

Gendered Experiences and Responses to School Violence among Female Students in Bangladesh

Tasnim Nowshin Fariha*

Abstract

Drawing on a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten female participants recruited through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling, this paper unravels how young girls experience and respond to school related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in Bangladesh. In light of Connell's 'gender regime' theory along with Humphreys's 'gender script' and Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' concepts, the findings reiterate how these schools function as social institutions marked by asymmetrical power relations —enacted through not only gender, but also age, economic class, and other social structures. Schools —through institutionalising its age and gender inequitable regimes —foster antagonist power relations between males and females as well as teachers and students, all contributing to gender violence. Guided by Leach's work, the findings also uncover how girls encounter both implicit and explicit violence — manifested through overlapping physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal acts —in the hands of both male and female perpetrators. Female students' abilities to negotiate with violence however get restrained by the gendered and institutional inequalities rooted in school and societal levels. Moreover, the social acceptance of violence, widespread impunity, victim-shaming, lack of awareness, and under-developed school mechanisms to protect children's rights feed an enabling environment for continued perpetuation of violence in school settings. This paper enriches the academic scholarship on SRGBV, as well as, informs context-appropriate policy measures to foster a safe and gender-responsive school environment for girls.

Key words: school violence, gender inequality, social structures, gender norms, power relations.

Introduction

School related gender violence (SRGBV) is one of the worst manifestations of gender-based discrimination which affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide.¹ It is a specific form of school violence that can be defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical, verbal, or psychological violence happening in and around schools;

* Lecturer, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

E-mail: tasnimnowshin1999@du.ac.bd

1 B. B. Chitsamatanga and N. S. Rembe, 'School related gender-based violence as a violation of children's rights to education in South Africa: manifestations, consequences and possible solutions', *Journal of Human Ecology*, Vol. 69, No. 1-3, 2022, pp. 65-80.

perpetrated because of gender norms, stereotypes, practices, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.² It includes all forms of violence and threats directed specifically against students because of their gender identity; including physical aggression, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, sexual coercion, rape, bullying, isolating, rumour mongering, name calling, ridicule, humiliation, and verbal threats.³ SRGBV becomes more acute, when different acts of violence occur in an overlapping manner, and reinforce one-another by intersecting with other social inequalities based on ethnicity, age, geographical location, economic class, religion, or physical conditions.⁴

Determining what constitutes an act of violence and who is a victim however is complex. A small number of emerging studies stipulate that school violence can be perpetrated within as well as across gender lines (by both males and females on both males and females).⁵ While, a wide range of previous studies conducted by prominent researchers and international organisations substantiate that girls are still at higher risk of school violence.⁶ Approximately 60 million girls have been sexually assaulted on their way to school in lower to middle-income countries.⁷ The global evidence on SRGBV mainly originate from African continent. Wide range of studies conducted in Botswana, Lebanon, Liberia, Yemen, Uganda, and Zimbabwe document an alarming

² C. Tanton, *et al.*, 'Increasing disclosure of school related gender-based violence: lessons from a systematic review of data collection methods and existing survey research', *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 23, 2023, pp. 1012.

³ A. S. Beyene, *et al.*, 'Gender-based violence among female youths in educational institutions of Sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *Systematic Reviews*, Vol. 8, No. 59, 2019; T. N. Poudel, 'Gender and violence in school: current phenomena and coping strategies', *The SIJ Transactions on Industrial, Financial & Business Management (IFBM)*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2014, pp. 166-173.

⁴ R. W. Connell, "*Gender*", Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002; J. Parkes and J. Heslop, "*Stop Violence against Girls in School: A Cross-country Analysis of Baseline Research from Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique*", London: Institute of Education and ActionAid International, 2011.

⁵ F. Leach and S. Humphreys 'Gender violence in schools, taking the 'girls as victims' discourse forward', *Gender and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2007, pp. 51-64.

⁶ A. Onoyase, 'School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and its consequences on secondary school students: implications for counselling', *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2019, pp. 29-37; M. K. Sanusi, 'Types, causes and consequences of school-related gender-based violence among college of education students in Kano State: Implications for counseling', Ifeoma Okafor *et al.*, (eds.), *Counselling Association of Nigeria* (Dubai: Olaf, 2015), pp. 67-83.

⁷ Girl's Education Challenge, '*Ending violence in schools: lessons from the girls' education challenge*', 2022. <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/ending-violence-schoolslessons-girls-education-challenge>

increase in school-based sexual violence.⁸ A cross-national survey conducted across Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique note that coerced sexual relationships between school girls and teachers is extremely common across African schools.⁹ These studies have employed a gender lens to explain school violence, but their scope is mainly limited to the acts of sexual violence, partly driven by donor concerns over exposure to HIV.¹⁰ Further evidence shows that, about 22 percent of adolescent girls in Latin America become victims of sexual abuse in educational settings.¹¹ While there is a dearth of reliable and comparable data to understand the trends and patterns of SRGBV across Asian countries.

Bangladesh is a patriarchal country located in South Asia, where women suffer from high risk of violence throughout their life cycle, at every sphere of society. SRGBV has emerged as an endemic with 74% of female students suffering from abuse and harassment at educational institutions.¹² School dropout rate for girls is 34.87 in the country¹³ hinting at blatant discrimination and violence at school settings. Increasing research has highlighted that violence in formative years of life is likely to leave far-reaching physical, psychological, and educational consequences for young girls.¹⁴ SRGBV is linked to poor academic performance, physical injuries, sexually-transmitted infections, self-harm, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, and PTSD among other potential negative outcomes.¹⁵ Despite the alarming increase of SRGBV and their damaging consequences, girls are encouraged to remain “silent” as family

⁸ UNEGI, ‘School related gender-based violence’, 2013. <https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/School-Related-Gender-Based-ViolenceUNGEI-UNESCO-Discussion-Paper-2013-eng.pdf>

⁹ F. Leach *et al.*, “Desk Review for Concern Worldwide: Promising Practice in School Related Gender Based Violence Prevention and Response Programming Globally”, Dublin: Concern Worldwide, 2012.

¹⁰ J. Heslop *et al.*, ‘Making meaning from data on school related gender-based violence by examining discourse and practice: insights from a mixed methodology study in Ghana and Mozambique’, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2019, pp. 64–80.

¹¹ M. Dunne *et al.*, “Schools as Gendered Institutions: The Impact on Retention and Achievement”, London: DFID, 2003.

¹² M. Shuaib *et al.*, “An Exploratory Research on Fear of Violence among Girls and Young Women in Bangladesh”, Dhaka: Plan International, 2021.

¹³ BANBEIS, ‘Bangladesh education statistics 2022’, 2023. <https://banbeis.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/banbeis.portal.gov.bd/page>

¹⁴ A. Ekine, “Gender-based violence in primary schools: Nigeri”, Washington: Centre for Universal Education at Brookings, 2020; D. M. Fergusson *et al.*, ‘sexual abuse and adult developmental outcomes: findings from a 30-year longitudinal study in New Zealand’, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 37, No. 9, 2013, pp. 664–74.

¹⁵ T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit.*, pp. 166-173; C. Tanton *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, p. 1012.

honour is considered to be tied with women's honour in patriarchal society.¹⁶ This omnipresent culture of "silence" has made SRGBV acceptable and regarded as "normal" in Bangladesh, alike many other countries of the world.¹⁷

It is predicted that many of the ambitious targets set through Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) will not be realised until violence is eliminated from schools around the world.¹⁸ Although, reports on extreme cases of school violence have attracted extensive media coverage in Bangladesh, this topic remains understudied by academic researchers.¹⁹ The fragmented and sporadic efforts so far to study school violence in the country either lack a critical gender lens²⁰ or have been purely quantitative in nature.²¹ Even the most detailed and carefully designed quantitative studies can fail to.²² This research intends to fill this gap by producing context-specific and in-depth qualitative data on SRGBV.

By delving into the narratives of ten female students from Bangladesh, this research aims to explore their gendered experiences and responses to violence occurred in school settings. Due to time and resource constraints, this study has not taken into account the experiences of male students or other gender groups, as well as, the violence faced by girls around school premise. The scope of exploration is limited to violence related experiences (beyond sexual acts) of female students within school premise. More precisely, this research tends to examine (i) how the power and authority structures of school as a social institution produce different forms of violence against female students, and (ii) how their abilities to resist and negotiate

¹⁶ A. Shahen, 'Gender-based violence in Bangladesh: a critical analysis', *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2021, pp. 127-139.

