

Effective moral strategies in mitigating gender based violence (GBV) in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Moral education remains an important foundation for developing learners who value respect, empathy, justice, responsibility, and peaceful coexistence. In secondary schools, these values are necessary because students interact daily in ways that can either promote dignity or reinforce harmful behaviours such as gender-based violence (GBV). Although moral education is taught in schools, the continued prevalence of GBV underscores the need for practical strategies that translate moral lessons into everyday practice. This article examines effective moral education strategies for mitigating GBV in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. It is extracted from a phenomenological study that investigated the efficacy of moral education in addressing GBV. The study was guided by Aristotelian virtue ethics, which emphasizes the formation of good character through repeated practice of virtues. Phenomenological-hermeneutical and critical methods were used to interpret teachers' lived experiences and the moral strategies they considered effective in preventing GBV. Purposive sampling was used to select five guidance and counselling teachers from five public secondary schools in Vihiga County. Primary data were collected through unstructured interviews and were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. The findings showed that effective strategies included integrating GBV education into moral and life skills lessons, peer counselling, interactive discussions, student-led clubs, confidential reporting systems, mentorship programmes, awareness campaigns, community involvement, and balancing discipline with moral guidance. The study concluded that moral education can mitigate GBV more effectively when it is participatory, continuous, learner-centred, and supported by teachers, parents, schools, and the wider community. Schools should actively involve parents, religious leaders, local administrators, law enforcement officers, alumni, and community-based organizations in designing and implementing gender-based violence prevention programmes. Regular community sensitization forums, parent engagement meetings, and school–community partnerships should be established to reinforce moral values, strengthen reporting mechanisms, and create a coordinated approach to preventing GBV both within and outside the school environment.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Kenya, Peer Counselling, Public Secondary Schools, Moral Education, Moral Strategies, Virtue Ethics, Vihiga County

I. INTRODUCTION

Moral education has historically been regarded as an important foundation for shaping ethical behaviour, social responsibility, and respectful relationships within society. In schools, moral education seeks to cultivate virtues such as empathy, justice, honesty, tolerance, self-control, and respect for human dignity. These virtues are essential in promoting peaceful coexistence among learners and in discouraging behaviours that may harm others. Aristotle's virtue ethics emphasizes that moral character is developed through repeated practice of good actions and habits, suggesting that schools play a central role in nurturing morally responsible individuals (Khisa & Werunga, 2021). As institutions of socialization, secondary schools are expected not only to provide academic knowledge but also to guide learners toward responsible and ethical conduct.

Despite the emphasis on moral education, gender-based violence (GBV) continues to affect learners in many educational institutions across the world. School-related GBV includes bullying, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, intimidation, discrimination, verbal violence, and other harmful behaviours that create unsafe learning environments (Parkes, 2015; Crooks et al., 2019). Such forms of violence negatively affect students' psychological well-being, academic participation, self-esteem, and sense of security. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN Women have continued to emphasize the need for schools to adopt preventive approaches that address the moral and social roots of violence rather than relying only on punishment after incidents occur (Women, 2016). This has increased attention toward moral education as a possible strategy for reducing harmful gender attitudes and promoting respectful relationships among learners.

In Kenya, cases of GBV in schools continue to raise concern despite the existence of guidance and counselling programmes, school rules, and national education policies aimed at protecting learners. Cultural stereotypes, unequal gender relations, silence surrounding abuse, peer influence, and limited awareness of respectful relationships continue

to contribute to violence within school settings. Studies have shown that schools can play a meaningful role in preventing GBV when moral values are integrated into everyday teaching, discipline, mentorship, counselling, and student interactions (Keller et al., 2017). However, the effectiveness of moral education depends largely on the strategies teachers and schools use to promote ethical behaviour among learners.

Effective moral strategies are therefore necessary in helping learners internalize values that discourage violence and encourage respect for others. Such strategies may include peer counselling, role play, dialogue, mentorship, participatory learning, awareness campaigns, reflective discussions, and safe reporting systems. These approaches allow students to engage critically with moral issues and develop ethical understanding through real experiences rather than abstract instruction alone. Freire (1970) argues that education becomes meaningful when learners actively participate in examining the social problems that affect their lives. Similarly, Gilligan (1993) emphasizes that moral development is strengthened through relationships, empathy, and care for others. This article, therefore, examines effective moral education strategies to mitigate gender-based violence in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. The study focuses on the lived experiences of guidance and counselling teachers regarding the strategies they employ or propose to strengthen moral education and reduce GBV among learners.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major challenge in public secondary schools because it threatens learners' safety, dignity, emotional well-being, and academic participation. Globally, UNESCO (2021) estimates that millions of learners experience school-related gender-based violence, including bullying, sexual harassment, intimidation, and emotional abuse. In Kenya, studies continue to show worrying levels of GBV within school environments. According to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS, 2022), many adolescents experience different forms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence before the age of 18. In addition, UNESCO (2021) reported that school-related gender-based violence remains widespread across Sub-Saharan Africa, affecting learners' attendance, academic performance, confidence, and retention in school.

