

**THE MWALIMU NYERERE MEMORIAL ACADEMY**



# **The Legacy of Mwalimu Nyerere in Leadership and Socio-Economic Development in a New Era of Industrialization**

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**Proceedings of the Second Academic Conference in  
Commemoration of the Late Mwalimu Julius Kambarage  
Nyerere, the First President of the United Republic of Tanzania  
and Father of the Nation, held at The Mwalimu Nyerere  
Memorial Academy, Kivukoni Campus, Dar es Salaam on 13<sup>th</sup>  
October 2023**

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## **Relevance of Strategies in Addressing Sexual Violence among Students in Selected Secondary Schools in Mzimba District, Malawi**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of strategies for addressing sexual violence among students in selected secondary schools of Mzimba district. The study was conducted in three secondary schools in Mzimba district, Northern region of Malawi. The study participants were teachers, students, deputy head teachers, head teachers, and gender officers. A total of 54 participants, comprising 24 teachers, 24 students, 3 deputy head teachers, 2 head teachers, and 1 gender officer, were involved. The study used a qualitative research approach. Six focus group discussions, six interviews, and a documentary analysis revealed the strategies used in addressing sexual violence among students at school, how they are implemented, their relevance, and challenges related to implementation. Guidance and counselling, as well as sexual education, were the most mentioned strategies. All the participants, representing 100% of the total participants, agreed that guidance counselling and sexual education are strategies used to address sexual violence among students in secondary schools. The last mentioned strategy, with 35 % of the total respondents, was the teachers' codes of ethics. On the effectiveness of the strategies, guidance, and counselling were found to be the most effective, with the highest score of 7 during the pairwise ranking with teachers. The least effective strategy was professional development. Effective implementation of the strategies was possible with the involvement and collaboration of different school actors. Implementation of the strategies was reported to have a tremendous positive impact in addressing sexual violence among students in schools. Increased awareness of sexual violence issues was the most reported relevance for implementing the strategies, with 100 % agreeing. Increased reporting of sexual violence issues was the least mentioned relevance of the strategies, with 40 respondents representing 74% of the total respondents. Implementing strategies in schools to address sexual violence among students in secondary schools shares a common goal of the education needs as well as social development of the students. Hence, the researchers conclude that effective implementation of the strategies effectively addresses sexual violence among

students in secondary schools. Policymakers, school administrators, and education stakeholders can effectively use the findings of this study in the efforts to eradicate sexual violence among students in secondary schools. Moreover, training of teachers on sexual violence issues, provision of support including safety to victims, and psycho-social support to the perpetrators are significant recommendations for the study.

**Keywords:** Guidance and counselling, Sexual violence, Strategies

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background Information**

Globally, the 2015 global SDGs have outlined a commitment to address equality and a culture of non-violence within private places such as schools, as stipulated in goal 4 indicator 7, which all member states must abide by (United Nations, 2015). To supplement this call, UNESCO formulated six guiding strategies that inform the Ministry of Education globally towards a comprehensive approach to prevent School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) in the global guidance on addressing SRGBV, which also encompasses sexual violence within a school setting. These strategies include leadership, environment, prevention, responses, partnership, and evidence (UNESCO, 2016). Different laws, interventions, and strategies for addressing sexual violence have been identified and are implemented globally, regionally, nationally, and at the school level. Implementing effective strategies for addressing sexual violence in schools to individual teachers, students, relationships, and the school environment is important to reduce and prevent incidences, as well as support victims, who are mostly students. In this case, schools act as a protective factor against sexual violence among students through the formulation and effective implementation of the strategies (Ozaki, 2020; American Association of University Women, 2004).

