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Relevance of Strategies for Addressing Sexual Violence among Students in Selected Secondary Schools in Mzimba District Malawi

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Abstract

This study explored how students and school stakeholders perceived strategies for addressing sexual violence in three secondary schools in Mzimba District, Malawi. A qualitative case study involved 54 purposively and conveniently selected participants: 24 teachers, 24 student prefects, three deputy head teachers, two head teachers, and one district gender officer. Data were collected through six focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, and analysed thematically. Teachers also participated in pairwise ranking of strategies. Five themes described perceived relevance: increased awareness of sexual violence, improved student discipline, fewer perceived incidents, a safer learning environment, and greater willingness to report abuse. The corresponding participant counts were 54, 53, 50, 45, and 40, respectively. Guidance and counselling and sexuality education were prominent strategies, while participants also described codes of conduct, student involvement, community partnerships, and improvements to school infrastructure and supervision. Teachers ranked guidance and counselling highest. These findings suggest that participants valued coordinated educational, supportive, and institutional responses. However, the descriptive counts reflect views within the selected sample, and longitudinal incident data did not establish reported reductions in violence. Schools should strengthen teacher preparation, confidential reporting, referral arrangements, professional accountability, and support for affected students. Further research should examine implementation quality and independently assess whether perceived improvements translate into sustained protection and educational inclusion.

1.0 Introduction

Sexual violence in schools threatens the protective role of education. Students need environments in which they can learn, form relationships, and seek assistance without intimidation, coercion, or exploitation. Schools nevertheless reflect the social inequalities and power relations surrounding them, and students may experience abuse from peers, teachers, or other adults. Responses therefore require more than awareness campaigns or written rules. They depend on whether educational messages, professional responsibilities, reporting arrangements, and institutional practices offer usable protection. Examining the relevance of these arrangements from the perspectives of those who implement and experience them can identify practical strengths and unresolved weaknesses.

The international commitment to inclusive education links learning with human rights, gender equality, and a culture of peace and nonviolence. Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.7 provides an educational basis for these commitments, while the broader goals recognise the importance of addressing violence and discrimination (United Nations, 2015). UNESCO and UN Women (2016) translated this concern into guidance on school-related gender-based violence. Their framework organises action around leadership, school environments, prevention, responses, partnerships, and evidence. Sexual violence belongs within this wider agenda but also requires specific attention to coercion, unequal authority, disclosure, and the needs of affected learners.

School strategies may operate at several connected levels. Classroom teaching can help students recognise unacceptable behaviour; counselling can provide a trusted setting for seeking support; codes of conduct can clarify institutional expectations; and collaboration with families and external services can extend protection beyond school boundaries. Physical improvements and supervision may also address locations where students feel unsafe. The practical value of any measure depends on its implementation and its relationship with other measures. A school may teach students to report abuse without providing a confidential reporting channel, or maintain disciplinary rules without applying them consistently to adults.

The school environment is another important area of action. Ngidi (2023) explored the geographies of sexual violence in and around a South African township secondary school, drawing attention to how students understand unsafe spaces. This spatial perspective encourages schools to examine classrooms, corridors, grounds, and routes through which learners move. However, surveillance or supervision alone cannot resolve abuse rooted in authority, intimidation, or institutional silence. Environmental strategies must be considered alongside trusted relationships and procedures for challenging misconduct, particularly when an alleged perpetrator holds authority over a student.
Studies in African schools also highlight teachers' responsibilities. Altinyelken and Le Mat (2018) examined teacher narratives of sexual violence in an Ethiopian secondary school and the silences surrounding it. Le Mat (2016) investigated students' interpretations of sexual violence in the same national context, demonstrating the importance of understanding how learners interpret relationships and power. Magwa (2014) discussed management of sexual abuse by teachers in

Zimbabwean secondary schools. Together, these studies locate prevention within the everyday organisation of schooling, where teachers may act as protectors but professional misconduct can also make their authority a source of risk.

Guidance and counselling feature prominently in this literature. Apriliana (2018) discussed school counsellors' roles in handling sexual harassment behaviour, while Ondicho et al. (2020) examined strategies used in Kenyan secondary schools. Counselling may help students recognise abuse, communicate concerns, and obtain support. Its relevance nevertheless depends on availability, confidentiality, competence, and students' confidence in the person providing it. Where teachers combine counselling with several other responsibilities, the existence of a counsellor does not guarantee that sufficient time or specialised skills are available. Counselling must also connect students to appropriate assistance when a disclosure requires action beyond the school.