Although schools teach moral values such as respect, empathy, justice, responsibility, and self-control, these values do not always translate into students' daily conduct. The continued occurrence of bullying, harassment, discrimination, intimidation, and other forms of GBV shows that moral education requires more practical and effective strategies. In Vihiga County, schools operate within social and cultural contexts where silence around GBV, gender stereotypes, peer pressure, and weak reporting structures may limit prevention efforts. Many school responses still focus on punishment after incidents occur rather than using moral education proactively to shape attitudes and prevent violence. This creates a gap between moral instruction and actual behavioural transformation. Therefore, this article addresses the need to establish effective moral education strategies to mitigate GBV in public secondary schools in Vihiga County. It focuses on strategies such as peer counselling, mentorship, dialogue, participatory learning, confidential reporting, awareness campaigns, student-led clubs, and community involvement as practical ways to strengthen moral education and promote safer school environments.

1.2 Research Objective

To establish effective moral strategies in mitigating GBV in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya

1.3 Research Question

What moral strategies can be established to mitigate GBV in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on Aristotelian virtue ethics, which emphasizes the formation of good character through repeated practice of virtues. From this perspective, moral education is not limited to teaching rules about right and wrong; rather, it is concerned with developing learners who can consistently act with respect, empathy, justice, courage, self-control, and responsibility. These virtues are important in mitigating gender-based violence because GBV often grows from disrespect, misuse of power, lack of empathy, and failure to recognize the dignity of others. Therefore, moral education becomes meaningful when students are guided to internalize moral values and apply them in their daily relationships within the school environment (Khisa & Werunga, 2021; Winter, 2012).

Aristotle's idea of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is also useful in understanding effective moral strategies against GBV. Learners may know that violence, harassment, bullying, and discrimination are wrong, but they need practical moral judgment to respond correctly when faced with peer pressure, conflict, or harmful gender stereotypes. Effective moral strategies, such as role-play, peer counselling, dialogue, mentorship, student-led clubs, and reflective discussions, help learners practice moral reasoning in real situations. In this sense, moral education becomes a process

of shaping conduct through repeated ethical practice rather than simply delivering moral content (Staksrud & Livingstone 2009).

The study is also supported by the ethics of care, which stresses the importance of relationships, empathy, attentiveness, and responsibility toward others (Dewey, 1938). Since GBV undermines human dignity and harms relationships, moral education strategies must help learners care about others' experiences and safety. Teachers, peer counsellors, mentors, and school communities, therefore, become important moral agents who help students develop sensitivity toward victims, reject harmful behaviour, and build respectful relationships. This theoretical position supports the need for participatory and relational strategies in moral education, especially when addressing sensitive issues such as GBV.

2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical studies show that moral education can contribute to GBV prevention when it is practical, participatory, and connected to learners' lived realities. Globally, school-related gender-based violence has been identified as a serious barrier to safe and inclusive education because it affects learners' attendance, confidence, participation, and academic achievement (Parkes, 2015). UN Women (2016) emphasizes that schools should adopt whole-school approaches that combine curriculum content, teacher training, safe reporting mechanisms, learner participation, and community involvement. This means that effective GBV mitigation cannot rely solely on punishment but must also include moral strategies that shape learners' attitudes and behaviour.

Studies on moral education further indicate that participatory methods are more effective than lecture-based teaching. Schuitema et al. (2008) found that strategies such as dialogue, discussion, reflection, and role play help learners engage actively with moral issues and develop ethical reasoning. Similarly, Harmawati et al. (2022) argue that moral education becomes more effective when students are allowed to connect moral values with real-life situations. These findings support the use of interactive approaches, such as debates, peer counselling, storytelling, mentorship, and student-led clubs, to address GBV.

