.2. Classroom Participation and Engagement

The study further revealed that GBV affected students' willingness and ability to participate actively in classroom activities. Adolescents who experienced violence described feelings of fear, embarrassment, insecurity, sadness, and reduced self-confidence. These emotional responses affected their willingness to answer questions, communicate with teachers, work with classmates, participate in group activities, and express their opinions. The qualitative findings suggested that some students became increasingly withdrawn following experiences of harassment or violence. Rather than seeking help, they sometimes remained silent and attempted to avoid attention. This behavior has important educational implications because effective learning requires active participation, interaction, questioning, collaboration, and communication.

The findings are consistent with UNESCO's observation that violence can disrupt children's ability to learn and participate fully in school. Exposure to violence can affect concentration, psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, and social relationships, thereby creating conditions that are unfavorable to effective learning. Thus, the relationship between GBV and educational outcomes should not be understood only in terms of physical absence from school. Violence may also produce a less visible form of educational exclusion in which students remain physically present but become psychologically disengaged from learning.

4.2.3. Motivation to Learn and Academic Performance

Another significant finding was that exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) negatively affected students' motivation and engagement in learning. Participants described how fear, emotional exhaustion, and declining self-confidence made it difficult for some students to concentrate during lessons, participate in classroom activities, and maintain interest in their studies. Some students reportedly became less active in class, while others withdrew from school activities. These experiences suggest that the effects of GBV extend beyond immediate physical or emotional harm and can gradually weaken students' confidence in their academic abilities and their willingness to pursue educational goals. This finding is consistent with UNESCO's discussion of school-related violence, which highlights its potential to disrupt learning, contribute to absenteeism and dropout, and undermine students' psychological wellbeing and academic development.

The findings further suggest that GBV influences educational outcomes through several interconnected pathways. Fear and emotional distress may interfere with concentration, while absenteeism limits students' access to lessons and learning materials. Similarly, reduced classroom participation can limit opportunities to ask questions, receive feedback, and strengthen understanding. Over time, declining motivation may weaken students' persistence and

educational aspirations, increasing the risk of poor academic performance or school dropout. These effects can reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which violence contributes to disengagement, and disengagement further undermines academic progress. Therefore, GBV should be understood not only as a child-protection and human-rights concern but also as a significant barrier to educational development. Creating safe, supportive, and inclusive school environments is essential for helping adolescents maintain their motivation, participate actively in learning, and achieve their educational potential.

4.3. Socioeconomic, Family, School, and Community Factors Increasing Vulnerability

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) was associated with adolescents' educational outcomes after controlling for socioeconomic and institutional factors. The model included GBV exposure, socioeconomic conditions, family support, school protection mechanisms, and teacher support as predictors of educational outcomes. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level ($p < .05$).

Predictor	B	SE	B	t	P
GBV exposure	-0.31	0.07	-0.29	-4.43	<.001
Socioeconomic vulnerability	-0.18	0.06	-0.16	-3.00	.003
Family support	0.21	0.07	0.18	3.00	.003
School protection mechanisms	0.24	0.07	0.20	3.43	.001
Teacher support	0.19	0.06	0.17	3.17	.002

The regression results suggest that GBV exposure had a statistically significant negative association with educational outcomes ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$) after the other factors were taken into account. In practical terms, adolescents reporting greater exposure to GBV tended to report less favorable educational experiences, including lower participation, motivation, engagement, and academic performance. The negative coefficient indicates that the relationship remained evident even after considering socioeconomic and institutional conditions. This suggests that violence may interfere with students' ability to concentrate, attend school regularly, participate confidently, and remain engaged in learning.

The analysis also indicates that the wider environment surrounding adolescents matters. Socioeconomic vulnerability was negatively associated with educational outcomes ($\beta = -.16$, $p = .003$), whereas family support, school protection mechanisms, and teacher support showed positive associations. Particularly, stronger school protection mechanisms ($\beta = .20$, $p = .001$) and family support ($\beta = .18$, $p = .003$) appeared to provide important protective conditions. These findings reinforce the idea that adolescents' educational experiences are shaped by more than what happens inside the classroom.