The quality of implementation remains a recurring concern. Spear (2019) examined teachers' perceptions of and responses to sexual gender-based violence in Burkina Faso, identifying the importance of teacher agency and institutional constraints. Vanner (2019) similarly considered teacher agency and resistance in relation to gender safety in Kenyan schools. These perspectives caution against assuming that teachers automatically act on policies simply because they know them. Professional loyalties, fear of consequences, uncertainty about procedures, and limited resources may shape responses. Prevention efforts need organisational support that enables staff to act appropriately and protects students when misconduct involves colleagues.

Reporting presents a particularly difficult challenge. Students may remain silent because of shame, threats, self-blame, or concern that adults will dismiss their experiences. Likumbo et al. (2021) examined secondary school involvement in protecting children against violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse in Zambia. This work contextualises barriers to disclosure and school action. A reporting system must therefore be understood as a relationship of trust as well as an administrative procedure. Encouraging disclosure is meaningful only when students can anticipate respectful treatment, protection from retaliation, and an appropriate response.

Malawi provides an important setting for examining these questions. Research has connected violence with educational outcomes in rural Malawi, demonstrating the relevance of school and household environments to learners' experiences (Psaki et al., 2017). Decker et al. (2018) evaluated empowerment self-defence training among adolescent girls and young women in Malawi through a cluster-randomised implementation trial. This evidence indicates the importance of prevention, but it does not replace an examination of how ordinary secondary schools implement their own strategies. Intervention trials and qualitative accounts answer different questions: the former can assess specified outcomes, whereas the latter can explain experiences, perceptions, and practical arrangements.

Malawian educational responses include life skills and sexual and reproductive health education. Kalanda (2010) examined behaviour change associated with life skills and reproductive health education among students and teachers. UNESCO and UNFPA (2012), reviewing school curricula in East and Southern Africa, also considered the place of sexuality education. Curriculum provision can offer repeated opportunities to discuss relationships, health, and harmful behaviour. However, its practical relevance depends on resources, teacher preparation, and delivery. Information may remain incomplete or difficult to use if students do not recognise its connection with experiences they encounter at school.

Mzimba District is relevant because its schools operate within communities where concerns about sexual violence and girls' educational vulnerability have been reported. Chirwa (2018) reported the interdiction of three teachers accused of sexual abuse, and Chitete (2021) reported wider concerns about sexual violence in the district. These accounts provide contextual reasons for investigation, although news reports do not constitute a representative measure of school-level prevalence. The study consequently focused on what selected schools were doing and how relevant participants considered these practices, rather than using district publicity to infer the experiences of every learner.

The practical problem is the gap between the availability of strategies and evidence about their everyday relevance. National commitments and school rules may coexist with limited training, weak reporting arrangements, and continuing abuse. Conversely, some practices may offer valuable support without systematic examination. Existing research identifies several possible strategies, but their relevance cannot be transferred automatically from other countries or from a different type of Malawian intervention. Understanding local implementation requires accounts from students, teachers, school leaders, and officials who work with the selected schools.

This study explored the perceived relevance of strategies for addressing sexual violence among students in three secondary schools in Mzimba District. It examined the benefits participants associated with these strategies and the practices through which they believed those benefits arose. Its contribution is a contextual account of awareness, conduct, perceived incidents, environmental safety, and reporting within the same school settings. It does not claim that strategies were absent from previous research or that the case study established causal effectiveness. Instead, it offers evidence that can inform school practice and identify questions requiring more rigorous outcome assessment.

2.0 Methodology

The study was conducted in June 2023 in Ekwendeni Community Day Secondary School, Mzimba Secondary School, and Jenda Community Day Secondary School in Malawi's Northern Region. The selected schools represented the northern, central, and southern parts of Mzimba District. Accessibility, rural surroundings, and proximity to busy markets informed school selection. These characteristics were relevant to exploring school practices within their community contexts.

School selection was not intended to generate a statistically representative sample of all secondary schools in the district or country.