In the Kenyan context, school-based interventions have shown that structured moral and behavioural programmes can influence learners' attitudes toward violence and gender relations. Keller et al. (2017) found that a school curriculum intervention improved boys' attitudes and behaviours related to gender-based violence in Kenya. Wangamati et al. (2022) also highlight the value of whole-school approaches in reducing violence affecting children in and around schools in Kenya and Tanzania. These studies suggest that schools can reduce GBV when teachers, students, parents, and communities work together to reinforce positive values. However, research also shows that inadequate teacher training, cultural silence, limited resources, weak reporting systems, and inconsistent implementation of moral education programmes often weaken GBV prevention in schools. In many schools, moral education is taught theoretically, while learners are given limited opportunities to practice values such as empathy, justice, respect, and responsibility in real-life situations. This creates a gap between moral knowledge and moral conduct. Therefore, this study focuses on effective moral education strategies for public secondary schools in Vihiga County to mitigate GBV through practical, continuous, and learner-centred approaches.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm. This design was appropriate because the study focused on teachers' lived experiences and their understanding of effective moral education strategies for mitigating gender-based violence in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to explore how guidance and counselling teachers experienced, interpreted, and applied moral strategies in real school situations. The study also used phenomenological-hermeneutical and critical methods to interpret teachers' meanings while examining the social, cultural, and institutional factors influencing GBV prevention.

3.2 Area of the Study and Participants

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. The participants were five guidance and counselling teachers drawn from five public secondary schools. These teachers were selected because they had direct experience in handling student discipline, counselling learners, guiding moral behaviour, and addressing GBV-related concerns in school settings. The focus on guidance and counselling teachers was important because they are directly involved in supporting students and implementing moral education strategies.

3.3 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. This method was suitable because the study required teachers with relevant knowledge and direct experience in moral education and GBV mitigation. The emphasis was on selecting information-rich participants rather than obtaining a large sample. Since the study was phenomenological, the small sample allowed for a deeper exploration of teachers' experiences, views, and interpretations.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using unstructured interviews. This method allowed participants to explain freely the moral education strategies used in their schools to mitigate GBV. The interviews focused on strategies such as integration of GBV education into moral and life skills lessons, peer counselling, mentorship, student-led clubs, awareness campaigns, confidential reporting systems, community involvement, and balancing discipline with moral guidance. Secondary data from relevant literature and policy documents were also used to support interpretation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. The researcher first read the interview responses repeatedly to become familiar with the data, then generated codes from meaningful statements. These codes were grouped into themes reflecting effective moral strategies for mitigating GBV. The themes were reviewed, refined, named, and presented in relation to the study objective. The analysis was interpretive and connected the findings to Aristotelian virtue ethics, particularly the cultivation of virtues such as respect, empathy, justice, responsibility, and self-control.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to participate voluntarily or withdraw at any time without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by protecting participants' and schools' identities. The collected data were used solely for academic purposes, and all responses were handled respectfully, as GBV is a sensitive subject. In addition, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics review committee before data collection commenced. Permission to conduct the study was also sought from the relevant educational authorities and school administrations. The study complied with established research ethics guidelines concerning human participants and sensitive social issues.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Moral education strategies used in secondary schools in Vihiga County to mitigate gender-based violence and their effectiveness

The following are the direct responses of the guidance and counseling teachers on the moral education strategies used in secondary schools in Vihiga County to mitigate gender-based violence and their effectiveness.

P1: "In our school, we incorporate gender-based violence in moral and life skills lessons." We discuss respect, equality, and human rights, but I do not think it works because students do not pay much attention to these lessons. Some people still have cultural beliefs that justify GBV. " (12th May 2025).

P2: "We have peer counseling where students who have been trained in conflict resolution teach their counterparts on how to avoid getting into GBV situations." This has been helpful for some students, but others do not share their thoughts and feelings because they feel that their peers will judge them " (13th May 2025).

P3: "Sometimes in our school, we have talks where we make students understand the right conduct and how they should treat their fellow students." However, these sessions are not always interactive, in the sense that participants are not actively engaged in a two-way communication process. We explain to them that they should do, but they rarely get an opportunity to ask questions or express their opinions " (13th May 2025).

P4: "We have banned any form of violence in our school, and especially GBV, and we also have penalties for anyone who engages in such acts. However, we need more than just discipline; we need to teach students why GBV is wrong, not just because they will be punished." (13 May 2025).

P5: "We also bring in guest speakers such as the police and lawyers to explain the laws on GBV to the students. This helps raise awareness, but there should be follow-ups to check whether students have grasped what they have been taught". (14th May 2025).

