

Lived experiences of teachers on the effectiveness of moral education in addressing gender-based violence in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya

Monicah Odero^{1*}
Joseph W. Nasongo²
Juma Injendi³

^{1*}moniodero@gmail.com

²jwamocha@mmust.ac.ke

³ijuma@mmust.ac.ke

^{1,2,3}Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

<https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.6.3.73>

ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) in secondary schools in Kenya, and especially in Vihiga County, is a major issue. This paper gives the lived experiences of educators on the use of moral education as a response to GBV. The study is based on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development and adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective to examine the challenges posed by cultural, institutional, and societal settings that teachers encounter when teaching moral education. In the proposed research, the population of interest consists of teachers from public secondary schools in Vihiga County, and five guidance and counseling teachers will be purposefully sampled. The primary method of data collection was an in-depth, unstructured interview, and the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The report indicates that teachers recognize the prospect of moral education as a measure to combat GBV. However, numerous challenges exist, including a poorly written curriculum, inadequate teacher training, and cultural resistance. The first finding of the study is that these issues require a curriculum explicitly addressing GBV. The study offers recommendations to support teachers by upskilling, creating policies, and engaging with the community to make moral education more effective in addressing GBV in schools.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Lived experiences, Moral Education, Kohlberg's Theory, Vihiga County, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is a major impediment to the realization of fair, inclusive, and quality education that is in line with the main goal of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). GBV in Kenya schools can take different forms, and they entail sexual harassment, corporal punishment, bullying, and emotional abuse, which give disproportionate treatment to girls and marginalized students (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2019). Such types of violence severely affect the health status of students in terms of their physical and mental state, usually leading to poor performance in studies, dropping out of school, and failure to graduate, especially among female students. These adverse effects also hinder the journey toward achieving gender equality and creating secure and supportive learning environments (Spear, 2019).

Although there are pieces of legislation like the Gender Policy in Education of 2015 and the National Action Plan on GBV (2020-2024), such policies are not properly observed in schools (Together for Girls, 2020). The teachers, who are at the frontline of implementing school-based interventions, are not usually provided with adequate resources, training, and institutional support to help them curb GBV. As a result, although the given policies primarily focus on the promotion of gender-friendly teaching and safe school environments, schools tend to either inappropriately respond to or hide the instances of GBV. This is an indication of more underlying cultural and institutional problems in the Kenyan school system, where GBV is not addressed in most schools.

In recent years, moral education has gained prominence as a potential solution to preventing and reversing GBV in schools. Education in ethics, whereby we strive to instill aspects of respect, empathy, fairness, and human dignity in students, is becoming a necessary practice in teaching students how to treat one another. Moral values education enables students to distinguish between right and wrong, promoting a harmonious culture in schools. When properly implemented, moral education can help minimize gender inequality and violence (Nyangaresi et al., 2024). Even so, in most Kenyan high schools, the teaching of moral education is often limited to rote learning rather than engaging with real-world problems. Consequently, the curriculum does not have a significant impact on students' attitudes and behaviors towards GBV.

The contemporary study aims to determine the effectiveness of moral education in preventing GBV in Kenyan public secondary schools, with a specific concern for the lived experiences of Kenyan teachers in Vihiga County. The study will address a question concerned with exploring how teachers who are agents of change find it in circumstances of challenges and obstacles regarding the conduct of moral education within the framework of GBV. Although it is clear why moral education should be an everyday practice, when it comes to how these programs are implemented and the actual results they produce, there are loopholes attributed to certain factors, such as ineffective curriculum content, inadequate teaching skills, and cultural opposition (Nyangaresi et al., 2024). Such lapses in literature underscore the necessity of conducting additional research to determine what can be done with moral education to combat GBV in scholastic institutions.