A qualitative case study design was used to develop a contextual understanding of strategies and their perceived relevance. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate because the questions concerned experiences, interpretations, and the organisation of school responses rather than estimating population prevalence. Creswell (2009, 2014) describes qualitative research as an approach suited to understanding the meanings people assign to social problems. The case study approach also supports examination of practices within their settings and allows evidence from several sources to be considered together (Crowe et al., 2011). Here, interviews, group discussions, and documents provided complementary perspectives on school protection.

The study focused on school stakeholders with direct knowledge of student welfare and institutional responses. It considered teachers' implementation responsibilities, students' experiences of school practices, school leaders' coordination roles, and the district gender officer's perspective on awareness and collaboration. These perspectives were relevant but did not exhaust all possible experiences. Parents, nonteaching staff, and students without leadership positions were not included as distinct participant groups. The resulting findings therefore describe the selected participants' accounts and the contexts they discussed rather than the full range of responses to sexual violence within the district.

The sample comprised 54 participants: 24 teachers, 24 student prefects, three deputy head teachers, two head teachers, and one district gender officer. Teachers and students participated in six focus group discussions, with one teacher group and one student group in each school. Each group contained eight participants. The six school leadership and district participants took part in individual interviews. This arrangement enabled comparison across different roles while avoiding the combination of teachers and students in the same discussion group. The total number of participants is consistent with the reported discussion and interview structure.

Purposive sampling identified participants whose responsibilities made them knowledgeable about the study topic. Teachers included those involved in counselling, discipline, and class leadership. Head teachers and deputy head teachers were selected because of their oversight of school activities and student welfare. The gender officer offered knowledge of district-level involvement. Student prefects were included because they represented fellow students, assisted with school organisation, and communicated with staff. The school management handbook provided contextual support for considering these responsibilities (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2013).

Convenience sampling was then used among eligible teachers and student prefects who were available and willing to participate. The combined approach suited the exploratory purpose, but it

also introduced selection limitations. Participants closely involved in school administration may have had greater familiarity with official strategies than other students or staff. Willingness to participate may also have differed according to confidence, personal experiences, or relationships with school authorities. These possibilities were considered when interpreting favourable descriptions of school practice. The findings should not be used to estimate the proportion of all students who experience safety or receive support.

The researchers considered the sample sufficient when no new information emerged. This judgement is treated as the researchers' assessment of informational sufficiency rather than proof that all relevant experiences were captured. The study does not report a detailed saturation log, variation by participant characteristics, or the sequence in which themes ceased to change. Nevertheless, inclusion of three schools and several stakeholder roles provided opportunities to examine recurring descriptions. The strength of the sample lies in its relevance to the questions and the depth of the accounts, not in statistical representativeness.

Six focus group discussions explored the strategies participants recognised, how they implemented them, and their perceived benefits. Discussion guides kept the conversations aligned with the research objectives while allowing participants to elaborate on relevant experiences. Students and teachers could compare views, recall shared practices, and describe school routines. Discussions took place in quiet rooms considered safe and comfortable and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. With participants' permission, the researcher recorded the conversations using a mobile phone and made written notes on key points. The separate teacher and student groups supported discussion among participants with similar institutional positions.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two head teachers, three deputy head teachers, and district gender officer. Guiding questions covered school responses, coordination, and the relevance of strategies. Interviews allowed these participants to describe administrative responsibilities and provide explanations that might not emerge in group discussions. They lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and were conducted in quiet rooms. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, sought oral permission to participate and record, and encouraged participants to express their views. Audio recordings and notes supported subsequent analysis.

Documentary analysis complemented the discussions and interviews. Materials included teachers' codes of conduct, school rules, disciplinary reports, the secondary school management handbook, safe school training materials, and life skills or related curricula. Published research also informed the background and interpretation. Documentary analysis can help situate participants' accounts within written institutional expectations (Bowen, 2009). A document inventory, extraction matrix, and school-specific trend analysis of incident records were not available for assessment. Documents were therefore used as contextual evidence, and no independently verified trend in violence was inferred from them.