4.1.2 Integration of GBV education into moral and life skills lessons

The attempt to teach moral education in response to gender-based violence (GBV) raises a fundamental question of the relationship between knowing and doing, between theory and practice. P1, a teacher, agrees with the notion that moral and life skills lessons teach students about respect, equality, and human rights but fail to eradicate the cultural practices that support violence, especially against women and girls. This aligns with the philosophical perspective of Paulo Freire (1970), who argued that education should not only be a process of depositing knowledge into learners' minds but also one that transforms learners' consciousness. Studies have supported this view by showing that although knowledge is power, it does not translate into attitude or behaviour change when the learning process is passive (Bowles, 2023). If students remain in a sociocultural context that perpetuates gender inequality, their academic understanding of the negative effects of GBV does not translate to their behaviour. Therefore, moral education, if it is to be meaningful, must move from the realm of the lecture and the textbook to the realm of the real and the experiential in terms of violence and injustice.

To bridge this epistemological divide, therefore, it is necessary to incorporate experiential learning approaches into GBV education so that students can transform the issue into personal knowledge. The use of case studies, storytelling, and survivor narratives to present information allows students to question their own perceptions and break free of the prejudices inherited from their culture. This is in line with Nussbaum's (2011) assertion that narrative imagination, which is the ability to view the world from another person's perspective, is crucial in fostering empathy and ethical responsibility. Furthermore, studies indicate that experiential learning, especially role-play and reflective writing, positively affects students' moral reasoning and their readiness to combat GBV (Kong, 2021). However, the potential of such education to transform cannot be contained within the school environment. Involving parents and the rest of the community ensures that the messages of equality and violence prevention are consistent across different aspects of society, thereby eliminating conflicts where the school's teachings are in contrast with the rest of society. Moral education is not about putting ethical knowledge into empty vessels but about engaging in a dialogue between reason and action, between theory and practice; only then can GBV education be transformative.

4.1.3 Interactive engagement in GBV education

The education system's approach to passive learning in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) education weakens its impact, turning it into a mere process of imparting moral codes rather than a process of critical thinking about ethical issues. Freire (1970), in his works on pedagogy, has argued that education should not be a process in which students are passive recipients of knowledge, but one in which they are encouraged to question their world. However, as P2 also notes, GBV education in schools is mostly didactic, where students are only told what is right and wrong and are not encouraged to question these norms. When students are not allowed to ask questions, argue, or even ask questions, they become mere recipients of knowledge rather than moral beings. This approach does not capture power relations, identity, and consent, which are crucial to understanding GBV beyond a set of norms.

A more engaging approach to GBV education would help students develop moral understanding and ethical decision-making skills, enabling them to address real-life situations. Noddings (2002) has also supported the view that moral education should involve emotions and personal experiences. Using techniques such as debates, role-play, and storytelling can make the content more personal, thereby making students more compassionate. Other ways to encourage students to express their concerns include question boxes or online feedback forms. Thus, education is not a set of rules imposed on students but a process of dialogue in which students build the moral and ethical perspectives that will enable them to fight GBV in their lives and communities.

4.1.4 Peer Counseling Approach in GBV Prevention

Peer counseling is very important in the fight against GBV since it helps in enhancing moral standards and teaching students how to handle conflicts. As P3, a guidance and counseling teacher, notes, this approach ensures that students can discuss with their peers rather than with authority figures. This is in line with other studies, like Keith et al., (2023) who noted that peer-based interventions are more effective than adult counseling in handling issues related to GBV and emotional problems. Peer counseling is based on the Socratic method of discussion, in which learning and understanding of oneself and others occur. However, its success depends heavily on peer counselors' capacity to foster trust and understanding. If students feel they will be judged or betrayed in any way, they may withdraw from the group, negating the whole purpose of peer support. It is here that we come across a paradox. While peer counseling aims to eliminate the barriers to hierarchy in conventional counseling, it introduces new risks regarding confidentiality and peer relations.

For this reason, peer counseling depends on institutional measures that foster trust and ethical practice. Tannen (1990) have noted that structured peer counseling programs should ensure that their counselors receive adequate training in ethical confidentiality, emotional intelligence, and trauma-informed care. Without these measures, peer counseling may become counterproductive or even detrimental, leading students to avoid participation due to potential exposure or stigmatization. To address these challenges, schools should implement additional measures, such as anonymous reporting systems and online platforms that allow students to report incidents without fear of exposure. Furthermore, using Aristotelian ethics, it is possible to state that the effectiveness of peer counseling depends not only on structural changes but also on the development of students' character: empathy, courage, and integrity. If fostered, peer counseling can go beyond its drawbacks and become a process that not only helps students deal with GBV issues but also fosters moral character in society.