The master discourses in this research work are those of gender-based violence, moral education, and the teacher's role in shaping the moral growth of students. Although numerous researchers have explored the effectiveness of moral education and the role of gender-sensitive policies in addressing GBV, there have been few studies that have targeted the views of teachers, who are the direct agents of change in implementing these educational interventions. The literature gap is evident, representing a general lack of information about what teachers themselves experience when it comes to moral education as a means to address GBV, which this research aims to address.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although moral education has been identified more often as the method to mitigate gender-based violence (GBV) in schools, the effectiveness of this approach has yet to be examined through the lens of a teacher. The teachers, as the main interface between educational policies and teaching practice, are important not only in providing moral education but also in demonstrating ethical conduct to students. The way they react and respond to ethical episodes is critical in helping students comprehend the ideas of respect, fairness, and empathy, especially with respect to GBV. However, many of the recent researches are mainly policy-driven or solution-led and fail to regard the experience of the teaching faculty as an information source (Mwenesi et al., 2025). The disregard on lived experiences of the teachers is a powerful break within literature that impedes the capacity to conceptualize more multifaceted and efficient education-based measures to reduce GBV within learning institutions.

1.2 Objective of the Study

To explore the lived experience of teachers within the public secondary schools within Vihiga County, Kenya, on the effectiveness of moral education in addressing gender-based violence (GBV).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study is founded upon the Theory of Moral Development by Lawrence Kohlberg, which is mainly used as theory. Kohlberg theory states that the moral thinking process can occur in three stages: pre conventional, conventional and post conventional. Each stage is decided by two levels and each thoroughly delve in the capacity of an individual making ethical choices towards common principles of justice, equality and human dignity in the world (Kohlberg, 1981).

The given model serves to build the ground understanding of how moral education may become part of the instructional processes and contribute to moral formation of students and shaping the vision of GBV recognition. The theory suggested by Kohlberg states that morality education should not focus entirely on what is proper and wrong. However, it should rather equip students with the skills to think critically about moral dilemmas, including those related to GBV.

2.1.1 Limitations of Kohlberg's Theory

Although the theory developed by Kohlberg is quite helpful in the context of moral education, it has received criticism concerning being too localized in terms of emotional states and interpersonal relations. Gilligan (1993) continued the work of Kohlberg by emphasizing the importance of empathy and care in the moral decision-making process. The Ethics of Care, introduced by Gilligan, proposes a different perspective on the study of morality, highlighting aspects such as interpersonal relationships, care, and empathy, which gain increased relevance in the context of gender-based violence. Integrating the justice-focused school of thought by Kohlberg and the moral education approach based on ethics of care by Gilligan may provide a more comprehensive solution in the process of moral education at schools.

Further, it will be useful to include Paulo Freire Critical Pedagogy. It is quite pertinent to Freire that education should address the oppressive systems and be critical, of in particular, the inequalities in the society, and the phenomenon of GBV during the educational process fits into this discussion. All these theories together large out a foundation through which the work of teachers in dealing with GBV using moral education can be analyzed.

2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical review is premised on research regarding gender-based violence (GBV), moral education, and functions of a teacher in talking about the issues in schools. Findings by other scholars have pointed out some of the key themes that guided this research paper.

2.2.1 Gender-Based Violence in Schools

Gender-based violence in schools is a significant issue in the world and the Kenyan school systems are not left out. UNGEI (2019) includes sexual harassment, corporal punishment, bullying, and emotional abuse as part of GBV in schools and positions it as affecting girls and the marginalized in academic institutions disproportionately. Research indicates that GBV is associated with poor academic performance, depressive episodes, academic failure, and school dropout due to adverse effects on mental health and the psyche of the students (Spear, 2019).

2.2.2 The Role of Moral Education in Addressing GBV

Moral education, which engages values such as respect, empathy, fairness, and dignity, is becoming evident as an important instrument that helps prevent and minimize GBV in institutions. Nonetheless, it has been found that in Kenya, moral education is often poorly introduced in the school environment, with the primary focus on rote learning rather than critical thinking and applying values to practical life situations (Nyangaresi et al., 2024). Researchers have also suggested that moral education should adopt a more holistic approach to help others address GBV by discussing the ethical implications of real-life problems (Spear, 2019).

2.2.3 Teachers' Perspectives on Moral Education

Although literature is available and focuses on whether it is the student's perspective or policy recommendations, there is a lack of literature concerning the aspect of teachers and their perspectives on the effectiveness of moral education in addressing GBV. Teachers are viewed as role models, and therefore, they must shape the moral development of their students (Mwenesi et al., 2025). Nevertheless, a considerable portion of teachers claim to be ill-equipped to deal with sensitive topics such as GBV because of a lack of training, a lack of resources, and even cultural resistance (African Population and Health Research Center [APHRC], 2025). The skills that teachers have in incorporating moral education into their classrooms depend on their values, their individual professional development, and the institutional support provided to them.