¹⁷ F. Leach and S. Sitaram, 'The sexual harassment and abuse of adolescent school girls in South India, *Journal of Education*', *Citizenship and Social Justice*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2007, pp. 257–277; S. Read-Hamilton and M. Marsh, 'The communities care programme: changing social norms to end violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities', *Gender & Development*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2016, pp. 261–76.

¹⁸ C. Tanton, et. al., *Op. cit*, 1012.

¹⁹ M. N. Islam and J. Ferdous, "Gender-based violence in tertiary education in Bangladesh", *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2023, pp. 24-35.

²⁰ S. Mahmood and S. Islam, 'Bullying at high schools: scenario of Dhaka city', *Journal of Advanced Laboratory Research in Biology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2017, pp. 79-84.

²¹ M. H. Reza, et al., 'Child maltreatment in Bangladesh: poverty, social class, and the emotional abuse of elementary school children by teachers', *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 116, 2020, pp. 105-195; M. Shuaib, A. Mahbub, et al., *Op. cit*.

²² J. Heslop, et al., 'Researching gender violence in poverty contexts: conceptual and methodological challenges', J. Parkes (ed.), *Gender Violence in Poverty Contexts: The Educational Challenge* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 30–47.

with violence are shaped by the gendered and institutional inequalities rooted in school and other social institutions.

Theoretical framework

School is a gendered social institution where violence is rooted in the concept of “gender regime”. Walby²³ primarily describes “gender regime” as a set of inter-related social relations and institutions that comprise a system. She highlights why gender regime is a useful framework for scrutinising the way gender—as a structure of power—pervades institutions and influences social dynamics and relations. Connell’s²⁴ work further enriches the concept of “gender regime”. She outlines “gender regime” as the patterning of gender relations within any small setting (i.e. school)—especially the continuing pattern—which provides the structural context of particular relationships and individual practices. In light of Connell’s insights, Mac an Ghail²⁵ accentuates how the gender regime within a school (i.e. disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms, classroom interactions) contributes to the (re)production of rigid gender relations, masculinities, and femininities among students; also reflected within the broader society.

In this endeavour, Humphreys²⁶ substantiates that schools—through its formal and informal environments—can subscribe gender specific scripts to male and female children which helps to construct, institutionalise, and sustain gender-inequitable regimes. Dunne *et al.*²⁷ explains “gender scripting” as a process of conditioning people to adopt certain roles, behaviours, and characteristics deemed socially appropriate based on their sex. Gender-inequitable regimes thereby produce and regulate unequal sexual practices for males and females, as well as, construct heteronormative gender identities for them.²⁸ Boys are expected to adapt an aggressive “male script” which promotes excretion of strength and power through sexual conquests, emotional abuse, or physical violence. While girls are expected to

²³ Walby, “*Theorising Patriarchy*”, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

²⁴ R. W. Connell, *Op. cit.*

²⁵ S. Walby, ‘Varieties of gender regimes, social politics’, *International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, Vol. 27, Issue 3, 2020, pp. 414–431.

²⁶ S. Humphreys, ‘Gendering corporal punishment: beyond the discourse of human rights’, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2008, pp. 527–540; T. T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit.*, 166–173.

²⁷ Dunne, M., *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

²⁸ M. Mac an Ghail, “*The Making of men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling*”, Berkshire: Open University Press: 1994; R. Miremba and M. Davies, *Op. cit.*, pp. 401–416.

adapt a submissive “female script” which promotes passivity, submission, and silent acceptance of violence.²⁹ Dunne *et al.* notably observe, anyone who steps beyond this “gender regime” and transgress gender-norms become subject to varying types and degrees of violence.³⁰

Crenshaw’s³¹ intersectionality concept helps to complicate the notions of ‘gender regime’ in school as it unveils how gender inequalities become more entrenched when they interact with other social markers of inequality such as class, ethnicity, race, caste, and religion within an organisation. These complex patterns of inequalities are enacted, carried out, reinforced by multiple structures in all spheres of a society including schools. In this vein, Dunne³² elucidates how schools are organised by different power and authority structures that assign different roles, functions, or social positions to different individuals. These power and authority structures, as elaborated by Robeyns³³, eventually feed an enabling environment for power imbalances between teachers and students, and among students, in which gender interacts with age and authority to create powerful forms of control. Barasa *et al.*³⁴ similarly clarify how the everyday processes, practices, and interactions of schools reinforce and perpetuate harmful social norms of adult authority over children and of male superiority over females. Those who do not accept the dominant norms promoted through social institutions remain at risk of discrimination, victimisation, and exclusion.

²⁹ M. Dunne, *et al.*, “Gendered School Experiences: The Impacts on Retention and Achievement in Botswana and Ghana”, London: DFID.

³⁰ M. Dunne, *et. al.*, ‘Gender violence in schools in the developing world’, *Gender and Education*, Vol 18, No 1, 2006, pp. 75-98

³¹ K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1, 1989, pp. 139-167.

³² M. Dunne, “*Gender, Sexuality and Development: Education and Society in sub-Saharan Africa*”, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008; R. J. Gruijters, *et al.*, ‘Opportunity hoarding and elite reproduction: school segregation in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Social Forces*, 2022, pp. soae070.

³³ I. Robeyns, ‘When will society be gender just?’ John Browne (ed.), *The Future of Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2007; R. Tabulawa, ‘Pedagogical classroom practice and the social context: the case of Botswana’, *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1997, pp. 189-204.

³⁴ S. F. Barasa, *et al.*, ‘Experience of school-related gender-based violence by pupils and the culture of silence: a case of primary schools in Kasarani District, Nairobi County, Kenya’, *International Journal of Education and Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2013, pp. 1-20; F. Leach, *et al.*, “*School-related Gender-based Violence: A Global Review of Current Issues and Approaches in Policy, Programming and Implementation Responses to School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) for the Education Sector*”, New York: UNESCO.

A small number of studies³⁵ from around the world exhibit how children experience multiple forms of violence from multiple perpetrators simultaneously, linked through social inequalities and relations of power. These studies unfold the importance of inspecting the multiple inter-connected categories of school violence to understand the true nature and magnitude of victim's sufferings. Leach *et al.*³⁶ accordingly clusters SRGBV in two overlapping categories, explicit and implicit (symbolic) violence. Explicit SRGBV includes unwelcome and unsolicited physical contact such as kissing, touching, pinching or groping, beatings, sexual advances, sexual assault, rape, derogatory comments, name calling, humiliation, intimidation, taunts, or verbal abuse. Implicit (symbolic) SRGBV covers actions that are less visible and more mundane (e.g. teachers feeling entitled to exploit free labour of girls subscribed by gender division of labour) and which are endorsed and reinforced by gender scripts that fill the school day with rules, norms, and symbols that guide and regulate behaviour and legitimise discrimination against those who resist.³⁷

Based on the above theoretical underpinnings, this study pays close attention to how the prevailing norms and practices produce context-specific manifestations of, and responses to SRGBV within the complex gender regime of a school. This paper shifts the focus away from individual acts of violence to social structures and institutions that perpetuate asymmetrical power relations leading to gender violence. Finally, the paper emphasises the ways in which violence is enacted within and through everyday relations, including how violence is experienced, negotiated, and resisted within the school settings.

Research methodology

This research was carried out by applying the principles of feminist standpoint epistemology that provides a space to women for interpreting social realities based on their experiences. By focusing on the intersections of everyday power practices and knowledge production, this epistemology denotes the lives of women as privileged

³⁵ D. Finkelhor, R. K. Ormrod, and H. A. Turner, 'Poly-victimization: a neglected component in child victimization', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007, pp. 7–26; H. K. Altinyelken and M. Le Mat, 'Sexual violence, schooling and silence: teacher narratives from a secondary school in Ethiopia', *Compare - A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2016, pp. 648–664

³⁶ M. Dunne, *Op. cit.*

³⁷ M. Dunne, *et al.*, "Gendered School Experiences: The Impacts on Retention and Achievement in Botswana and Ghana", London: DFID, 2005.

sites of knowledge production.³⁸ To explore women's unique standpoint, a qualitative methodology was employed to design the study. This methodology deemed more appropriate for conducting this study because it addresses power imbalances between researchers and participants, and generates rich data helping to understand the meanings and context of violence.³⁹ Moreover, this research embraced the views of feminist scholars who argue that qualitative methods can effectively transmit the less heard voices of women.⁴⁰

Semi-structured in-depth interview was used to acquire detailed data from the participants. This method facilitated the collection of in-depth insights from the interviewed girls, by delving into their experiences and thoughts on a sensitive issue like gender violence.⁴¹ It allowed me to initiate in-depth conversations with a set of pre-determined questions and following them up with leading questions, probes, and comments to explore subjective experiences of the participants.⁴² I started the interviews with a guide comprising of both closed and open-ended questions. The guide was designed with three board sections. The first section included queries on personal details followed by the second section involving queries on gendered experiences related to school violence. The final section added queries regarding gendered responses to school violence. Each interview lasted for 30 to 45 minutes and they were recorded with informed consent of participants. Detailed hand notes were also taken during and after each interview enabling me to identify the data gaps and interesting new lines of inquiry.