4.1.5 Balancing punitive measures with education on GBV

It is therefore moral and practically imperative to ensure that punitive measures are complemented by education on GBV, especially in learning institutions. P4, a school administrator, underscores the role of strict disciplinary actions as a deterrent against GBV. This aligns with deterrence theory, which posits that people will not engage in criminal activity if they are likely to face stiff penalties (Beccaria, 1764). However, the administrator is not naive enough to think that fear alone will instill ethical behavior in the employees. Discipline without understanding leads to compliance without commitment, which is not far from mere conformity rather than change. Nussbaum (2011) posits that moral development entails education that enhances the ability to reason ethically and emotionally rather than just following orders. Hence, schools need to enhance students' knowledge of GBV's ethical and societal ramifications so that they do not engage in it because they know they will be punished. Thus, institutions fulfill their ethical obligation to produce responsible citizens rather than merely discipline them.

A better approach is restorative justice, which focuses on the offender's restoration rather than punishment. Zehr (1990), for instance, opines that punitive justice perpetuates offenders' isolation and escalates the use of violence instead of reducing it. Instead of just suspending or expelling the offenders, schools should require them to undertake certain forms of rehabilitation, such as counseling, mentorship, and community service. Through acknowledging the wrong they have done and seeking to make amends, the offenders may be able to change for the better and become moral beings. Gilligan (1993), in his study on moral development, established that it is only through transformative learning that people can grasp the actual consequences of their actions, and, thereby, are more likely to change and embrace the right behavior for the right reasons, rather than being forced to do so by fear of the consequences. Therefore, combining educational programs with disciplinary measures enables students to adopt a culture of respecting fellow human beings and equality. Schools should not only require students to follow anti-GBV policies but also ensure that ethical behavior becomes a part of the students' character.

4.1.6 Awareness programs and follow-ups after

Participant P5 mentioned police officers and lawyers as guest speakers who play a crucial role in educating students about GBV laws. It is beneficial for students to interact with people who have worked in law enforcement and the legal profession, as this adds a practical aspect to what is otherwise a theoretical course. According to Cahill et al. (2023) awareness programs spearheaded by experts help students understand legal measures related to GBV. However, as P5 rightly notes, a major drawback of such interventions is that they are short-term; a single presentation cannot bring about a change in attitude or perception. If not reinforced, the knowledge acquired is likely to remain mere impressions, easily forgotten. Aristotle stated that knowledge is not a result of mere exposure but of reflection and practice. Therefore, the success of guest speaker sessions does not depend on their implementation but on the measures that are taken to enhance their outcomes.

For such a change to be effective, schools need to shift from one-off GBV education to continuous discussions. Reflection discussions are important for allowing students to question and make the lessons more personal. According to Tannen (1990), debriefing sessions structured after educational interventions reinforce the messages conveyed and foster critical thinking. Likewise, quizzes, essays, and role-play are used as tools for assessing understanding and promoting the practical application of knowledge. John Dewey's theory of learning by experience supports the use of activities that involve learners in the learning process through reflection. In addition to the academic exercises, there are ongoing mentorship programs that introduce a relational learning component, where students develop relationships with guest speakers or local role models. Through such engagement, mentorship programs ensure that GBV education is not only about awareness but also about the wisdom of the law. It is only through such a holistic, cyclical process that schools can guarantee that GBV education is not only acknowledged at the cerebral level but also becomes a lived reality of justice and respect.

The study's findings show that the current moral education strategies have their strengths and weaknesses in tackling GBV in secondary schools, as described by the participants. Schools use classroom teachings, peer counseling,

strict measures, and guest speakers to educate students and encourage ethical practices. However, these efforts are not without challenges, including cultural barriers, low student participation, cultural taboos around GBV issues, and poor follow-up, which reduce their effectiveness. These barriers need to be addressed in a more comprehensive manner that involves the school community and ensures a continuous support system that enhances the safety of the school environment.

4.1.7 New or improved moral education strategies can be developed to enhance the mitigation of gender-based violence in secondary schools in Vihiga County.

The following are the direct responses of the guidance and counseling teachers regarding new or improved moral education strategies that can be developed to enhance the mitigation of gender-based violence in secondary schools in Vihiga County.

P1: "It is necessary to use such activities as debates and storytelling, which will allow students to share their opinions and fight against gender stereotypes in the classroom" (20th May 2025).

P2: "I believe that schools should establish organizations that will allow students to discuss GBV and ways to avoid it freely." This would make learning more fun rather than just being told about it". (20th May 2025).