2.2.4 Barriers to Effective Implementation of Moral Education

There are some barriers to effective implementation of moral education in schools. These include lack of some GBV content in the curricula, a lack of preparedness to teach on gender sensitive issues by the teachers and the cultural norms which are antagonistic to gender issues i.e. equality and violence (UNGEI, 2025). The lack of institutional reaction and reporting on GBV cases in educational establishments also tends to not equip teachers with adequate resources to address such issues in their entirety (Together for Girls, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The phenomenology of teaching moral education on gendered based violence (GBV) in a secondary school in Vihiga County, Kenya, was found through the use of a phenomenological hermeneutic approach in this study. According to Heideggerian concepts of *being-in-world*, this trend is moved to comprehend human experiences and situations with reference to cultural and historical backgrounds of the educators. It aims at identifying how teachers identify, choose to work on, and react to GBV-related content in their classrooms, especially in environments where a discussion of a delicate topic like this one is generally suppressed. Questions behind the study are to know tacit meanings about the role, responsibilities, ethical issues, and the challenge that the teachers experience in handling GBV in their teaching classes through Hermeneutic phenomenology were meaning in what has not been said is frequently meaning that has been disclosed (van Manen, 2016; Heidegger, 1962).

3.2 Targeted Population

The targeted study population comprises teachers in Vihiga County, specifically in secondary schools that are government schools, and in particular guidance and counseling teachers who are responsible for teaching matters related to morality and GBV. These teachers have been chosen because they are key individuals in a child's development and are typically the primary school-based roles in addressing sensitive matters, such as GBV.

3.3 Sampling Methods and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was used to sample individuals who were considered to possess in-depth knowledge of the study's subject matter. There were five selections of guidance and counseling teachers in the various schools in the county. The small sample size was chosen to enable the researcher to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of the teachers in this study in detail. This was found about the teacher's involvement in teaching moral education and their direct involvement in the issue of GBV in schools.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Unstructured in-depth interviews were done and their durations were about 45 to 90 minutes. These interviews were originally initiated in order to enable the people to open up and tell their feelings and beliefs regarding the moral education and the ways in which moral education could be utilized to respond to GBV. The undirected style allowed the participants to talk freely and tell about their problems in their own words, which gave a better idea of their experiences and allowed understanding the way they learn.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the data, which follows a series of six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using this method, common theme and meanings behind answers given by teachers on how they make ethical decisions, the challenges they experience in teaching moral education and how they integrate GBV in classrooms were understood and analyzed.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All the participants provided an informed consent and confidentiality was observed at all times during the course of the study to affirm the ethical character of the research. Also, the researcher used reflective journaling in the data collection process, which involves noting personal feelings and observations in collecting data that facilitated understanding the research findings.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Importance of Moral Education in Addressing GBV

Through the interviews, it was revealed that the teachers in Vihiga County indicate that moral education is a crucial matter to be considered when addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools. The majority of educators thought that awareness in form of moral education is extremely important when it comes to teaching on respect and equality, but it is not enough to persevere everything required to fight GBV. One of the teachers explained the role of moral education as a means of sowing the seed, further implying that moral education provides the groundwork for promoting ethical conduct; nevertheless, it depends on better institutional encouragement. This opinion aligns with that of Arthur et al. (2017), who state that character education can help students develop their moral identity, engage their minds and emotions, thereby increasing awareness of GBV and promoting ethical conduct. The study's teachers also demonstrated that the effects of moral education are limited when support is not more structured and consistent.

4.2 Teachers' Interpretation of Moral Education

The research discovered that, although the curriculum contains the promotion of such values as respect and fairness, in many cases, teachers are unable to connect these concepts to concrete life experiences, including sexual harassment, coercion, and gender discrimination. This task has become difficult because the curriculum only vaguely mentions GBV, so teachers must interpret and address such issues themselves. Turiel (2015) points out that values-based education helps students relate to practical issues, such as GBV, but this can only occur if the curriculum makes such issues relevant. The absence of step-by-step instructions in the curriculum means that the theory of fusion of horizons, as used by Gadamer (2013) to explain how teachers rely on their experiences and knowledge to fill in the gaps, applies; however, it leads to ad-hoc education on GBV, particularly in cases of incomplete or inconsistent information.