In developed countries such as the USA in 2006, the US Department of Education strengthened the Title IX rule that prohibits discrimination based on sex in schools by coming up with school preventive measures to end all forms of sexual violence and create a safe environment for students. Through education, students and teachers treated one another equally and created conducive and safe schools for all students (United States Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights, 2020). In addition, Tanara Burke funded the 'Me Too movement' aimed at finding ways to address sexual violence as well as helping the survivors of sexual violence, especially black girls and young women of colour in low-wealth communities, which also benefitted a lot of students (Kentucky Bar association, 2019). Similarly, Lu *et al.* (2022) also found that addressing school-based programs reduces sexual violence acts among students in schools. The program addresses the needs of children with disabilities and different age groups, exposure to sexual abuse acts, and providing positive feedback to students, as training of the teachers was reported to be more relevant in addressing sexual abuse among students in schools. Implementation of the strategies has also been relevant in adding relevant information on sexual violence in terms of forms, causes, consequences, and preventive measures.

Getting relevant and adequate information concerning sexual violence is important in combating sexual violence among students in schools. Mind change of both teachers and students towards sexual violence, gender issues, patriarchal traditional norms, beliefs, and attitudes is only possible with the acquisition of relevant knowledge (Lu *et al.*, 2022; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Apriliana, 2018). A safe and conducive environment has also been reported in countries such as the USA, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Ghana as a result of the implementation of the strategies in schools (Ngidi, 2022; Antinyelken *et al.*, 2018; Le Mat, 2018; and United States department of education and Office of Civil Rights, 2020). Strategies that prevent discrimination encourage monitoring of school premises, promote codes of conduct, and improve the physical structures at school were found to be successful in creating a suitable environment for teaching and learning at school. When the environment in schools is safe, possible perpetrators are prevented from committing sexual acts, thus preventing sexual violence among students (Ngidi, 2022; Antinyelken *et al.*, 2018; Le Mat, 2018; and United States Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, there is a lack of structures, guidance, and training among teachers and other stakeholders on how to address sexual violence in schools. Clear guidelines, knowledge, and skills are essential in addressing sexual violence among students in schools, and if these are not available, the efforts to address sexual violence are compromised (House of Commons Women's & Equalities Committee, 2016). Similarly, Spear (2019) states that in Burkina Faso, the lack of training in sexual violence issues among school actors is affecting the process of combating sexual violence in schools. Lack of knowledge and skills on how to handle sexual violence issues usually acquired through training has led to most reported incidences of sexual violence being brushed off by the school staff, and no support is given to students. This has further led to a lack of a coherent approach to addressing the problem, as most of the students have lost trust in the school staff and no longer report the incidents. Furthermore, inappropriate behaviours, attitudes, culture, and relationships that put students at risk of sexual violence continue to exist in schools (House of Commons Women's and Equalities Committee, 2016). Solidarity among teachers, especially male teachers, has led to overprotection of the perpetrators, especially when they are fellow teachers, for fear of the consequences such as dismissal from work, suspension, and imprisonment. Teachers usually do not take an extra step to address the reported cases, especially when the perpetrator is a fellow teacher or other school staff. This has further made more teachers continue being perpetrators and students victims (Spear, 2019).

In Australia, respectful relationship education has also been integrated into secondary school policy and interventions. Prevention education about GBV, including sexual violence, is done by using five good practices embedded in the effective curriculum and culturally sensitive practices at a school. This has a great impact on addressing sexual violence mostly perpetrated through boy-girl relationships. Individuals can respect each other regardless of age, disability, economic level, and sex, as well as change behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs that may make one a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence (Ollis, 2014). Different strategies have also been reported in South Asia. In Bangladesh, 'breaking the silence' is an initiative in which boys and girls form groups to send out messages against child sexual abuse. In Nepal, educating boys and men on how to create an environment that is safe from sexual violence is an initiative called 'Girls Taking Action to End Sexual Harassment', which was started by girls. The initiative aimed to involve men and boys who are usually perpetrators in the fight against sexual violence through training. This is intended to change their attitudes and behaviours regarding sexual violence (UNICEF, 2016). Closed-circuit television (CCTV) was further proposed in Malaysia as a psychological means of monitoring the teachers, visitors', and students' behaviour patterns at school to reduce the high degree of privacy in the school premises. In this case, all spaces within the school will be open and avoid the perpetration and victimization of sexual violence (Mohamed *et al.*, 2015).