Teachers also undertook pairwise ranking near the end of their discussions. Strategies were compared in pairs, and preferred options accumulated scores according to the group's judgement. This procedure elicited comparative assessments from those involved in implementation. Pairwise ranking can make priorities visible, particularly when participants are familiar with several alternatives (Russell, 1997). In this study it was an additional qualitative exercise rather than a validated measure of intervention performance. Guidance and counselling received the highest reported ranking, with a score of seven, while professional development ranked lowest. The complete comparison matrix was unavailable.

The data were analysed thematically using the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers listened to recordings, transcribed the discussions and interviews, and read the transcripts to become familiar with the material. Accounts in Chitumbuka and Chichewa were translated into English with assistance from trained translators. Relevant ideas were coded, similar codes were grouped, and categories were developed into themes linked to the study purpose. Themes were reviewed, refined, and named before the findings were written. Selected quotations illustrated participants' explanations and were identified by focus group or interview codes.
Descriptive counts accompanied the themes in the study. The denominator was the total sample of 54 participants, and percentages were rounded to whole numbers. Because participants could identify several benefits, the themes were not mutually exclusive and percentages do not sum to 100%. These figures indicate how often benefits were attributed within the reported sample. They do not measure the frequency of abuse, the percentage reduction in incidents, or the proportion of the school population protected by a strategy. This distinction is essential because the design primarily generated narrative evidence through group discussions and interviews.

The study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, following Lincoln and Guba (1985). Interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis enabled triangulation across evidence sources. Supervisor review of findings and their relationship to the data supported examination of interpretation. Participant quotations made the relationship between accounts and themes more transparent. These practices strengthened the contextual account, although member checking, independent coding, and a formal audit trail were not documented. Trustworthiness is therefore considered in relation to the procedures actually reported rather than through additional procedures assumed to have occurred.

Permission was obtained from the State University of Zanzibar and the Northern Region Education Division office, followed by school-level arrangements for data collection. Participants gave oral informed consent to participation and recording and were informed that they could withdraw. Names and personal identifying details were not requested, and participant codes were used in reporting. Recordings were erased after analysis. Schools were named in the study, so anonymity

applied to individual participants rather than the institutions. Private rooms were used to reduce interruptions and support participants' comfort.

The available ethical account did not document participants' ages, separate arrangements for student assent and parental or guardian consent, a research ethics committee approval reference, or a referral procedure for distress or disclosure. Group confidentiality is also limited because participants hear each other's contributions. These reporting limitations restrict assessment of the safeguards used for sensitive research with potentially underage students.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Participants described a combination of educational, supportive, disciplinary, participatory, and environmental strategies. Guidance and counselling and sexuality education were the most prominent practices reported. Other strategies included school rules and student codes, teachers' professional codes, student involvement, community participation, teacher development, and efforts to create a safer environment. Participants reported that all participants identified guidance and counselling and sexuality education, whereas teachers' codes were mentioned by 35%. Because a full strategy-frequency table was not supplied, these descriptions are presented as contextual findings rather than a complete comparative distribution.

Teachers' pairwise ranking placed guidance and counselling first and professional development last. The ranking suggests that teachers valued an immediately accessible interaction through which students could obtain advice and support. It does not establish that counselling prevented more incidents than other interventions. Nor does a lower ranking show that teacher preparation was unnecessary. Training may enable several other strategies to function effectively and may be less visible to participants as a direct student service. Without the full matrix or school-specific scores, further numerical comparisons would exceed the available evidence.

Five themes captured the perceived relevance of implementation. Table 1 presents participant counts and rounded percentages for the reported benefits. All participants were reported as identifying awareness, and most identified improvements in conduct and fewer incidents. Environmental safety and reporting were also frequently mentioned, although by fewer participants. The ranking of theme frequencies helps organise the findings but does not indicate the relative magnitude or importance of actual changes. A less frequently mentioned benefit, such as reporting, may still be essential to protection.

Table 1: Perceived relevance of strategies for addressing sexual violence

Perceived benefit	Participants	Percentage
Increased awareness of sexual violence	54	100
Improved student discipline	53	98
Perceived decrease in sexual violence cases	50	93
Safer and more supportive school environment	45	83
Increased reporting of sexual violence	40	74

Increased awareness of sexual violence

Increased awareness was identified by all 54 participants in the coding summary. Teachers and students described learning about forms, causes, consequences, and prevention of sexual violence through lessons, counselling, and visits from external stakeholders. Awareness activities were presented as recurring rather than isolated events. Teachers referred to relevant topics within school subjects, while students described information provided by police officers and medical professionals. The district gender officer also described cooperation with schools. These accounts suggest that participants encountered messages through several channels, potentially reinforcing recognition of harmful behaviour.