The research participants were selected through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling is a non-probability technique, that—drawing on social connections—helps to access hard-to-reach populations, who otherwise would be extremely difficult to be contacted or located,⁴³ i.e. the female

³⁸ S. Harding, 'Introduction: standpoint theory as a site of political, philosophic, & scientific debate', Sandra Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies* (New York Routledge 2004), pp. 1-15.

³⁹ J. Heslop, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, 30-47.

⁴⁰ V. Olesen, 'Feminisms and models of qualitative research', N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, Inc. 1994) pp. 158-174.

⁴¹ M. DeJonckheere, and L. M. Vaughn, 'Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: a balance of relationship and rigour', *Family Medicine and Community Health*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019, pp. e000057.

⁴² C. N. E. Thompkinsa, *et al.*, 'Methodological reflections on closing qualitative interviews with women drug users', *Methodological Innovations Online*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2008, pp. 18-29.

⁴³ R. D. Petersen and A. Valdez, 'Using snowball-based methods in hidden populations to generate a randomized community sample of gang-affiliated adolescents', *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2005, pp. 151-167.

victims of school violence in a patriarchal country like Bangladesh. The selection criteria initially included school girls who either experienced or witnessed SRGBV. I leveraged my personal network⁴⁴ to recruit the first participant. My younger sister helped me contact one of her friends—currently a school girl with lived experiences of sexual violence in school—who consented to become my very first participant. Her responses also helped me to test the validity of the interview guide. From there, each participant served as the ‘seed’ to help identify the following ones by referring individuals whom they knew could meet the selection criteria.⁴⁵ I contacted each of the recommended individuals, and five among them consented to give interviews who became my next (2nd to 6th) participants.

Snowball sampling, due to its heavy reliance on social networks, contains the risk of identifying a homogenous group of participants.⁴⁶ Hence, I employed purposive sampling as well to ensure that a variety of perspectives get captured. Purposive sampling, is another non-probability technique, which involves intentional selection of participants who possess particular knowledge and experience related to the study phenomenon.⁴⁷ This technique, through the selection of information-rich cases, helped me to obtain deep insights into the topic of interest.⁴⁸ At this stage, I expanded my selection criteria for research participants. I emphasised selecting students from higher educational institutions (college/university) as well who either suffered from or witnessed SRGBV at some point of their lives, to acquire more diverse perspective on the subject matter. The willingness to voluntarily participate in interviews and communicate own experiences was equally important in selection criteria.⁴⁹ The geographical scope of the study was kept limited to Dhaka due to time and resource constraints. I was analysing the field findings alongside conducting the interviews. Hence, I was able to identify the commonalities and differences of the participant’s lived experiences, and eventually find the data saturation point. After interviewing

⁴⁴ J. Kirchherr and K. Charles, ‘Enhancing the sample diversity of snowball samples: Recommendations from a research project on anti-dam movements in Southeast Asia’, *PLoS One*, Vol. 13, No. 8, 2018, pp. e0201710.

⁴⁵ S. Sarantakos, “*Social Research*”, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

⁴⁶ J. Kirchherr and K. Charles, *Op. cit.*

⁴⁷ M. Ahmad and S. Wilkins, ‘Purposive sampling in qualitative research: a framework for the entire journey’, *Qualitative and Quantitative*, Vol. 59, 2025, pp. 1461–1479.

⁴⁸ L. A. Palinkas, *et al.*, ‘Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research’, *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, Vol. 42, No. 5, 2015, pp. 533–544

⁴⁹ M. Ahmad and S. Wilkins, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1461–1479.

the tenth participant (see table 1), I stopped collecting further data as I reached my thematic saturation.⁵⁰

As a qualitative researcher who dealt with human subjects, I tried my best to maintain the required code of ethics as a major obligation. I commenced the fieldwork with a firm understanding of the delicate and complex nature of ethical issues in qualitative inquiry. Throughout the research process, I adhered to upholding participant's anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, privacy, and other crucial ethical regulations.⁵¹ Seven among the interviewed girls were below the age of 18 whose interviews were conducted with full consent from both them and their parents. For the ones aged above 18, informed consent was acquired directly from the participants. The timing and place of interviews were decided based on their preferences and comfortability. In cases of four out of seven participants aged below 18, their parents stayed with them during interviews. Multiple sessions were conducted with each participant, and enough time and space were offered to them, helping them to open up about the sensitive issues of gender violence. I also prepared myself mentally before initiating any interview in order to make my participants comfortable. I started the conversations with briefly introducing myself, explaining the research topic, objectives and significance of the study, as well as, the rationale for reaching out to selected participants and with obtaining their verbal consent, which eventually helped in ice-breaking and establishing preliminary trust, respect, and rapport with the participants—the perquisites for making qualitative interviews effective.⁵² To strengthen rapport, I carefully moderated my verbal behaviors, through actively listening to the participants, showing personal interest, offering personal disclosures, giving empathetic responses, keeping a smooth tone of voice, and using the participant's name where required. I was also careful about my non-verbal behaviors such as smiling and nodding frequently, and keeping an open body language.⁵³ By following Oakley's⁵⁴ "participatory model", I shared my own

⁵⁰ B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago: Aldine, 1967.

⁵¹ A. Halai, 'Ethics in Qualitative Research: Issues and Challenges', Plenary Address, Multi-Disciplinary Qualitative Research in Developing Countries, Aga Khan University, Karachi, 2006.

⁵² R. Leslie, *et al.*, 'Reflecting on rapport: strategies for online interviews about sensitive or distressing topics with vulnerable children', *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2024, pp. 496–509.

⁵³ E. Schmid, *et al.*, 'The continuum of rapport: Ethical tensions in qualitative interviews with vulnerable participants', *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 24, No. 5, 2024, pp. 1253–1271.

⁵⁴ A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms', Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981), pp. 30–61.

experiences of school violence with the participants during interviews, which helped to vitalise rapport, increase reciprocity, neutralise power relations, and obtain more authentic information. Throughout the process, I also addressed my own positionality and reflexivity to minimise my biases as researcher.⁵⁵ I was careful about not asking any question that could re-instigate any traumatic memory for the victims. They were allowed to take small breaks during interviews when they got emotional discussing about violence related experiences. I assured the participants all their personal information (i.e. address, contact number and name that could lead to identification) were to be kept strictly anonymous. Their privacy and anonymity were also protected through the use of pseudonyms (see table 1). In these ways, I made sure the participants could share confidential information without any fear or risk of harm. I also clarified the participants were totally free to withdraw from conversation at any point of interview or to refuse answering any question if they felt uncomfortable.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Research Participants

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Current educational status	Type of school	Current location	Family income (BDT)
Farhana	16	Candidate for 10 th grade board examination	Co-education	Dhaka	1,50,000
Raima	23	Undergraduate student	All girls	Dhaka	50,000
Mariam	14	Class nine	Co-education	Dhaka	70,000
Shama	17	Class 10	Co-education	Dhaka	1,20,000
Fatema	14	Class eight	All girls	Dhaka	60,000
Aziza	19	Undergraduate student	All girls	Dhaka	1, 20,000
Hena	15	Class 10	All girls	Dhaka	60,000
Zeba	15	Class eight	Co-education	Dhaka	65,000
Tanha	18	College	Co-education	Dhaka	90,000
Zara	16	Class 10	Co-education	Dhaka	50,000

Source: field work.