In Africa, intensifying comprehensive sex education that mostly provides the correct information concerning male and female anatomy, consequences of unsafe sex, contraceptives, sexual violence, and others have also been noted in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and other developing countries. Training teachers on sexual violence issues such as causes and effects, addressing and preventive measures, and formulating and implementing clear rules and regulations of sexual violence are also included. This training is so important since an inclusive, holistic, and school-wide approach in which every stakeholder is involved by providing them with adequate knowledge and assigning clear responsibilities is effective in addressing sexual violence in schools. Furthermore, education and training change an individual's behaviour, attitudes, norms, and beliefs, which may lead one to be either a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence (Lu, Barlow, Meinck & Neelakantan, 2022; Altinyelken *et al.*, 2018 & Magwa, 2014). Altinyelken *et al.* (2018) researched teachers' narratives of sexual violence in schooling contexts. The study used a qualitative research approach in which interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data from 17 male and female teachers. Being a case study, only one public secondary was involved. The study revealed that monitoring classrooms to check appropriate behaviour among students is

one of the strategies used in secondary schools in Ethiopia to address sexual violence. Class teachers monitor the classrooms during classes, teachers on duty, and other school staff like security guards.

To support this, Ngidi (2022) conducted a study to check on how school children identify and describe school-related geographies of sexual violence in township secondary schools in South Africa. The study used a participatory workshop approach with a total sample of 27 boys and girls adolescents. Data was collected through participatory visual methods such as drawings, collages, photovoice, and storyboards. The study revealed that classrooms were found to be sites for sexual violence highly perpetrated by boys against girls, especially in the absence of a teacher. Usually, the presence of the teacher mediates the extent and nature of the sexual violence in the classroom as the students behave well. This is so because of the hierarchical power of the teachers in the school setting, which commands respect from students. Therefore, students and teachers learn and reinforce appropriate behaviours and attitudes, creating safe schools. Guidance and counselling are other strategies used in secondary schools in Indonesia, Ethiopia, and Ghana (Lu *et al.*, 2022; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Altinyelken *et al.*, 2018; and Apriliana, 2018). Teachers, especially counsellors and female teachers, offer guidance and counselling to girls. In the process, they feel free to speak out about their concerns and experiences of rape as well as male teachers asking for sexual favours in exchange for good grades and gifts. This situation has helped in increasing reporting of cases and minimizing cases of sexual violence in schools. Girls are also empowered in self-defensive skills, establishing trust, confidence, and high self-esteem to report and prevent any form of sexual violence on their own. Guidance and counselling have also helped students to gain knowledge and adopt acceptable behaviours, attitudes, norms, and beliefs that will help them to create a safe environment as they will not be potential perpetrators or victims (Lu *et al.*, 2022; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Altinyelken *et al.*, 2018; Apriliana 2018; and Magwa, 2014).

To this, Apriliana (2018) conducted a study on "The role of school counsellors in handling student sexual harassment behaviour in the school." The qualitative study of documentation used books and journal articles to collect data. Variables such as sexual harassment and the school counsellor's role guided the data search. The study revealed the role of school counsellors in addressing sexual harassment among students, especially in the personal and social development of the students. This is done through classical information services, orientation, and group guidance. However, according to Altinyelken *et al.* (2018), sometimes, if the schools use the same teachers as school counsellors, they do

not effectively conduct guidance and counselling to students as they are mostly occupied by other duties and responsibilities at school. Nevertheless, Ondicho *et al.* (2020), in a study to establish prevalent forms of sexual harassment and strategies used by secondary schools to address sexual violence among students in Kenya, revealed that guidance and counselling are the most effective strategies for addressing sexual violence among students. No wonder it was also regarded as one of the preferred strategies for addressing sexual violence among students. The study used a mixed research approach using questionnaires and interviews to collect data from students, teachers, deputy principals, and coordinators of guidance and counselling.