> One teacher group explained:
> *We provide students with relevant information on sexual violence through teaching topics related to sexual violence offered in different subjects and guidance and counselling. They are aware of different issues concerning sexual violence. Almost every day, there is something these students learn concerning sexual violence. They are equipped with adequate knowledge* (FGD 6).

The account connects awareness with both formal teaching and interpersonal support. It also reflects an implementer's positive assessment of students' knowledge rather than the result of an independent knowledge test. Frequent exposure may be valuable, but its adequacy depends on the accuracy of messages and whether learners can apply them. A school could repeatedly discuss discipline without sufficiently explaining coercion, consent, or abuse of authority. The findings therefore establish that participants recognised awareness activities, while the depth and consistency of knowledge remain questions for further assessment.

Students described a change in their ability to identify abuse:

> *Police officers and doctors come to this school to provide awareness on forms, causes, consequences and other issues concerning sexual violence. We are now aware of many issues. At first, we did not know that some acts were sexual violence, but now we are aware, and we report such acts* (FGD 3).

This account is significant because recognition precedes many forms of help-seeking. Conduct previously treated as ordinary or ambiguous may become identifiable as unacceptable. The involvement of people outside the school may also provide perspectives beyond familiar authority relationships. Nevertheless, the quotation does not indicate which acts were newly recognised or whether every disclosure received assistance. Awareness is therefore a plausible enabling process rather than sufficient evidence of protection. Its practical relevance depends on accessible responses when students act on the information they receive.

Awareness also has institutional implications. When teachers and students share an understanding of unacceptable behaviour, school rules can become more meaningful and reporting can become easier to justify. However, shared vocabulary must be accompanied by adult accountability. Students should not be expected to manage risks simply because they have received information. The strongest interpretation of this theme is that awareness activities were highly visible and

valued within the selected schools. Whether they changed conduct consistently, reached more marginalised learners, or protected students from powerful perpetrators remains beyond the study's direct evidence.

Improved student conduct and discipline

The study found that 53 participants, or 98%, associated strategies with improved student discipline. Respondents linked behaviour change to counselling, sexuality education, school rules, and community involvement. They described greater awareness of consequences and expectations concerning relationships. Students also referred to sanctions imposed on others as lessons influencing their own conduct. This theme demonstrates that participants evaluated prevention partly through the everyday order of school life. They interpreted adherence to rules and fewer disciplinary concerns as signs that strategies were relevant to reducing harmful behaviour.

A student group stated:

> *We have seen our fellow students expelled from school for sexually violating others at school. We have learnt from them and also changed our behaviours and attitudes towards others. We have also learnt a lot from guidance and counselling and people who come to speak to us. We know what is good for us and behave accordingly* (FGD 3).

The quotation combines deterrence and learning. Participants referred to observing consequences while also gaining information and advice. These mechanisms should be distinguished because compliance motivated by fear may differ from an understanding of respectful relationships. The study cannot determine how enduring either form of change was. It also cannot assess whether sanctions were applied consistently or whether investigations protected the rights and safety of those involved. The evidence concerns how students understood the relevance of school responses, not an evaluation of disciplinary procedures.

Teachers similarly described improved attitudes and behaviour. One group reported that the knowledge students gained had reduced concerns about substance use and sexual abuse. Such statements convey optimism but should be read as teacher perceptions within the period discussed. They do not establish that no abuse remained. Sexual violence can be hidden even in apparently orderly schools, particularly when students fear authority or reputational consequences. The absence of disciplinary reports therefore cannot be equated with the absence of violence. This distinction is important when institutional success is assessed through visible compliance.

A head teacher linked discipline to school rules, clothing expectations, and distance between students and teachers of the opposite sex. These descriptions reflect locally used indicators of acceptable conduct. They require critical interpretation: clothing is not evidence that a student is protected, and responsibility for abuse remains with the perpetrator. Similarly, professional boundaries should address exploitation and authority rather than assume that ordinary interaction between sexes is inherently dangerous. Prevention that relies heavily on regulating girls' behaviour may leave unequal power relations insufficiently challenged. The data describe these practices but do not validate their protective effects.