⁵⁵ A. Halai, *Op. cit.*

Finally, this study adopted a thematic analysis approach⁵⁶ that helped to define the theme of raw data, split them into small units, and analyse the categorised themes in light of research objective. To gain familiarity with the data, my first step was to get involved with transcribing the interviews and translating them into English. The transcripts were shared with the participants for checking the accuracy of translation. Based on participant's validation (commonly known as member checking),⁵⁷ three transcripts were slightly revised, which further helped to minimise researcher's biases. Next, I manually coded the data by organising each participant's responses under each question. All relevant data were coded meaningfully and comprehensively. The codes were carefully read and re-read to identify broader themes, and later, related codes were grouped into potential themes. The themes were further refined and adjusted to ensure coherence and relevance throughout the data set. I ensured that the themes provide meaningful insights into the research objective. I simultaneously tried to provide clear explanations of each theme.⁵⁸ My chief concern was to sketch an in-depth and insightful analysis, instead of just describing the field data. Extensive secondary literature (journal articles, book chapters, GO/NGO reports, and working papers) was also reviewed to build a more robust analysis and enhance research credibility by triangulating and cross-verifying findings.

Gendered experiences of school violence

Field data reflects that both explicit and implicit gender-based violence occur in schools of Bangladesh. Explicit violence takes place through overlapping categories of sexual, physical, verbal, and psychological acts. A nationwide study conducted by Plan International similarly depicted, girls facing overlapping categories of explicit violence in educational institutions of Bangladesh.⁵⁹ SRGBV can take place in the form of teacher or peer violence, by both male and female perpetrators. Girls also face risk of violence in the hands of school staff (peon, guards, and canteen boys). Desalegn⁶⁰ in Ethiopian context and Turner *et al.*⁶¹ in Ugandan context similarly

⁵⁶ S. K. Ahmed, *et al.*, 'Using thematic analysis in qualitative research', *Journal of Medicine, Surgery and Public Health*, Vol. 6, 2025, pp. 100198.

⁵⁷ L. Birt, *et al.*, 'Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation?', *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 26, No. 13, 2016, pp. 1802–1811.

⁵⁸ S. K. Ahmed, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁵⁹ M. Shuaib and A. Mahbub *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Z. Desalegne, 'Gender-based violence and its associated effects on female students: the case of Gozamin and Nigus T/Haimanot secondary schools in the East Gojjam administrative zone', *Ethiopia, Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 7, 2019, pp. 237–46.

observed that female students simultaneously face multidimensional problems from multiple perpetrators in school premise.

Field findings further certify, classrooms function as ‘hub of gender violence’ where teachers exercise unquestioned power and authority, with free pass to abuse female students without much resistance. Empty classrooms are also favourable sites for exploitation by both teachers or peers. Washrooms, teacher’s rooms, common rooms, staircases, rooftops, backrooms, laboratories, corridors, playgrounds, and abandoned places are all unsafe for minor girls, especially when they are alone.⁶² In the same vein, Badri⁶³ discussed how unsafe school environment and poor infrastructure contribute to the likelihood of sexual violence in Sudan.

The risk of violence against girls in co-educational schools has been reportedly higher due to the presence of male teachers, staff and peers, corresponding with previous studies from African contexts.⁶⁴ Physical violence in the hands of both male and female is prevalent in Bangladeshi schools, alike three other Sub-Saharan countries (Zimbabwe, Ghana, Malawi).⁶⁵ Study participants mentioned corporal punishment (battering/slapping, pulling by hair/ear, throwing duster/chalks) as a widespread practice; reflecting the deeply entrenched social norms reinforcing institutional authorities and power imbalances – between males and females, and adults and children. Ekine’s⁶⁶ study stemming from Nigerian schools, echoed that interpersonal relationships are central to understand gender violence, thus, addressing SRGBV entails not only behaviours and values but also the power dynamics between victims and perpetrators. Stewart-Tufescu⁶⁷ – drawing on a large body of global evidence – took this view forward by arguing that male and female teachers tend to inflict corporal punishment on students as a way of demonstrating their power. Field

⁶¹ E. Turner, *et al.*, ‘Sexual violence through corporal punishment: rethinking siloes in school violence prevention using feminist theory and data from Uganda’, *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, Vol. 5, 2024, pp. 100413.

⁶² A. Ekine, *Op. cit*; M. Shuaib and A. Mahbub, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁶³ A. Y. Badri, *Op. cit*, pp. 1-20.

⁶⁴ E. Chikwiri and E. M. Lemmer, ‘Gender-based violence in primary schools in the Harare and Marondera districts of Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2014, pp. 95–107; J. Parkes, *et al.*, ‘Addressing silences in research on girls’ experiences of teacher sexual violence: insights from Uganda’, *Comparative Education*, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2022, pp. 1–21.

⁶⁵ F. Leach, ‘Researching gender violence in schools: methodological and ethical considerations’, *World Development*, Vol. 34, No. 6, 2006, pp. 1129-1147; F. Leach and S. Sitaram, *Op. cit.*

⁶⁶ A. Ekine, *Op. cit.*

⁶⁷ A. Stewart-Tufescu, ‘Corporal punishment: the global picture’, *Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2023, pp. 08-33.

findings convey that, corporal punishment is also used as a regulation and disciplining method to teach students the right way of thinking and behaving through conforming “gender scripts”. Mariam, currently a ninth-grade student shared her experience in this regard:

Our religion teacher used to batter girls if they talked or laughed loudly. His justification was, Islam prohibits women from talking or laughing loudly. Muslim women should be submissive, docile, and obedient to husband etc. He used to ask girls about different Islamic verses or texts. In anyone failed to answer correctly, he would either slap or hit them on back.

Mariam’s narrative reflects how school reproduces the context-specific and culturally embedded ideas of gender-appropriate behaviour shaped by sexist religious norms. Her narrative also depicts, how the transgressions across the boundaries of accepted behaviour are discouraged through enactment of punishment by different school actors. Kuleana⁶⁸ in Tanzanian context found similar evidence that beating of girls at school is rationalised as a part of socialising them into becoming respectful and obedient wives or mothers. The gender-specific use of corporal punishment is a way to stabilise the age and gender inequitable regimes of schools.

Sexual violence in the hands of male teachers, peers, or school staff has also been reported as prevalent, yet another expression of authority and power imbalances across age and gender groups, driven by harmful social norms. School girls are minors (aged below 18) in Bangladesh; the question of their consent thereby becomes irrelevant.⁶⁹ Any attempt to commit sexual acts against them is counted as “sexual violence”. Muhanguzi⁷⁰ articulated that schools in the African continent offer a vigorously socio-cultural and discursive environment in which everyday interactions are characterised by gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances. Pinheiro,⁷¹ by examining a more global context, strongly argued that it is important to unmask gender relations at school level to understand the root causes of sexual violence, where female passivity and male violence is accepted as “normal behaviour”. Interviewed girls stated, sexual harassment occurs through the acts of bad touches, unwanted advances or attention, sexual jokes or comments, while sexual assault occurs through coerced sex or rape. Similar types of sexual acts take place against

⁶⁸ Kuleana Children's Rights Centre, “*Does Corporal Punishment Bring about Discipline*”, Dar-es-Salaam: Kuleana Children's Rights Centre, 1999.

⁶⁹ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁷⁰ F. K. Muhanguzi, ‘Gender and sexual vulnerability of young women in Africa: experiences of young girls in secondary schools in Uganda’, *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 13, 2011

⁷¹ P. S. Pinheiro, “*World Report on Violence against Children*”, Geneva: United Nations, 2006.

school girls in Nepali⁷² and African countries too.⁷³ In all girl's school, male teachers and staff are likely to be the main perpetrators of sexual violence, while in co-educational institutions, male students also partake in committing sexual acts.

Field data exhibits that often girls experience multiple forms of violence at the same time, which resonates studies arising from North American and African countries.⁷⁴ Especially, physical and sexual forms of violence take place simultaneously, reinforcing one another, commonly through the act of “sexualised corporal punishment”, i.e. teachers’ sexualised touching in the pretext of corporal punishment.⁷⁵ Hena, currently studying in tenth-grade, shared her experience in this regard:

One day our religion teacher touched my friend on her shoulder and pinched her. By pointing at her breasts, he asked why her uniform was dirty. He pretended as if he was trying to discipline my friend, but he was clearly trying to touch her inappropriately. The same teacher tried to rape a girl from our school ten years ago. Despite everything, he is still teaching there. You see! In our country, schools are no heaven for girls.

Fatema, an eighth-grade student further recounted her disturbing experiences:

There is a male teacher in our school who most of the times walks across the corridor in the name of monitoring the behaviour of students. He stares at our body parts inappropriately. During class, he tries to touch the breasts or buttocks of girls in the name of pretend or play behaviour. I have also been a victim of his sexualised touches.