In Ghana and Ethiopia, formulating girls' clubs in schools is used as a strategy in secondary schools to address sexual violence among students (Agu *et al.*, 2018 Altinyelken *et al.*, 2018). Agu *et al.* (2018) conducted a study to explore the sexual abuse of school children in basic and secondary schools in Ghana. The study was a descriptive and exploratory survey that employed a qualitative research approach involving 490 schoolchildren, 116 parents, and 49 head teachers from 49 public schools in 4 districts. The abuse of power theory further guided the study. The study revealed that girls' clubs allow girls to discuss issues that could remain hidden openly. They also help girls to have the courage to report, seek guidance and counselling, and get trained in specific skills of handling sexual violence that have been successful in addressing sexual violence. According to Altinyelken *et al.* (2018), clubs are further used to raise awareness about respectful boy-girl relationships, dress according to school rules, and how to handle themselves with male teachers and boys. Girls also share their challenges and help one another on how effectively they can solve them. They also discuss issues of women's empowerment, self-esteem, decision-making, norms as well as cultural beliefs that make them prone to sexual abuse.

Maintaining teachers' professional relationships with learners in which teachers are aware of policies that guide them on their responsibility to students is practiced in Zimbabwe. This was revealed in a qualitative study in which questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The study used a case study design with a sample size of 60, including teachers and head teachers. The study reported that minimizing the social distance between teachers and students through professionalism controls the sexual behaviour of teachers and protects girls from being victims (Magwa, 2014). Concerning this, Le Mat (2016), in a study aimed at exploring how boys and girls define, experience, and interpret sexual violence in secondary schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, revealed the need for the implementation of effective teachers' codes



of conduct to address sexual violence among students. This was revealed through interviews and focus group discussions involving students, teachers, and Sexual and reproductive health professionals. The Relational theory also guided the study. The study reported that students agreed that enforcing codes of conduct instil appropriate behaviours in every individual in the institution. This, therefore, prevents sexual relationships between teachers and students as well as punishes perpetrators regardless of being teachers.

Furthermore, effective school rules and regulations are used in Nigeria and Ethiopia (Ondicho *et al.*, 2020; Antinyelken *et al.*, 2018). These are the dos and don'ts that all students are required to abide by. These further explain how students need to behave towards themselves and others. (Ondicho *et al.* (2020) argue that appropriate behaviours, attitudes, and norms are learned and reinforced among students through effectively implementing the school rules and regulations. Most students are afraid of the measures attached. As a result, they usually abide by the rules and regulations which further protect them from being perpetrators or victims of sexual violence at school. However, Antinyelken *et al.* (2018) add that for these rules and regulations to be effective, they must be clear and updated so that students and teachers understand them well.

According to Spear (2019), in a study conducted in Burkina Faso, Teachers also feel unsafe to address the cases of sexual violence in schools. The fear of perpetrators being defensive and hurting them to hide the evidence and protect themselves from the consequences that may follow has prevented teachers from taking action when cases are reported. This study further explains the lack of cooperation in combating sexual violence between the school and other security firms, such as the police, who are required to provide safety to people.

Furthermore, in Zambia and Burkina Faso, students' low reporting of sexual violence due to lack of evidence, shame, guilt, and fear of the perpetrators is affecting efforts in combating sexual violence among students in schools (Likumbo *et al.*, 2021 and Spear, 2019). Students tend to blame themselves for what happened and do not want other people, such as peers, teachers, and parents, to know about such violence as they keep to themselves. In addition, most sexual incidents lack concrete evidence. Students fear not being believed if they report the actions, which may bring more shame to them. Even the perpetrators sometimes threaten them not to report to anyone, and, as a result, the victims keep quiet. This makes teachers and other stakeholders not aware of the sexual violence cases that exist in their respective schools. As such, no action is taken to address such issues (Likumbo *et al.*, 2021). Enforcing laws and

strategies in combating sexual violence has been a challenge in other places such as Malawi due to a lack of funds to conduct education programmes, training, inquiries, public awareness, and provision of resources. This has been due to a lack of political will, such as a lack of desire and commitment to supporting change by individuals and stakeholders. This has led to slow and ineffective implementation of the strategies (Kayira, 2019).