Ondicho et al. (2020) also considered school strategies in addressing student sexual harassment, providing a relevant comparison for the connection participants made between guidance, rules, and conduct. The Mzimba findings suggest that participants appreciated predictable expectations and educational support. Schools can build on this perceived relevance while examining whether rules clearly identify abusive behaviour and adult obligations. A rights-based interpretation of discipline centres on respect and protection, rather than conformity alone. This interpretation preserves the theme's practical importance without treating all disciplinary practices as equivalent or necessarily effective.

Perceived reductions in sexual violence

Fifty participants, or 93%, were reported as associating strategies with fewer cases of sexual violence. Respondents connected perceived reductions to counselling, education, codes of conduct, student participation, supervision, and disciplinary action. School leaders and students described fewer reports or fear of consequences as indications of improvement. The theme reflects a widely shared perception that school practices mattered. It does not establish the number of incidents before and after implementation, and the study did not include a comparison group or a longitudinal assessment capable of attributing change to particular strategies.

One deputy head teacher stated:

> *There was high interaction between boys and girls in the past, which led to many cases of sexual abuse. With social distance nowadays, we no longer get such reports* (DHT 3).

This account links reduced interaction with fewer reports. The two components of that explanation remain distinct: fewer reports can reflect fewer incidents, changes in reporting behaviour, or changes in where abuse occurs. The study cannot identify which explanation applies. The statement also attributes risk to interaction between boys and girls without differentiating consensual relationships from coercion. It is therefore useful as evidence of an administrator's interpretation, but insufficient as proof that separation prevented violence or that interaction itself caused abuse.

A student group linked reporting and deterrence:

> *We report cases of sexual acts to teachers and assist accordingly. Most students are aware of the consequences and are afraid of committing sexual acts* (FGD 5).

Students perceived consequences as discouraging misconduct and described a role in communicating concerns. The wording also shows the need for precise educational language: sexual activity, harassment, and sexual violence are not interchangeable categories. Where participants use broad terms, the analysis should avoid assuming that every reference describes the same kind of conduct. Clear definitions matter for both school practice and future measurement. They help distinguish prevention of abuse from general regulation of adolescent sexuality and support responses appropriate to the behaviour being reported.

The relationship between knowledge, deterrence, and reduced abuse is plausible, but evidence of plausibility differs from evidence of impact. Decker et al. (2018), for example, evaluated a

specified intervention using a randomised design and defined outcomes. The present qualitative case study explains how stakeholders perceived school strategies, which is valuable for understanding implementation but cannot offer the same kind of causal assessment. Lu et al. (2023) similarly emphasised pathways and contextual factors within prevention programmes. These comparisons support careful interpretation rather than using external findings to prove outcomes in the Mzimba schools.

The theme also needs to be considered alongside increased reporting. A school can experience greater disclosure because students trust its response, even if violence is declining. Conversely, a school can receive fewer reports because students are afraid or believe nothing will happen. Counts of reports are therefore meaningful only in relation to access, trust, and response quality. The strongest conclusion here is that most selected participants believed strategies contributed to improvement. Independent monitoring is needed to determine whether perceived improvement corresponds to lower incidence, better detection, or both.

A safer and more supportive school environment

Forty-five participants, or 83%, associated strategies with a safer learning environment. They described improvements to lighting, fencing, water points, and supervision. Teachers on duty and guards were said to monitor school premises during the day and at night. Some schools separated boys and girls during evening study and adjusted study times. Participants also described restrictions on visits to teachers' homes. These accounts show that environmental safety was understood through both physical arrangements and rules governing movement and interaction. The relevance of strategies was therefore not confined to classroom education or individual counselling.

A student group explained the evening study arrangements:

> *We do not mix during evening study time so that others should not have a chance or intention of sexually violating others. The time to start and finish the study also differs between boys and girls, so there is no interaction. Teachers on duty and guards are always available to monitor the school premises* (FGD 2).