Hence, the results point out that GBV should not be viewed simply as the consequence of individual behavior. Gender norms, unequal power relations, economic insecurity, community attitudes, and institutional capacity can

create or reinforce conditions in which violence becomes more likely to occur or more difficult to report. At the same time, supportive families, responsive teachers, and effective school protection systems may help reduce the educational harm associated with such experiences. The regression, therefore, points toward a broader understanding of GBV in which individual experiences are closely connected to the social and institutional environment. The regression demonstrates that GBV exposure is statistically related to educational outcomes after controlling for selected factors, but it does not establish that GBV alone caused changes in students' educational performance. The qualitative findings provide an important complement by showing how fear, humiliation, stigma, insecurity, and lack of support may help explain the relationship observed in the quantitative analysis.

4.3.1. Poverty and Economic Vulnerability

Poverty emerged as an important factor increasing adolescents' vulnerability to GBV. Economically disadvantaged students may have fewer opportunities to access protective services, transportation, safe accommodation, counseling, or other forms of support. Economic dependence may also make some adolescents more vulnerable to coercion, exploitation, or unwanted relationships.

The finding is important because poverty can simultaneously increase exposure to violence and reduce the capacity to respond to it. Students from economically vulnerable households may be particularly reluctant to report violence if they fear losing educational support, creating conflict within the family, or experiencing additional social or economic hardship. The relationship between economic vulnerability and educational participation is also consistent with broader evidence from Ethiopia, where poverty and other socioeconomic barriers continue to affect school attendance, retention, and educational progression.

4.3.2. Harmful Gender Norms and Social Expectations

Harmful gender norms were another major factor identified by participants. The qualitative findings suggested that some forms of harassment, unequal treatment, controlling behavior, and violence were normalized through social expectations concerning masculinity and femininity. Such norms can discourage adolescents from speaking openly about violence and may place greater pressure on girls to tolerate inappropriate behavior.

The findings suggest that GBV should therefore be understood partly as a problem of unequal power and social expectations. When aggressive behavior is associated with masculinity, while silence and compliance are expected from girls, adolescents may find it difficult to challenge inappropriate behavior or seek institutional protection. This finding supports the need for gender-transformative interventions rather than interventions that focus only on changing the behavior of individual victims. UNICEF Ethiopia has emphasized the importance of gender clubs, community dialogue, life-skills education, and interventions addressing harmful gender norms in efforts to prevent GBV and promote safer educational environments.

4.3.3. Family and Community Environment

The findings also indicated that family and community environments influenced adolescents' vulnerability. Participants described limited communication between adolescents and parents or guardians concerning sexual harassment, relationships, violence, and personal safety. In some situations, fear of blame or social stigma discouraged adolescents from disclosing their experiences to family members.

The community context was equally important. Where violence is normalized or considered a private family matter, adolescents may receive limited protection from adults and community institutions. This can create a cycle in which violence is experienced, concealed, and repeated without effective intervention. Accordingly, schools cannot address GBV independently of families and communities. Prevention requires coordinated action among schools, parents, community leaders, youth groups, health services, child-protection actors, and local authorities.

4.3.4. Weak Reporting and Institutional Support Mechanisms

A particularly important finding concerned weaknesses in reporting and response mechanisms. Although Ethiopia has a national Code of Conduct for the prevention of school-related GBV, participants' experiences suggested that the existence of policies does not automatically guarantee effective implementation at school level. Ethiopia's Code of Conduct was developed by the Ministry of Education with UNICEF support and is intended to guide prevention and response to GBV in government schools.

Participants nevertheless reported concerns about limited awareness of reporting procedures, fear of retaliation, confidentiality concerns, inadequate counseling, and uncertainty regarding where and how to report incidents. These barriers can undermine students' confidence in institutional protection.

This finding highlights an important distinction between policy availability and policy implementation. A school may have rules prohibiting violence, but students require accessible, confidential, trusted, and responsive mechanisms through which they can report concerns and receive appropriate support. UNICEF's assessment of Ethiopia's school-related GBV policy implementation similarly demonstrates the importance of examining how national policies are enacted at institutional level.