P3: "There should be a clear reporting system where students can report GBV cases anonymously." Some students are afraid to speak because they do not believe the school administration" (21st May 2025).

P4: "We should involve the community more." Schools can engage the parents, religious institutions, and local government to ensure moral education is not limited to school compounds" (21st May 2025).

P5: "It would be very effective to have a mentorship program where older students or alumni can help the young students on matters related to moral values and GBV." Young people listen more to their peers than to teachers or parents". (21st May 2025).

4.1.8 Interactive Learning Methods in GBV Education.

As P1 pointed out, one of the best strategies is to use activities such as debates and storytelling. Lecture-based teaching is a common approach in most learning institutions, but it is not effective at capturing learners' attention on issues such as GBV (Cahill et al., 2023). Debates are a good way for students to express themselves and challenge gender stereotypes in a constructive manner. Storytelling, on the other hand, enables students to understand real-life situations, thereby enhancing empathy and critical thinking (Brunetti et al., 2024). These methods provide the students with an open platform to share their views, question cultural practices that perpetuate GBV, and gain knowledge on the root causes and impacts of GBV. According to Jurado-Castro et al., (2023) the use of interactive learning methods increases students' interest. It helps them retain the material for longer, which is why it is an effective approach to GBV education.

4.1.9 Student-led clubs as a platform for GBV awareness and prevention

Likewise, P2 also underscores the importance of having student clubs that focus on GBV issues and campaigns. The formation of these clubs would ensure that students take charge of their learning, thereby making moral education more realistic and engaging (Jurado-Castro et al., 2023). Instead of just receiving knowledge from teachers on GBV, students would engage in discussions, raise awareness, and develop solutions that are close to them. They would also provide a platform for students to discuss their experiences and seek support from their peers, which would help in creating a culture of non-violence in the school. Research has also revealed that peer education is highly effective, especially when students lead the campaign, since they are more likely to listen to fellow students than to authority figures (Abdi & Simbar, 2013).

4.1.10 Confidential reporting systems to address GBV in schools

One of the challenges that hinders the fight against GBV in school is that students are afraid to report cases of GBV to the administration, as pointed out by P3. To this end, schools should ensure that there is a reporting system students can use to report GBV incidents without revealing their identity or facing any repercussions (Cahill et al., 2023). A good reporting system would not only safeguard the victims but also ensure that the offenders are punished. Schools should also ensure that reports are followed up on and that the affected students receive counseling and other related

services. This means that many cases of GBV may not be reported and hence not addressed, thus perpetuating the culture of silence (Obara et al., 2025).

4.1.11 Community involvement in GBV prevention

Apart from school, P4 also emphasizes the role of the community in moral education. Schools cannot fight GBV on their own; they need the support of parents, religious leaders, and local authorities to support the messages taught in class. Most students are raised in homes or societies where GBV is accepted, and therefore, it becomes challenging for them to adopt moral education that supports gender equality. Community participation in workshops, awareness creation, and policy formulation ensures that everyone is involved in the fight against GBV. According to Cahill et al. (2023), when families and community leaders embrace moral education, students are more likely to embrace the right moral standards and practice them in their daily lives.

4.1.12 Mentorship programs for GBV prevention and moral guidance

P5 recommends that the school introduce a mentorship program in which senior students or alums educate junior students on moral issues and GBV. It is also important to note that young people are more likely to open up to their peers or slightly older individuals than to teachers or parents (Kong, 2021). A structured mentorship program would ensure that students are exposed to positive male role models who do not support the negative gender norms (Keith et al., 2023). Through storytelling and advice, mentors can help young learners manage various social challenges and build appropriate relationships. Moreover, mentorship programs can offer students support groups to fight GBV and support victims (Crooks et al., 2019). In summary, participants' views suggest a need for new, realistic approaches to moral education to address GBV in secondary schools. Debates and storytelling are effective in developing critical thinking and students' interest, while clubs foster open discussion. Confidential reporting means that victims are free to report cases, and community involvement supports what is taught in school. Finally, virtue ethics can help students become change agents and support each other. Through virtue ethics, the secondary schools in Vihiga County can help in eradicating GBV in schools and ensure that students are protected from any form of violence and are empowered to fight for their rights, as discussed below.

4.1.13 Virtue Ethics as a Complementary Framework for Addressing Gender-Based Violence through Moral Education

The findings of this study demonstrate that moral education provides an important foundation for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) by shaping learners' values, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. However, the findings suggest that moral education becomes more effective when it moves beyond the transmission of moral rules and focuses on the development of character. This finding supports Aristotelian virtue ethics, which argues that morality is not merely about knowing what is right or wrong but about developing stable moral dispositions through continuous practice of virtues such as respect, justice, courage, and self-control (Khisia & Werunga, 2021; Winter, 2012). In the context of GBV prevention, this implies that students should not reject violence only because school rules prohibit it or because they fear punishment, but because they have developed an internal commitment to respecting human dignity and equality.