This account suggests that students perceived supervision and scheduling as reducing opportunities for unwanted conduct. It does not reveal whether the arrangements affected learning time, convenience, or participation differently for girls and boys. Nor does it show whether abuse shifted to less supervised locations. A fuller evaluation would examine both perceived safety and equitable access to school activities. Environmental protection should make education accessible rather than secure safety by unnecessarily restricting a group's opportunities. The study's evidence identifies valued arrangements while leaving these possible consequences unresolved.

Another student group described the significance of fencing:

> *At first, our school had no fence, and we students, especially girls, were sexually violated by our fellow students and members of the community who could usually pass by our school. With the fence, we feel very safe at school* (FGD 5).

The quotation indicates that students recognised risks involving peers and people outside the school. A boundary could reduce uncontrolled access and strengthen a sense of protection. However, it cannot address every form of abuse by people already within the institution. Students' perceived safety is an important finding, but the account should not be interpreted as demonstrating comprehensive protection. Fencing works within a wider set of responsibilities concerning visitors, staff conduct, reporting, and responses to misconduct. The quotation also shows why community relationships remain relevant even when schools improve their physical boundaries.

A head teacher reported installation of additional water taps and restrictions on students visiting teachers' homes. The account links infrastructure with reducing contact at shared facilities and links professional boundaries with limiting private access. Additional facilities may reduce congestion, while clear boundaries can make expectations concerning staff–student interaction more visible. Nevertheless, the study did not examine maintenance, cost, or compliance, and it cannot separate the contribution of each measure. These details are useful for understanding implementation choices rather than identifying which environmental change produced a measurable reduction in abuse.

Ngidi's (2023) attention to the geographies of sexual violence provides a relevant basis for interpreting these accounts. Safety concerns are connected to places and routines, and students' perspectives can reveal locations adults overlook. The World Health Organization (2019) also treats school violence prevention as a practical institutional responsibility. The Mzimba findings suggest that participants valued visible changes to their surroundings, but environmental improvements need continuing assessment. Students should be able to identify unsafe spaces, and schools should review whether supervision protects them while preserving privacy, dignity, and equal access to learning.

Greater willingness to report sexual violence

Increased reporting was identified by 40 participants, or 74%, making it the least frequently mentioned of the five themes while still receiving substantial recognition. Students described encouragement from teachers and school leaders to raise concerns, and administrators associated awareness with greater confidence. Guidance and counselling, student participation, community involvement, and sexuality education were presented as supporting disclosure. These accounts suggest that reporting was understood as part of the prevention response rather than an isolated administrative activity. The theme is especially important because hidden abuse cannot be addressed through ordinary disciplinary observation alone.

One student group stated:

> *We are not afraid of reporting cases of sexual violence. As prefects, student council and class monitors, we are always told to report to the Deputy Headteacher and form teachers on issues that concern us* (FGD 2).

The quotation identifies named institutional routes and illustrates the intermediary role of student leaders. Prefects and class monitors may make concerns visible to teachers, particularly when fellow students are reluctant to approach adults directly. However, the participants were themselves prefects, and their confidence may not represent students with less authority or weaker

relationships with staff. The account also does not establish that every student could report confidentially or that reports involving a teacher were handled independently. These remain relevant questions when considering the accessibility of the school's response.

A deputy head teacher linked knowledge with willingness to disclose:

> *The knowledge that our students get through different strategies of addressing sexual violence helps them to have much confidence and willingness to report cases of sexual violence either done to him or herself or others* (DHT 1).

This explanation identifies a possible connection between awareness and reporting, including reports concerning peers. It is consistent with the idea that recognising abuse and knowing whom to approach can facilitate disclosure. Yet willingness is only one stage in the response. Students also need assurance that disclosures are taken seriously, that information is handled carefully, and that perpetrators cannot retaliate. The study does not document the sequence from disclosure through investigation, referral, and support. Its findings establish perceived encouragement and confidence rather than the quality of every subsequent response.

Lu et al. (2023) examined mechanisms through which prevention programmes can support disclosure, including links between knowledge, trusted adults, and responses. The Mzimba accounts suggest that educational messages and identifiable staff contributed to participants' confidence. However, a reporting system should provide alternatives when the usual contact person is implicated or inaccessible. Students should receive support regardless of whether a complaint can immediately be substantiated. The practical implication of this theme is to strengthen the connection between encouragement to report and dependable assistance, rather than judging success solely through the number of reports received.