Various studies have been conducted globally, regionally, and nationally on the prevalence, forms, causes, effects, policies, and preventive measures of sexual violence among children and adolescents including students (Goodman and Calestani, 2022; Horn and Poteat, 2022; Lu *et al.*, 2022; Ngidi, 2022; Likumbo *et al.*, 2021; Maitanmi *et al.*, 2021; Samati, 2021; Spear, 2021; Ondicho *et al.*, 2020; Ozaki, 2020; Malongo *et al.*, 2019; Vanner, 2019; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Apriliana, 2018; Psaki *et al.*, 2017; Nlewem *et al.*, 2016; Mohamed *et al.*, 2015; UNESCO, 2015; Ollis, 2014; WHO, 2008; and American Association of University Women, 2006). However, despite different preventive measures used in addressing the problem in schools, reports still indicate that there is an increase in cases of sexual violence among students in various places, and Malawi is not exceptional. Studies have also revealed that schools, through different school actors, have a significant role to play in ensuring that all students have a conducive and safe learning environment that is free from any form of sexual abuse, including sexual violence (Ozaki, 2020; Vanner, 2019; Sida, 2015).

The government of Malawi is committed to addressing sexual violence through different policies, acts, and programmes. In 2002, a national strategy to end different forms of violence, including sexual violence in different sectors, was established as a supplement to National gender policy. The policy lacked ways to address the power disparities that exist between women and men in the country that have contributed to the normalisation of GBV, including sexual violence; thus, a supplement to address the gap was relevant (Moser *et al.*, 2004). The policy was later reviewed in 2015 to incorporate GBV as one of the emerging issues that mainly affect children and women due to patriarchal solid power structures. The main objective of the policy is to empower women to attain gender equality and equity, reduce all inequalities, and enhance the participation of all people in the country's socio-economic development (Malawi gender policy, 2016). The revised policy further led to the revision of old laws and the formulation of new laws and strategies in its effort to combat violence of any kind, such as sexual violence, in different places, including schools. For instance, the Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act was reviewed to adjust the legal marriage age of girls from 16 to 18. This led to many girls who were

forced into early marriages to be brought back to school (Masina, 2017). Moreover, Human Rights Watch (2014) criticized the government for lacking effective measures for protecting children and women against violence, including GBV and child marriages. Laws did not clearly define a child, prohibit child marriages and criminalize rape cases. Furthermore, in 2017, the government revised the constitution of Malawi, which defined a child as a person below the age of 16, as it conflicted with other amended laws as per the request by some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) (Masina, 2017).

The Gender Equality Act of 2013 was also enacted to address inequalities that exist between women and men as well as end sexual violence in different aspects of life. The act stipulates that any person who is found guilty of sexually harassing another person is liable to a fine and five years' imprisonment (Malawi Gender Equality Act, 2013). A similar law is also successfully implemented in Malaysia to address sexual violence (Mohamed *et al.*, 2015).

Life Skills and Sexual Reproductive Health Education (SRH) in secondary school education curricula are used to address GBV, including sexual violence in schools. SRH aims to empower students and teachers with life skills on issues of sex, sexuality, and HIV prevention, as well as help students address life challenges like family life, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, and STI, among others. Students have acquired different knowledge and skills to address social context issues such as human rights, gender and social inequalities, cultural beliefs, values and practices, and risky behaviours (UNESCO & UNFPA, 2012; Kalanda, 2010).

Other prominent instruments include Malawi Vision 2063, the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act of 2010, the 2020 National Plan to combat GBV of 2014, 2011 Deceased Estates (wills, inheritance, and protection), the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2006, Malawi constitution, Education policy, Malawi growth and development strategy II, National HIV/AIDS policy and National youth policy among others.

In addition, through different ministries, the government has also supported local and international agencies like World Vision, UNICEF, Save the Children, and Action Aid in delivering national-wide school-based interventions to address sexual violence in Malawi. Some programmes such as Keeping Girls in School, Safe School programme, Dream Project, and Joint Programme for Girls Education (JPGE) have been implemented in different parts of the country, especially in the southern region. Activities include life skills education, teachers' training on

positive discipline, infrastructure development, health education, involving traditional leaders to end child marriages and using transformative approaches to change deep-rooted gender attitudes and behaviours among boys and girls that exist in their communities (UNICEF, 2017b and FAWEMA, 2015).