4.4. Prevention Strategies and Institutional Responses

The interview findings suggest that no single intervention is sufficient to address gender-based violence (GBV) among adolescents. Effective and sustainable prevention requires cooperation among schools, teachers, families, communities, education authorities, health and child-protection services, and adolescents themselves. Schools should strengthen prevention activities through gender-awareness education, life-skills training, peer education, school campaigns, and gender clubs. These initiatives can help students understand their rights, recognize less visible forms of violence, challenge harmful stereotypes, and develop respectful relationships. School administrators

should also establish accessible and confidential reporting systems that allow students to seek help without fear of blame, retaliation, or public exposure. Clear referral procedures are equally important to ensure that reported cases receive appropriate and timely support.

The findings also highlight the need for stronger counseling services, psychosocial support, and safeguarding capacity. Adolescents affected by GBV may experience emotional distress, shame, reduced confidence, and difficulty concentrating in class. Teachers should therefore receive regular training to recognize changes in students' attendance, behaviour, participation, and emotional wellbeing and to respond sensitively to disclosures of violence. Beyond schools, parents, religious leaders, community representatives, and youth organizations can help challenge harmful gender expectations, reduce stigma, and encourage supportive responses to affected adolescents. The South Ethiopia Regional Education Bureau and school administrations should also strengthen monitoring and accountability by examining reported cases, attendance patterns, school dropout, students' perceptions of safety, and the effectiveness of counseling and referral services. Thus, preventing GBV should be treated as an integral part of educational quality, child protection, and inclusive education. When adolescents feel safe, respected, and supported, they are better positioned to attend school regularly, participate confidently, remain motivated, and pursue their educational aspirations.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence (GBV) among adolescents in secondary schools in the South Ethiopia Region is a complex problem that extends beyond physical harm. The study identified several forms of violence, including verbal and emotional abuse, psychological intimidation, bullying, gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, physical violence, unwanted relationship pressure, and sexual coercion. These experiences can undermine students' confidence, emotional wellbeing, classroom participation, attendance, learning motivation, and overall educational engagement. In some cases, violence may become normalized through everyday insults, teasing, gender stereotypes, and unequal treatment, making it difficult for adolescents to recognize the harm or report their experiences. The problem is further complicated by fear, shame, stigma, social judgment, and concerns about retaliation, which may discourage students from seeking help, particularly when dealing with sexual harassment and abuse. Therefore, low reporting rates should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that violence is uncommon, as some experiences may remain hidden.

Addressing GBV requires a collective effort that goes beyond responding to individual incidents. Families, schools, communities, education authorities, and child-protection and health institutions all have important roles in preventing violence and supporting affected adolescents. Schools need accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms, counseling and referral services, gender-sensitive education, and clear procedures for responding to reported cases. At the same time, community awareness and open discussions about gender equality, mutual respect, and nonviolence can help challenge harmful attitudes and encourage adolescents to seek support without fear of blame or discrimination. Ultimately, preventing GBV is essential not only for protecting adolescents from harm but also for safeguarding their right to learn, participate confidently, and pursue their educational aspirations in a safe and supportive environment.

Recommendations

Schools and teachers should strengthen confidential reporting and referral systems, provide regular GBV prevention and gender-sensitivity education, and create supportive classroom environments where students can speak about violence without fear of blame or retaliation. School leaders and the South Ethiopia Regional Education Bureau should establish clear safeguarding procedures, strengthen counseling services, train teachers and school administrators, and monitor GBV incidents systematically. Parents, community leaders, and religious leaders should work with schools to challenge harmful gender norms, promote respectful relationships, and encourage adolescents to seek help when they experience or witness violence. Government and child-protection institutions should strengthen coordination, survivor-centred services, and access to psychosocial, health, and legal support. Finally, students themselves should be encouraged to promote peer support, respectful behaviour, and safe reporting, while researchers should continue generating evidence on the less visible forms of GBV and their educational consequences.

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