These instances of sexualised corporal punishment unravel, how the gendered and institutional power imbalances facilitate male teachers’ access to girls’ bodies, and afford impunity for men engaging in sexual violence, misusing their institutionally mandated roles as disciplinarians, similarly observed by Turner *et al.*⁷⁶ in two primary schools of Uganda.

The occurrence of sexual violence by male peers, in overlapping verbal and physical acts, has also been reported as common.⁷⁷ Tanha, currently a college student, who previously attended a co-educational school, shared her observations in this regard:

⁷² M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁷³ A.Y. Badri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20; B. B. Chitsamatanga and N. S. Rembe, *Op. cit.*, pp. 65–80; E. Turner, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 100413.

⁷⁴ D. Finkelhor, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 648-664; H. K. Altinyelken and M. Le Mat, *Op. cit.*, pp. 648-664.

⁷⁵ E. Turner, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 100413.

⁷⁶ E. Turner, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 100413.

⁷⁷ B. B. Chitsamatanga and N. S. Rembe, *Op. cit.*, pp. 65–80; J. J. Turanovic and S. E. Siennick, “*The Causes and Consequences of School Violence: A Review*”, USA: National Institute of Justice, 2022.

In our school, girls and boys sat next to each other. A number of boys touched girls on their backs/shoulders/hands, stroked their checks, and passed sexualised comments. One boy from our class used to touch girls on their thighs. We informed our class teacher about it. She said boys can be mischievous due to their overfriendly nature. As girls, we should be more patient, if we want to study in co-education. Otherwise, we should shift to all-girls schools.

Tanha's narrative reflects how teachers implicitly maintain "gender regime" through the approval of mundane "taken for granted" incidents of mistreatment in classrooms, which is a manifestation of implicit (symbolic) violence. Teachers reinforce "gender scripts" that males should be dominant and powerful and females should accept it. Schools legitimise violent behaviours of boys toward girls, rendering these acts as invisible to curate hegemonic masculine values in boys and submissive feminine values in girls. Connell and Messerschmidt⁷⁸ defines hegemonic masculinity as a practice that legitimises men's domination and women's subordination in a patriarchal society. Similar instances have also been reported in schools from other countries (e.g. Sweden and UK)⁷⁹ where boys were encouraged to learn and exercise dominant manhood through committing verbal abuse, physical abuse, and even violent sexual behaviour against peers.

The present body of literature on SRGBV pays less attention to non-physical acts of violence.⁸⁰ Field findings however indicate that prevalence of verbal and psychological violence is much higher than physical violence in both all girls and co-educational schools. The occurrence of non-physical acts has increased with the rapid digitalisation of Bangladesh. Various forms of cyber violence, including bullying, revenge pornography, trolling, privacy violation, and leaking explicit pictures, are frequently committed against girls, especially by peers, reproducing similarities with the findings of previous studies conducted in Bangladesh.⁸¹

Studies across high, middle, and low-income countries have found how the boundaries between different forms of verbal and psychological are getting blurred, as they are expressed in the overlapping acts of calling names/slangs, rumor mongering, fat shaming, slut shaming, bad comments, bullying, harassment, and

⁷⁸ R. W Connell, and J. W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity', *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6, 2005, pp. 829–859.

⁷⁹ J. Lunneblad, and T. Johansson, 'Violence and gender thresholds: a study of the gender coding of violent behaviour in schools', *Gender and Education*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 1–16; V. Rawlings, *Gender Regulation, "Violence and Social Hierarchies in School: 'Sluts', 'Gays' and 'Scrubs'"*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁸⁰ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁸¹ M. Shuaib and A. Mahbub, *et. al.*, *Op. cit*; UNGEI, *Op. cit*

mockery.⁸² By inspecting global evidence, Leach *et al.*⁸³ argued that female teachers and students have a greater tendency to initiate verbal and psychological abuse against female students, also reflected in the field findings. Shama, currently studying in tenth-grade, narrated that female teachers use humiliation, shaming, or intimidation as well as other gender-specific labels to correct “inappropriate” behaviours:

For six consecutive months, our physical training teacher forced me and other obese girls to walk up to our class at eighth floor instead of using lift. She used to call us “fatso”. She publically insulted us for being over-weight. She said no one will marry us if we didn’t lose weight. Her behavior was a clear manifestation of psychological and physical abuse. You can’t let it pass in the name of “disciplining”.

These incidences indicate how multiple forms of violence, rooted in different structures of power and authority, are used to discipline girls to embrace “gender scripts”. In the similar vein, Bunwaree⁸⁴ discovered that high level of verbal abuse is particularly prevalent among female teachers who prefer to use it instead of corporal punishment in sub-Saharan Africa.

Verbal and psychological violence by peer groups also occur frequently; rooted in a general classroom behaviour and atmosphere which some students find light-hearted and enjoyable, while others find antagonistic and shaming. Zeba, an eighth-grade student, recalled how misogynistic stigma around menstruation led to mocking and humiliation for girls in her class:

Last year, one of my friends got blood stains on her uniform during periods. Both boys and girls from our class made fun of her. One of the boys asked her if it was a new fashion to come to school with blood stains on uniform. Later a female teacher came to the class and scolded my friend for not being careful enough. She gave us a moral lecture on how girls should protect their honour and avoid coming to school during heavy period days.

Peer violence can also be inflicted by senior male and female students as a means to regulate gender-specific behaviour. Farhana, currently a candidate of board examination for 10th grade pointed out, violence is generally perpetrated against girls who are not considered as sufficiently modest and retiring in their “feminine” demeanour:

In our school, senior girls inflict verbal or physical violence on junior girls if they don’t dress properly. We were advised to wear an extra scarf on uniform, and if anyone skipped

⁸² S. Mahmood and S. Islam, *Op. cit.*, pp. 79-84; C. Tanton, et. al., *Op. cit.*, 1012.

⁸³ F. Leach, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁸⁴ S. Bunwaree, ‘Gender inequality: the Mauritian experience’, Heward Christine and Sheila Bunwaree (eds.), *Gender, Education and Development: Beyond Access to Empowerment* (London: Zed Books), 1999, pp.693-735.

wearing it, senior girls would discipline her through different means of violence. Senior boys also voluntarily discipline girls. During one of our class parties, a boy from senior class shamed my classmate because she was wearing skirt. Another senior rebuked my junior because she was spotted talking to boys from another school outside the school gate.

This narrative shows that, both girls and boys in the age and gender inequitable regime of school, play a part in “policing” the boundaries of appropriate gender-behaviour and punish the transgressions, also noticed in other global studies.⁸⁵ Studies emanating from western contexts (America and Europe) also attest how peer violence can result from power game, where more powerful initiate violence to exert dominance over less powerful.⁸⁶ Shama narrated her school memories in this regard:

The seniors drag juniors to empty classrooms to bully them. Once a girl was forced by male seniors to smoke cigarette. When she denied it, the seniors slapped her. Seniors deliberately target new students. Senior boys also coerce junior girls into romantic relationships. Once a group of girls bullied a disabled girl. They hit her so hard on the head that she had to be hospitalised.

Peer violence takes place across gender groups based on power differences stemming from age, economic conditions, and physical features (including height, weight, wearing glasses, fashion sense, or physical abilities). Onoyase⁸⁷ in Nigerian schools discovered that, disability can be a ground for stark power inequalities leading to high risk of school violence. The current research further explored that peer violence occurs due to aggressive behaviour of wealthy students, reproducing similarity with.⁸⁸ Students from wealthy families also receive preferential treatment from school management, teachers, and peer groups. On contrary, students from economically disadvantaged families, experience exclusion due to limited capacity to participate in cultural activities, school picnic, or bring fancy tiffin. These instances mirror that, schools through their formal and informal environments, institutionalise antagonist power relations and offer privileges to certain groups over others, reproducing wider social inequalities which lead to violence within as well as across gender lines.

⁸⁵ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁸⁶ T. R. Nansel, *et al.*, ‘Bullying behaviors among US youth: prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment’, *JAMA*, Vol. 285, No. 16, 2001, pp. 2094–2100; M. E. Solberg and D. Olweus, ‘Prevalence estimation of school bullying with the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire’, *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2003, pp. 239–268.

⁸⁷ A. Onoyase, *Op. cit.*, pp. 29–37.