4.3 Cultural Resistance to Discussing GBV

One of the significant challenges faced in the research is the cultural context's dislike towards discussing gender in the context of GBV issues. Teachers reported that students and parents often demonstrated discomfort or even rejection when gender-related topics were discussed in the classroom. One of the teachers informed us that students had expressed concerns that this would be against their cultural beliefs. Parkes and Heslop (2013) have faced the same problems in their 2013 research on Sub-Saharan Africa, since the cultural stigmas surrounding the role of gender do not allow openly addressing the problems of sexuality and violence. Such a behavior of resisting the culture that coexists among Vihiga County residents fits into the theory of conscientization by Freire (2020), implying that initiatives toward

changing the current societal norms can be belittled. The teachers we interviewed in this study indicated that they have to confront these challenges every day and the institution is not there to assist them and therefore unable to make an effective response to GBV.

4.4 Lack of Institutional Support for GBV Education

Another finding was the lack of institutional support to teachers to offer services on GBV. Many of the teachers were frustrated by the fact that there are no guidelines and resource materials on how to handle the disclosure of GBV by students. One teacher indicated that there was ambiguity of reporting GBV cases to the police or handling them within the school system. The ambiguity puts the teachers and students in an awkward position and fear of making mistakes can freeze teachers at times when a quick move is needed to make crucial decisions. Similar notes can be found in Keller et al. (2017), who have found that there exists a gap between the implementation and unsuccessful implementation programs of school-based GBV in Kenya. The scale of this gap seems to be enormous in a way that even though, policies exist, their practice is still not adequate because of the absence of adequate structures and guidelines. In line with this, Actionaid. (2013) further indicated that schools lack any formal structures that can accommodate GBV victims and teachers do not receive any additional instruction on how to solve such sensitive issues.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Moral Education's Role in Preventing GBV

These results confirm the opinion that moral education is necessary to encourage ethical behavior and create awareness of GBV. According to Arthur et al. (2017), GBV can be prevented by educating students using well-delivered character education, which can help them gain a sense of right and wrong. Nevertheless, the study found that the given efforts have limited potential without proper institutional support and resources. This aligns with the notion of the implementation gap outlined by Keller et al. (2017), which is primarily due to schoolteachers' inability to support moral education, largely stemming from a lack of resources that would enable them to achieve a certain level of success in combating GBV.

4.5.2 Cultural Barriers to Addressing GBV

The study and the literature are in agreement that culturally based resistance has a huge role to play in being a barrier to discussions regarding GBV. In Sub-Saharan Africa, as Parkes and Heslop (2013) have also noted, students and teachers are often hesitant to discuss gender matters due to cultural beliefs. This cultural opposition to the realization of effective and responsive moral education, that can confront gender-based violence, is one of the greatest barriers,, and this is something that can be related to the theory of conscientization introduced by Freire (2020), whereby the powerful do not cooperate with proposals that challenge the existing order.

4.5.3 Institutional Support and Teacher Preparedness

One of the challenges raised in the study is that teachers lack institutional support when officially handling matters related to GBV. Similarly, Egne (2014) and Vanner (2022) identified that a lack of preparation to teach about sensitive gender topics often befalls teachers because they do not have the training or support to feel confident in teaching gender-related topics. It is this ill-equippedness that culminates in the implementation gap within the Kenyan academic system, effectively hindering the implementation of policies concerning GBV due to the deficiency of resources and frameworks at the local school level, as outlined by Keller et al. (2017).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The teachers in the Vihiga County consider moral education to alleviate the gender-based violence because they hope to change the way learners approach the issue of respect and equality. Nonetheless, this potential is not being fully met due to several issues within the system. Textbook literature on GBV is very scarce, leaving teachers to confront these issues with their students and without many resources. In addition, the establishment of gender-based beliefs and cultural beliefs in the school or community may render conversations about GBV resistant to students, parents, and in some cases, other personnel. As a result of such cultural opposition, educators might not be able to present gender justice and moral perspectives confidently. Moreover, the teaching of moral education is constrained when the institutions lack adequate support, including poor teacher training, inappropriate instructions on dealing with GBV revelations, and psychosocial support. Moral education needs to be rebuilt and include extensive, gender-sensitive teaching, delivered by well-trained and equipped teachers, and form part of a school system with coherent policies that prioritize gender equality.