This finding is consistent with UN Women (2016), which emphasizes that effective school-based GBV prevention requires more than punitive responses and should include interventions that transform attitudes, behaviours, and social norms. Similarly, Keller et al. (2017) demonstrated that school-based interventions can influence students' attitudes and behaviours related to gender-based violence in Kenya. However, while Keller et al. (2017) focused mainly on structured curriculum interventions, the present study extends this understanding by showing that sustainable GBV prevention also requires moral formation processes that enable learners to internalize values and practise ethical behaviour in their daily interactions.

The findings also support Crooks et al. (2019), who argue that successful GBV prevention programmes among adolescents should address underlying beliefs, gender attitudes, and interpersonal relationships rather than focusing only on responding to incidents after they occur. From this perspective, virtue ethics provides a complementary philosophical framework by explaining how learners develop the moral capacities necessary to challenge harmful gender norms. While legal and institutional measures remain important in protecting learners, the findings indicate that external controls alone may not be sufficient to transform attitudes that are rooted in cultural beliefs and socialization processes.

Furthermore, the study extends existing literature by demonstrating that virtue development can be promoted through practical and participatory approaches. The findings revealed that strategies such as storytelling, debates, role-play, peer counselling, and mentorship create opportunities for learners to practise virtues in real-life situations. This supports Freire's (1970) argument that meaningful education requires learners to actively engage with social realities rather than passively receive information. It also aligns with Nussbaum's (2011) argument that narrative imagination enables individuals to understand the experiences of others and develop empathy. Therefore, virtue ethics, when

combined with participatory learning approaches, provides a pathway through which moral education can contribute to long-term GBV prevention.

However, the study does not suggest that virtue ethics should replace legal, disciplinary, or institutional approaches to GBV prevention. Rather, the findings indicate that virtue ethics should complement existing strategies by addressing the internal moral development of learners. This argument is consistent with Zehr's (1990) restorative justice perspective, which emphasizes the importance of transformation and responsibility alongside accountability. Therefore, the contribution of this study is its demonstration that GBV prevention requires both external mechanisms of protection and internal processes of moral development.

4.1.14 The Role of Virtues in Preventing Gender-Based Violence

The findings revealed that values such as respect, empathy, justice, responsibility, and self-control are central elements through which moral education can contribute to reducing GBV among secondary school learners. These findings reinforce the argument by Khisa and Werunga (2021) that Aristotelian virtue ethics views moral development as a process of cultivating desirable habits that guide human conduct. Unlike approaches that focus mainly on compliance with rules, virtue ethics emphasizes the development of an internal moral orientation that enables individuals to make ethical decisions even in situations where external supervision is absent.

The importance of virtues identified in this study is consistent with Noddings' (2002) ethics of care, which emphasizes relationships, empathy, and responsibility toward others as essential elements of moral development. The finding that empathy is necessary for preventing GBV supports the argument that violence often emerges from failure to recognize the dignity and experiences of others. Therefore, moral education that encourages learners to understand the experiences of victims and appreciate diverse perspectives may contribute to reducing harmful behaviours.

The findings also complement Schuitema et al. (2008), who established that moral education is more effective when learners participate in discussions, reflection, and reasoning about moral dilemmas. The present study extends this argument by demonstrating that such activities are particularly important in addressing GBV because they allow learners to question gender stereotypes, examine cultural beliefs, and develop ethical responses to situations involving violence and discrimination.

Moreover, the findings correspond with Harmawati et al. (2022), who argue that moral education becomes meaningful when learners connect values with everyday experiences. In this study, virtues were not viewed as abstract concepts but as qualities that must be practised through peer interactions, mentorship, dialogue, and school activities. This suggests that the effectiveness of moral education depends not only on the values taught but also on the opportunities learners have to practise these values within their social environment.

Nevertheless, the study challenges the assumption that awareness of moral values automatically results in behavioural change. Although schools teach values such as respect and responsibility, participants indicated that GBV may continue because of cultural beliefs, peer influence, and limited opportunities for learners to practise these values. This finding supports Freire's (1970) argument that education should promote critical reflection and transformation rather than simply transfer knowledge. Therefore, virtue development requires continuous engagement, reflection, and social reinforcement.