⁸⁸ A.Y. Badri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1–20; J. J. Turanovic and S. E. Siennick, *Op. cit.*

Gendered responses to school violence

Field findings indicate, the most common response of female students to SRGBV is to remain silent. The fear of tarnishing family reputation, victim-blaming, stigmatisation, and lack of cultural understanding on “school violence” refrain Bangladeshi girls from voicing out their problems, also explored by Shahen.⁸⁹ Ekine⁹⁰ in Nigerian context reported that boys can voice out their SRGBV experiences more than girls, partly due to superiority of male child in patriarchal society whereas “gender scripts” teach girls to remain silent in the face of injustice and abuse. The existent lack of reciprocity between parents and children in Bangladeshi families also deny girls the adequate space to share their traumatising experiences. Those who gather courage to share their problems prefer talking to mother/sisters,⁹¹ since girls in patriarchal families share more proximate bonds with female kin. A BRAC study unveiled that around 50% girls in Bangladesh share their SRGBV related problems with their mother.⁹² Badri⁹³ in Sudanese context (also a Muslim majority patriarchal country like Bangladesh) found that daughters received positive response from mothers, helping them to legally report violence and rehabilitate through counselling, and other support. The findings of this study however present contrasting scenario, because victims barely received positive responses from female kin, as elaborated by Farhana:

My friend shared her problems with her mother because her father is short-tempered. Upon hearing everything, her mother advised my friend to keep quiet and avoid undue attention from that teacher. Her mother bought her a few hijabs and made her wear them. She believed hijab can save her daughter from the evil intentions of perverted male teachers.

She asked my friend not to share anything with her father to avoid family conflicts.

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country where veil (hijab/purdah) is considered as the best strategy to save women from all social evils and offset any possible risk of

⁸⁹ A. Shahen, *Op. cit.*, pp. 127-139; P. S. Saha, ‘Female students not safe even at educational institutions’, *Prothom Alo*, 80 February, 2022, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/female-students-not-safe-even-at-educational-institutions>

⁹⁰ A. Ekine, *Op. cit.*

⁹¹ P. S. Saha, *Op. cit.*

⁹² M. A. Alim, “*Changes in knowledge and attitudes of school girls towards sexual harassment and its incidence: An impact assessment of the MEJNIN program*”, Working Paper No. 39, Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, 2013.

⁹³ A.Y. Badri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20.

sexual advances.⁹⁴ Farhana's friend was coerced into wearing a veil, which reflects lack of choice and forceful conformity to religious values. Mariam also shared her experiences of school violence with her mother, who immediately convinced her to change the school. Previous studies conducted in Bangladesh⁹⁵ similarly echoed that when parents learn about their daughter's violence encounters, they restrict their participation in school picnics, annual sports, or extra-curricular activities. In sum, victims' abilities to negotiate school violence get downplayed by gender inequalities, fostered by discriminatory social and religious practices, and ingrained in the institution of family. At school level, their abilities to negotiate violence are further dismissed by the institutionalised power and authority imbalances rooted in not only gender, but also, other structures of inequality.⁹⁶

Bangladesh's High Court issued a set of guidelines in 2009, urging to prevent any kind of physical, mental or sexual harassment against girls in educational institutions and form a five-member harassment complaint committee headed by a woman to investigate sexual harassment related allegations.⁹⁷ The government was directed to enact a law based on the guidelines, which was not implemented until the adaptation of the "Workplace and Educational Institutions Sexual Harassment Prevention Ordinance in 2026". It expands the scope to define sexual harassment, involving all forms of physical, verbal, non-verbal and online misconduct. This ordinance mandates the formation of internal complaint committees, the enforcement of heavy penalties if the accused is proven guilty, and the implementation of a survivor-centric approach to ensure the complainant's safety and dignity.⁹⁸ Relevant protective provisions are also enshrined in the articles 27, 28, 31, 32, and 34 of the national Constitution, National Children Policy of 2011, Child Act of 2013, and the Penal

⁹⁴ M. Sheen, *et al.*, 'Investigating the effect of wearing the hijab: perception of facial attractiveness by Emirati Muslim women living in their native Muslim country', *PloS One*, Vol. 13, No. 10, 2018, pp. e0199537.

⁹⁵ M. Shuaib, A. Mahbub, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*; S. F. Barasa, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20.

⁹⁶ A. Humayra and Z. T. Nashita, 'Addressing the crisis of gender-based violence on campus', *The Daily Star*, 24 February 2026. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/campus/news/addressing-the-crisis-gender-based-violence-campus-3768256>

⁹⁷ M. Shuaib, A. Mahbub, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

⁹⁸ S. Correspondent, 'Two ordinances to protect women, kids in all spaces', *The Daily Star*, 30 January 2026. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/two-ordinances-protect-women-kids-all-spaces-4094071>

Code of 1860.⁹⁹ The government also criminalised all forms of corporal punishment in schools.¹⁰⁰

Despite these legal advancements, students are rarely encouraged to formally report their physical or sexual violence, as shared by study participants. In case of verbal and psychological violence, they are far less encouraged to file formal reports, due to lack of evidence to prosecute invisible acts of abuse. None of the interviewed girls could share any specific information on school's complaint mechanism. They opined that, either their schools have no complaint mechanism or deliberately avoid sharing such information with students to protect school's reputation, similarly observed in Nepalian and Nigerian contexts.¹⁰¹ Violence related studies in the context of Bangladesh¹⁰² foreground that, lack of information restricts victim's ability to report violence, allowing perpetrators to further extend corruptions on their parts. In line with it, Chikwiri and Lemmer¹⁰³, based on their study in Zimbabwean schools, have defined school as a dangerous place, often under-supervised, where violence can break anytime, without efficient channels for reporting incidents.

In Bangladesh, reporting mechanisms for school violence either do not exist or are invariably under-developed and under-resourced, irrespective of the type of school.¹⁰⁴ Research participants shared that, most schools advise their students to contact their class teacher who is responsible for conveying violence reports to school authorities. Raima however shared, even when victims report their cases to teachers or formal school authorities, they are unlikely to receive positive responses:

Our Bangla teacher battered my friend with a ruler. She got bruises all over her hands. Her parents complained about the teacher to our headmistress. However, no action was taken against her. She kept teaching until her retirement. The headmistress told my friend she should forget about everything. Teachers are like parents and they have every right to

⁹⁹ M. Rahat and T. Hasan, 'Legal protections against sexual harassment in schools and workplaces in Bangladesh: Challenges and enforcement', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ A. H. Khan, "Key Findings and Protection Gaps: Physical and Humiliating Punishment of Children in Bangladesh", Dhaka: Sweden Sverige and Save the Children, 2022.

¹⁰¹ A. Ekine, *Op. cit*; T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit*, 166-173.

¹⁰² M. N. Islam and J. Ferdous, *Op. cit*, pp. 24-35; M. Putten and A. Nur-E-Jannat, 'Coping with domestic violence: women's voices in Bangladesh', *Journal of Health Research*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2022, pp. 77-88.

¹⁰³ E. Chikwiri and E.M. Lemmer, *Op. cit*, pp. 95-107.

¹⁰⁴ M. N. Sheikh, *et al.*, 'Cyberbullying victimization & perpetration among university students: prevalence, impact, help-seeking practices', *Journal of School Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2023, pp. 198-214.

discipline students. Later, her parents withdrew the complaint considering the future of my friend.

Similarly, Zeba reported her sexual harassment to teacher's committee and was upset with the kind of responses she received:

If I talk about my report, there was no positive feedback. I expected the accused teacher would be terminated but nothing happened. In fact, the teacher's committee kept the complaint to themselves. They even didn't inform anyone from the governing body. Our class teacher kept telling me not to share anything with my parents or outsiders because it could affect mine as well as the school's reputation.

These instances exhibit the stark authority and power imbalances among students, teachers and school management, which stem from institutional inequalities and diminish the abilities of students to resist or negotiate with gender violence. The age/authority relations between teachers and students, rooted in the age inequitable regime of school sanction them the power to neglect the problem, justify abuse, and even help perpetrators continue violence through approval of existing violent conditions, corresponding with African context.¹⁰⁵

Students also reported they try to contact other teachers informally, when they don't receive any positive response from class teacher. Despite being aware of the illicit activities of their colleagues or staff, most teachers choose to remain silent mainly to save their colleagues or protect school's reputation, also found in other South Asian countries.¹⁰⁶ While a number of teachers pay lip service or take further advantage of the situation. Raima (age 23), reflecting on her school day experiences shared in this vein:

It is not easy to report SRGBV, especially when the perpetrator is someone powerful from school authority or a senior teacher. When I was in school, one of our male teachers promised to help us fight against gender violence. Later, we got to know, he was also a "sexual predator" himself. He tried to sexually exploit girls in the name of offering help. Despite knowing everything, school administration took no action against him.