Implications for School Practice

The five themes indicate that participants understood strategies as complementary. Awareness helped them recognise unacceptable behaviour; counselling and student representation offered routes for communicating concerns; rules and sanctions clarified expectations; and environmental changes supported a sense of safety. This combination suggests that schools should avoid treating any single strategy as sufficient. The relevance of counselling depends partly on whether referrals and accountability are available, while the relevance of rules depends on whether students know them and trust their application. Coordination therefore matters because weaknesses in one response can reduce the value of another.

School rules should distinguish sexual violence from general concerns about conduct or sexuality. Clear wording can reduce uncertainty about harassment, coercion, exploitation, and prohibited staff–student behaviour. Expectations must apply to adults as well as students, and procedures should identify who receives a complaint, who takes protective action, and how conflicts of interest are managed. Accountability should not depend on a student's dress, reputation, or adherence to unrelated rules. Schools can maintain orderly environments while recognising that abuse may occur even when students appear compliant and that protection remains an institutional responsibility.

Reporting arrangements should be accessible to students with different levels of confidence and school authority. Student leaders can assist communication, but learners should also have direct routes to trusted adults and options beyond an immediate teacher. Schools need to consider confidentiality, retaliation, and continuity of learning when responding to a report. Partnerships with district gender services and other appropriate agencies can support action beyond the school's resources. Such arrangements should be made concrete enough that staff and students understand where assistance is available, while avoiding public handling of disclosures that exposes affected learners to stigma.

Monitoring should distinguish awareness, reporting access, response quality, and violence outcomes. A school may deliver many activities while students remain unsure how to obtain help. It may also receive more reports because confidence has improved. Useful assessment therefore considers the content and reach of education, the accessibility of counselling, the handling of disclosures, and whether students feel protected. Incident records can contribute when maintained safely and consistently, but they should be interpreted alongside student perspectives. Independent research is needed before favourable perceptions are used to claim sustained reductions in sexual violence.

Study Limitations

This study provides contextual insight into three selected schools, but its purposive and convenience sampling limits representativeness. Student participants were prefects, and adult participants generally held responsibilities connected to welfare or administration. Their positions may have increased knowledge of strategies and influenced how they evaluated institutional performance. Students outside leadership structures, those absent from school, or those unwilling to participate may have had different experiences. The study did not provide disaggregated findings by school, gender, age, or other characteristics, restricting assessment of variation within the reported themes.

The findings rely mainly on accounts generated in interviews and group discussions. Recall, social desirability, and reluctance to disclose sensitive information may have influenced the data. Documentary analysis supplied context, but no independent comparison of incident records across time was established. Counts attached to themes should also be interpreted cautiously because the procedure for establishing individual endorsement within focus groups was incompletely documented. The figures are retained as reported descriptive summaries, while the qualitative accounts remain the principal basis for interpretation.

The study did not measure baseline knowledge, changes in reporting access, or incidence before and after implementation. It therefore cannot determine causality or compare the effectiveness of different strategies. Translation procedures, informational sufficiency, and ethical safeguards were also incompletely documented. Further research should include a broader range of learners, examine school-specific implementation, and use appropriate safeguards for sensitive disclosures. Longitudinal or mixed-methods assessment could test whether perceived benefits correspond to changes in students' experiences, while preserving qualitative inquiry into trust, authority, and access to support.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Participants in the selected Mzimba secondary schools considered strategies for addressing sexual violence relevant to awareness, student conduct, perceived reductions in incidents, environmental safety, and reporting. Guidance and counselling and sexuality education were prominent, and teachers ranked counselling most favourably. The findings show that students and school stakeholders associated practical benefits with coordinated educational and institutional responses. They also indicate that protection was understood through everyday interactions and physical arrangements, extending beyond the formal availability of policies.

These conclusions concern perceived relevance rather than proven causal effectiveness. Fewer reports do not necessarily indicate fewer incidents, and conformity with disciplinary expectations does not guarantee safety. Schools should strengthen teacher preparation, professional accountability, accessible counselling, confidential reporting, and referral arrangements. Environmental improvements should protect students while maintaining equitable educational participation. District services and school leaders should support these responsibilities, and future evaluation should assess implementation and student experiences independently. Such work can establish whether the practices valued by participants provide sustained protection and identify which students remain insufficiently supported.

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