Consequently, this study contributes to existing GBV literature by demonstrating that virtues function as both personal and social resources for preventing violence. When learners develop empathy, justice, and respect as part of their character, they are more likely to challenge harmful practices and promote safer school environments. However, virtue development must occur alongside supportive institutional structures, including reporting systems, teacher guidance, and community engagement as emphasized by UN Women (2016) and Wangamati et al. (2022).

4.1.15 The Practice of Virtue through Moral Education

The findings indicate that virtues cannot be effectively developed through theoretical instruction alone; rather, they require continuous practice within learners' everyday experiences. This finding supports Aristotle's view that moral character develops through habit formation, where repeated ethical actions gradually become part of an individual's character (Khisa & Werunga, 2021; Winter, 2012). Therefore, moral education aimed at preventing GBV should provide learners with opportunities to practise respect, empathy, justice, and responsibility through meaningful social interactions.

The finding that storytelling can promote empathy and understanding among learners agrees with Nussbaum's (2011) argument that narratives enable individuals to appreciate the experiences of others and develop moral imagination. In relation to GBV prevention, storytelling provides learners with opportunities to understand the consequences of violence from the perspective of survivors, thereby challenging stereotypes and promoting compassion. This extends existing GBV prevention literature by highlighting the importance of emotional and moral engagement alongside cognitive awareness.

Similarly, the use of discussions and debates identified by participants supports Schuitema et al. (2008), who found that dialogue-based approaches strengthen moral reasoning among learners. Through discussions, students are able to question harmful cultural assumptions, examine ethical dilemmas, and develop more balanced perspectives regarding gender relations. This supports Freire's (1970) argument that transformative education requires dialogue and critical reflection rather than passive acceptance of knowledge.

The study further found that role-play and mentorship provide practical opportunities for learners to demonstrate moral virtues in realistic situations. This finding aligns with Harmawati et al. (2022), who emphasize that moral education becomes more effective when learners connect values with practical experiences. Similarly, Crooks et al. (2019) highlight the importance of interactive and relationship-based approaches in preventing violence among young people.

However, the findings also indicate that practising virtues requires support beyond the classroom. Learners are influenced by families, peers, communities, and broader social norms. Therefore, schools alone cannot achieve sustainable GBV prevention without collaboration with parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders. This supports Wangamati et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of whole-school approaches involving multiple actors in addressing violence affecting children.

Overall, the study contributes to existing scholarship by showing that moral education should be understood as a process of moral becoming rather than merely moral instruction. Virtues become effective in preventing GBV when learners repeatedly practise them within supportive environments. Therefore, schools should create spaces where learners can experience, demonstrate, and reinforce ethical behaviour through mentorship, dialogue, peer engagement, and community participation. Through such approaches, moral education becomes a transformative process capable of shaping learners who not only understand that GBV is wrong but also possess the moral commitment to oppose it.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that moral education may provide useful strategies for addressing gender-based violence in public secondary schools in Vihiga County. The findings revealed that schools use approaches such as integrating GBV content into moral and life skills lessons, peer counselling, guest speaker sessions, disciplinary measures, awareness programmes, debates, storytelling, student-led clubs, confidential reporting systems, community involvement, and mentorship. According to participants, these strategies help promote values such as respect, empathy, responsibility, justice, and human dignity among learners. However, the study also found that passive teaching approaches may limit the effectiveness of these strategies. These cultural beliefs normalize GBV, fear of reporting, inadequate follow-up mechanisms, and limited student participation. The findings therefore suggest that moral education can contribute to GBV prevention when implemented through practical, participatory, continuous, and school-wide approaches, supported by the broader community. Nevertheless, the study did not directly measure behavioural outcomes or reductions in GBV incidence, and therefore, conclusions regarding effectiveness should be interpreted cautiously.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that public secondary schools in Vihiga County should strengthen moral education by making GBV prevention more participatory and learner-centred. Teachers should use debates, storytelling, role-play, reflective writing, peer discussions, and real-life case studies to help students connect moral values with real experiences. Schools should also establish student-led clubs and peer counselling programmes to encourage open dialogue and student ownership of GBV prevention. Confidential reporting systems should be created so that learners can report GBV safely without fear of shame or victimization. In addition, schools should involve parents, religious leaders, legal officers, police officers, alums, and local community leaders to reinforce moral education beyond the classroom. The Ministry of Education and KICD should also support schools by providing teacher training, clear GBV-related moral education content, and regular monitoring to ensure that moral education becomes an active strategy for building safe, respectful, and non-violent school environments.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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