Raima's narrative echoes that, voicing out violence related concerns can lead to the risk of aggravated abuse and mistreatment due to the authoritarian school culture that strengthens unequal power balance between males and females and between teachers and students, similarly discovered at studies of global scale.¹⁰⁷ Mariam however

¹⁰⁵ F. Leach, *et al.*, *Op. cit*

¹⁰⁶ T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit*, pp. 166-173.

¹⁰⁷ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit*.

ascertained that anonymous complaints can be more effective, in case of holding the perpetrators accountable:

There is a letter box in front of our headmistress' room where we can drop written complaints. Years ago, there was a peon in our school who used to stare at girls with evil glances. Later he was fired due to repeated anonymous complaints against him. Actually, most of the students don't have the courage to directly share their problems with school authority.

Job termination nonetheless is not enough to dismantle the institutionalised culture of school violence. By not prosecuting the perpetrators under the national frameworks of legal justice, schools "normalise" an enabling climate for violence¹⁰⁸. Moreover, a laden power hierarchy exists in school in case of punishing the perpetrators. Field data corroborate, school authorities are much more eager to terminate lower level employees, than students from powerful families, senior teachers, or members of higher authority. In fact, they try to cover up their illicit activities to protect school's reputation.

It has been described in previous section, how female teachers trivialise the complaints of peer violence in co-educational schools. Teacher's responses to peer violence is further shaped by power differences among students stemming from unequal gender, economic, and political relations of our society¹⁰⁹, as narrated by a tenth-grade student named Zara:

One day during tiffin period, one of my male friends tried to touch between my things. When I slapped him, he got back at me with slangs and dirty comments on my body shape. I immediately rushed to our class teacher for help. She advised me to keep quite because the boy's family was quite wealthy with political connections in the parliament. She judged me for being close with male students. She added, being a middle-class girl, I should be more careful about protecting my family's dignity. Finally, she advised me not to befriend boys anymore to avoid "unwanted touching".

Field data further conveys that, male teachers laugh at girls, ask girls to keep quiet, or denote them as "bad characterd", upon hearing the complaints of peer violence. Especially, teachers who are engaged with committing violence are more dismissive of boys' behaviour, replicated by the study of Turner *et al.*¹¹⁰ in Ugandan schools. Some African schools similarly dismissed violence cases by blaming students or

¹⁰⁸ A. Ekine, *Op. cit*

¹⁰⁹ C. Tanton, *et. al.*, *Op. cit*, 1012.

¹¹⁰ E. Turner, *et al.*, *Op. cit*, pp. 100413.

simply encouraging them to “stay away” from the perpetrators who harassed them.¹¹¹ These examples substantiate how multiple structures of social inequalities institutionalise power imbalances within school limiting the abilities of female victims to resist violence. Eventually they grow mistrust towards peers, teachers, and higher authority amid gendered school dynamics, leading to the routinisation of violence. Ekine¹¹² however attested that Nigerian teachers show a propensity to help victims to resist violence, seek counselling, and re-integrate into normal life when they share a positive interpersonal relation with each other; which is very rare in the authoritarian and patriarchal culture of Bangladesh.

In sum, the power dynamics and authority structure of school produce and reproduce environments potentially dangerous for girls. The school system itself in developing countries (e.g. Bangladesh)¹¹³ exposes girls to different types of violence that replicate, reinforce, or recreate power dynamics followed by the society and the people belonging to this. Different social, gendered, and institutional inequalities institutionalise impunity and impede the abilities of victims to negotiate with unequal power relations and claim gender justice. The absence of mechanisms to keep harmful norms and practices in check, pathetic and sporadic structures in schools, lack of awareness, fear of stigmatisation, protecting colleagues and school reputation are all contributing to the systematic reproduction of “violence culture”¹¹⁴ in Bangladeshi schools, alike the schools from many other countries around the world.

Discussion and conclusion

For a really long time, schools were considered as “neutral” domains, without much attention to how they can be a fertile ground for various forms of gender violence.¹¹⁵ In recent times, there has been a growing awareness on the gendered nature of school, and this paper offers a Bangladeshi context to the growing international literature exploring the context-specific manifestations of, and responses to gender violence in

¹¹¹ S. F. Barasa, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20; S. Hallam, “Crimes without Punishment: Sexual Harassment and Violence against Female Students in Schools and Universities in Africa”, London: Africa Rights, 2022.

¹¹² A. Ekine, *Op. cit.*

¹¹³ USAID, “Unsafe Schools: A Literature Review of School-Related Gender-Based Violence in Developing Countries”, USA: United States Agency for International Development, 2023.

¹¹⁴ F. Adil, A. S. Malik and F. Anjum, ‘The gender-based violence in educational institutions as a barrier towards women education: Archival analysis’, *Asian Social Studies and Applied Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2022, pp. 80–90.

¹¹⁵ F. Leach, M. Dunne, *Op. cit.*

school.¹¹⁶ To the best knowledge of the author, this is the first study conducted in Bangladesh that offers such a nuanced understanding on how age and gender inequitable regimes institutionalise and sustain a deep-seated culture of violence in school settings. Drawing on in-depth data from interviews with ten female students from different educational institutions, this research postulates that unequal power and authority structures of school and broader society perpetuate overlapping categories of implicit and explicit violence in school settings. Moreover, the abilities of female students to resist or negotiate with school violence get shaped and restrained by the gendered and institutional inequalities enacted through everyday interactions, practices, and interpersonal relations at school and family domains.

In light of Connell ‘gender regime’ theory along with Humphreys ‘gender script’ and Crenshaw ‘intersectionality’ concepts, schools in this research have appeared as forums of unequal power relations enacted through gender, age, economic class, politics, physical disabilities, and other intersecting forms of inequalities, reproducing similarities with prominent studies from around the world.¹¹⁷ Age and gender regimes in co-educational schools are far more complex and oppressive than same-sex schools, with the presence of teachers and peers from different age, gender, and social groups, where power relations are shaped by the intersections of gender, institutional, and other forms of authorities. On contrary, in all-girls schools, teacher-student relations and interactions are (re)shaped by age/institutional authority, while intra-gender power imbalances stemming from intersecting social inequalities. Such comparative analysis between the age and gender regimes of co-educational and same-sex schools is a unique contribution of this study. It also emphasises that the deeply entrenched culture of SRGBV cannot be uprooted unless the intricate and inter-connected age and gender regimes are dismantled through structural changes.

This study further substantiates, how schools as primary agents of socialisation, legitimise and reinforce harmful norms and power dynamics of wider society, resulting in an enabling climate that perpetuates and sustains gender violence. Both formal (curriculum, pedagogies, management structures, and inequitable systems) and informal school environments (everyday interaction, social and cultural norms) take part in reinforcing unequal gender regimes and relations, also pointed out by

¹¹⁶ M. Z. Ahmed, *et al.*, ‘Prevalence and nature of bullying in schools of Bangladesh: a pilot study’, *Heliyon*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2021, pp. e07415; M. N. Islam and J. Ferdous, *Op. cit.*, pp. 77-88; Mahmood and S. Islam, *Op. cit.*, pp. 79-84.

¹¹⁷ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*; J. Heslop, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 30-47; J. J. Turanovic, and S. E. Siennick, *Op. cit.*

Barasa *et al.*¹¹⁸ The institutional culture of Bangladeshi schools has fixed norms for interaction and rigorous rules that guide socially-approved behaviour enacted and reinforced through everyday activities. These norms produce and regulate aggressive masculinity for boys and submissive femininity for girls through “gender scripting”, that works to reproduce unequal and antagonistic power dynamics leading to gender violence.¹¹⁹ In this endeavour, this study calls for the promotion of alternative forms of masculinity and femininity to foster egalitarian gender relations throughout school environment.¹²⁰ It also stresses the necessity for adapting whole-school approaches to transform social norms, gender roles, and power relations to eradicate violence at each level of school settings.¹²¹

This study further proclaims that, age/authority relations between teachers and students is another acute power dimension rooted in school environment that interacts with gender regime and further complicates it.¹²² Social norms of Bangladeshi culture shape the authority of teachers, warranting them immense power to discipline, control, or use violence against students.¹²³ The culture of teacher’s discipline is in tune with Bangladesh’s traditional views on how to bring up children and socialise them into culturally-approved roles.¹²⁴ This notion creates a fictional picture of “model teacher” and passes on the message to students that the teacher is a figure of authority who should not be questioned. For girls, this means that they are not expected to challenge inappropriate behaviour by teachers because of their institutionally assigned responsibility to socialise them into feminine roles.¹²⁵ In this way, gender violence is normalised and reproduced through everyday student teacher interactions and interpersonal relations in Bangladeshi schools. This line of discussion also highlights that teachers have a crucial role to play in dismantling the

¹¹⁸ S. F. Barasa, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20.