5.2 Recommendations

In order to enhance the effectiveness of moral education in managing gender-based violence (GBV) in schools, several main recommendations may be formulated. Firstly, the curriculum should be looked into in detail to include learning about GBV and gender equality as a part of moral education of students. That would help to have the relevant material that would fit the real-life problems and we have an atmosphere that would allow students to learn about this topic and its significance in a critical manner.

Moreover, the education staff needs to be encouraged, particularly through regularly providing them with possibilities of upskill their activities in relation to effectively dealing with the issues of GBV. The teachers should receive the tools, training, resources critical to help in dealing with such sensitive situations so that when such incidences as GBV in the classroom occur, the teacher can act in a confident and professional manner.

Moreover, parents and the rest of the society members need to become a driving force in the discussion of GBV. A better atmosphere that encourages and welcomes change in relation to this problem can be presented by bringing people to speak about it at the community level. This form of participation can be employed to eliminate cultural resistance and inculcate a state of communal duty towards mitigating the menace of GBV.

Finally, in the last place, schools also have to arrange a series of specific routes and mechanisms on how to deal with cases involving GBV. This means setting up of formal reporting facilities, issuing of counseling services to those in need and ensuring that all the students and the teaching body become fully aware of the procedures that should be followed should such incidents take place. The mechanisms play a central role in the provision of an environment that is conducive and safe to students, and an environment through which GBV can be addressed in an orderly, effective, and ethical way.

REFERENCES

- ActionAid. (2013). *Stop violence against girls in school success stories 2: Stop violence against girls in school! Make girls' rights to education reality!* https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/svags_success_stories.pdf
- APHRC. (2025). *Challenges in addressing gender-based violence in Kenyan schools: A teacher's perspective*. African Population and Health Research Center.
- Arthur, J., Kristjánsson, K., Harrison, T., Sanderse, W., & Wright, D. (2017). *Teaching character and virtue in schools*. Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Egne, R. M. (2014). Gender equality in public higher education institutions of Ethiopia: The case of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 5(1), 3–21.
- Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a sociology of education* (pp. 374–386). Routledge.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2013). *Truth and method*. A&C Black.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- Keller, J., Mboya, B. O., Sinclair, J., Githua, O. W., Mulinge, M., Bergholz, L., ... & Kapphahn, C. (2017). A 6-week school curriculum improves boys' attitudes and behaviors related to gender-based violence in Kenya. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(4), 535–557.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *Essays on moral development, Volume 1: The philosophy of moral development*. Harper & Row.
- Mwenesi, J., Nasongo, J. W., & Juma, I. (2025). Exploring teachers' lived experiences about alternatives to corporal punishment in addressing moral decline in secondary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. *African Journal of Empirical Research*, 6(1), 123–134.
- Nyangaresi, J. K., Nasongo, J. W., & Injendi, J. (2024). Teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of moral strategies for character formation in public secondary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya. *African Journal of Empirical Research*, 5(4), 695–707.
- Nyangaresi, J. K., Nasongo, J. W., & Injendi, J. (2024). The value of the aims of moral education for character formation in public secondary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya: A phenomenological approach. *African Journal of Empirical Research*, 5(4), 1197–1207.
- Parkes, J., & Heslop, J. (2013). *Stop violence against girls in school: A cross-country analysis of change in Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique*. Plan International.
- Spear, A. M. (2019). Teachers as change agents? Assessing teachers' perceptions of and responses to sexual gender-based violence in schools in Burkina Faso. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 5(2), 195–213. Lehigh University Library and Technology Services.
- Together for Girls. (2020). *Kenya: School-related gender-based violence fact sheet*. <https://www.togetherforgirls.org>
- Turiel, E. (2015). Moral development. In *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science* (pp. 1–39).



- UNGEI. (2019). *Strategies to end school-related gender-based violence: The experience of education unions in Africa*. United Nations Girls' Education Initiative.
- UNGEI. (2025). *Gender-based violence in education: The role of moral education in schools*. United Nations Girls' Education Initiative.
- van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Vanner, C. (2022). Education about gender-based violence: Opportunities and obstacles in the Ontario secondary school curriculum. *Gender and Education*, 34(2), 134–150.