¹¹⁹ P. Garner, ‘Dimensions of school-based violence to and by children: an overview of recent literature’, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2014, pp. 484-495; J. Lunneblad, and T. Johansson, *Op. cit.*

¹²⁰ B. C. Prezenszky, *et al.*, ‘School actions to prevent gender-based violence: a (quasi-)systematic review of the Brazilian and the international scientific literature’, *Sec. Educational Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 89. 2018.

¹²¹ UNEG, *Op. cit.*

¹²² M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

¹²³ A. H. Khan, *Op. cit.*

¹²⁴ F. Nusrat, “*Corporal Punishment in Schools: Unaddressed Reasons Behind Dropouts in Bangladesh*”, Dhaka: GAGE, 2019.

¹²⁵ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

institutionalised culture of SRGBV.¹²⁶ However, if teachers subscribe to dominant cultural norms which justify men's violence against women, they are likely to fail as agents of change. Thus, more research is required to identify the factors which influence teachers' changes in attitude and behaviour regarding the institutional violence that they witness, and often take part in, on a daily basis.

The field narratives also reveal that, even when female students voice out their traumatising experiences, their abilities to resist and negotiate with violence or seek justice get downplayed by unequal socio-economic, gender, and institutional relations embedded in school and boarder society. Social acceptance of violence, widespread impunity, victim-shaming, lack of awareness, and under-developed school mechanisms to protect children's rights feed an enabling environment for continued perpetuation of violence in school settings, also found in prior regional studies.¹²⁷ Thus, it is also crucial to break silence and raise awareness among different level stakeholders including teachers, parents, communities, and school girls themselves to tackle SRGBV.¹²⁸ Moreover, this research suggests that, without understanding the gender and institutional structures that create and perpetuate violence, and the ways in which unequal social relations underpin violence and disproportionately affect women and girls, policymaking and legislation will not be effective.

The research unveils the potential for using a gender lens in addressing the institutional and gender inequalities in schools. It helps to advance understanding on, how gender and other forms of social inequalities interact with each other leading to complex patterns of violence, both within and across gender lines, which are difficult to map out and to address. Unveiling the intra-gender group dynamics of school violence is another unique contribution of this study. In the context of Bangladesh, women/girls are perceived as the "victim" group only. This research unravels women's aggressive behaviours, which are often less overt than men, hence less easily recognised. This research stresses the necessity for not only preventing explicit forms of SRGBV but also the implicit ones, often less visible and more harmful, performed through mundane activities of everyday school life.¹²⁹ Guided by Leach's work, the findings also reveal that girls experience multiple forms of violence from multiple perpetrators simultaneously, manifested through overlapping categories of

¹²⁶ T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit.*, 166-173.

¹²⁷ A.Y. Badri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-20; B. B. Chitsamatanga and N. S. Rembe, *Op. cit.*, pp. 65-80.

¹²⁸ F. Leach and S. Sitaram, *Op. cit.*, pp. 257-277; D. Naker, 'Preventing violence against children at schools in resource-poor environments: Operational culture as an overarching entry point', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 47, 2019, pp. 268-273.

¹²⁹ M. Dunne, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, and other invisible acts, which are inter-related and difficult to be isolated.¹³⁰ This viewpoint shows the necessity for adapting integrated approaches to eradicate intertwined age and gender regimes, power relations, and social inequalities giving rise to clustered acts of SRGBV.

In sum, this study reiterates how SRGBV incidences emerge from a social field with complex power relations and hierarchies that require complex and multi-level approaches to understanding and addressing it. In this endeavour, further research is needed to identify how interventions can synthesise the linkages between different forms of inequality and power relations for prevention efforts, and in ways that is appropriate for particular contexts. I hereby conclude by acknowledging the limitations of my sample size and interview data. I am not claiming the findings to be representative or consistent across all types of schools. Yet, they point to the gendered nature of school, which have been far underexplored in prior investigations. Comprehensive and longitudinal studies covering the perspectives of both male and female students from different school types and social backgrounds may reveal more diverse stories, which remains to be addressed in future research.

Policy implications: A whole-school approach to combat SRGBV

The findings of this study foreground the urgency of implementing a “whole school approach” —that will help to advance structural and sustainable changes by introducing comprehensive interventions involving the entire school community, including students, teachers, parents, community members, faith leaders, government officials, health and social welfare workers, law enforcing agencies, and NGOs. The whole school approach —through integrating gender violence into a broad programme of educational support (e.g. gender training for teachers and curriculum revision) —offers the avenues for addressing intersecting inequalities of gender, economic class, religion, and physical conditions —crucial for challenging the age and gender inequitable regime in schools¹³¹. Each stakeholder should be actively engaged in social and behavioural programmes to dismantle the harmful social norms and stereotypes likely to trigger SRGBV.¹³² Parents especially should be encouraged to raise their children in empathetic ways and teach them about the signs and effects of SRGBV. The teachers, school staff, and management committees need to be equipped with periodic training and support systems to create a gender transformative learning environment. Moreover, the whole academic process,

¹³⁰ F. Leach, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

¹³¹ T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit.*, 166-173

¹³² S. Lee and R. Rudolf, ‘The relationship between school-related gender-based violence and absenteeism: Evidence from 14 Southern and Eastern African countries’, *South African Journal of Education*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2022, pp. 1–16.

including curricular and extra-curricular activities, reading materials, teaching methods and teacher-student interactions should be free of gender biases –as part of the hidden curriculum taught implicitly through everyday school activities.¹³³ The curriculum should be revised to incorporate the core concepts of gender, human rights, violence, intersectionality, and sexual and reproductive health, as well as, the relevant laws and policies to safeguard children’s and women’s rights.¹³⁴ Adequate lighting and CCTV systems should be installed at major points inside and around the school campus. Student-led initiatives and clubs should be established to promote gender equality and inclusion, encouraging students to actively participate in nurturing a safe learning environment. The students themselves should be empowered to prevent SRGBV through curating societal values, conflict resolution, and diversity among them.¹³⁵ As the lives of men and women are closely connected, working simultaneously with both the genders can be the key to preventing SRGBV. Boys and men must be made aware of the harmful outcomes and punishment of SRGBV under the existing legal frameworks. Guidance and counselling facilities should also be installed for survivors at school level.¹³⁶

The field findings also substantiate how schools are located within the broader national landscapes and mirror the gender inequalities produced in other domains of the society. Addressing SRGBV therefore calls for a holistic and multifaceted approach at national level, through engaging all levels of schooling, community efforts, and ministerial policy and practice.¹³⁷ As discussed before, the high court guidelines and some fragmented protection provisions are not sufficient to prevent SRGBV. The government need to enact strict laws, regulations, and reporting systems, as well as, allocate adequate resources to implement the provisions in existing legal frameworks¹³⁸. Most importantly, every school authority should be held accountable for effective implementation and monitoring of the child protection laws, safeguarding policies, and reporting procedures to prevent SRGBV.

¹³³ B. B. Chitsamatanga and N. S. Rembe, *Op. cit.*, pp. 65–80;

¹³⁴ T. N. Poudel, *Op. cit.*, pp. 166–173

¹³⁵ P. Garner, *Op. cit.*, pp. 484–495; J. Lunneblad, and T. Johansson, *Op. cit.*

¹³⁶ UNESCO, *School-related gender-based violence: Achieving systemic, sustainable change – with youth and for youth*, Paris: UNESCO, 2023.

¹³⁷ A. Wickramasinghe, *et al.*, “‘I don’t know how we can stop ragging’: A qualitative study on the perceptions of staff and work-affiliated individuals at a Sri Lankan University on the phenomena of ragging”, *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2023, pp. 390–405.

¹³⁸ P. S. Saha, ‘Female students not safe even at educational institutions’, *Prothom Alo*, 14 March 2026. Available at: <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/female-students-not-safe-even-at-educational-institutions>