Sexual violence is a global problem affecting students of different ages at different educational levels, including secondary schools. Students experience different forms of sexual violence in schools. When these violence cases are reported to school officials, they are handled differently due to the strategies to address sexual violence that are available at the institution. The implementation of different strategies, therefore, should have an impact on behaviour, norms, attitudes, and environment to address sexual violence among students in school (WHO, 2019).

Strategies implemented in schools have provided support and empowered teachers and students in addressing sexual violence in schools. Both teachers and students have been reported to practice accepted behaviours, promote gender equality and respect for humanity, and change attitudes and beliefs, among others. Through awareness of sexual violence issues, including sexual and health education, students and teachers have changed behaviours, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that have a great impact on addressing sexual violence in schools. When teachers and students behave morally and respect one another, it is rare for them to indulge in sexually violent acts (Ondicho *et al.*, 2020; UNESCO, 2016).

In realizing the role of the school in addressing sexual violence among students, different research has revealed some strategies that are implemented in secondary schools and are more effective in addressing sexual violence among students in different parts of the world (Lu *et al.*, 2022; Ngidi, 2022; Ondicho, 2020; Ozaki, 2020; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Apriliana, 2018; Ollis, 2014; and American Association of University Women, 2006). However, these studies have mainly been conducted in developing countries and some parts of Africa, especially East and West Africa. Little is known about what secondary schools are doing to address the rising cases of sexual violence among students in Southern Africa, especially in Malawi, where no similar study has been found. This study, therefore, addressed this knowledge gap by exploring strategies for addressing sexual violence among students in selected secondary schools of Mzimba district in Malawi.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Sexual violence in secondary schools has been evident in the body of knowledge globally through different studies conducted on the prevalence, forms, causes, consequences, strategies, and policies implemented (Likumbo *et al.*, 2021; Wodon *et al.*, 2021; Samati, 2021; United States department of education, 2020; Malongo *et al.*, 2019; Spear, 2019; Agu *et al.*, 2018; Psaki *et al.*, 2017; Leach *et al.*, 2014; Ollis, 2014; Barasa *et al.*, 2013). Malawi is not immune to such a problem, as different studies have revealed the rise of sexual violence among students in secondary schools. For instance, the recent 2018 randomized controlled trial revealed that 23% of the young women reported victims 12 months before the study (Malongo *et al.*, 2019; Decker *et al.*, 2018; and Psaki *et al.*, 2017).

International, regional, and national strategies are implemented globally to address these complex challenges by dealing with deep-rooted societal gender disparities, traditional values, and hierarchical power structures. These include global goals, gender and educational national policies, laws, acts, guidelines, education curriculum review, community and school programmes, projects, professional codes of conduct, and national plans that are available in both developed and developing countries (United Department of Education, 2020; Kentucky Bar Association, 2019; UNICEF, 2017b; UNESCO, 2016; FAWEMA, 2015; Mohamed *et al.*, 2015; United Nation, 2015; and Malawi Gender Equality Act, 2013).

Despite international and national efforts, the problem indicates that the strategies are either ineffective or there are challenges related to their implementation. Through the analysis of these strategies, it is also noted that most of the researchers have ignored addressing sexual violence among students in secondary schools as the emphasis is much on ending other forms of GBV, domestic sexual violence, and others. Addressing sexual violence separately from other forms of GBV is very important as it has its complex causing factors that differ from one society to the other. As such, addressing it needs strategies that tackle causing factors in a particular society and for easy prevention monitoring (Wodon *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, some national strategies lack empowerment, proper guidance, and practical formal ways of addressing sexual violence among students in schools. The weakness of these national strategies may have also contributed to a lack of political will and ineffective implementation by teachers, supporting staff, and the students themselves (Kayira, 2019). For instance, the introduction of Life

Skills and Sexual Reproductive Health Education (SRH) in the education curriculum in secondary schools in Malawi in the year 2002 has not been practical in addressing sexual violence in schools due to a lack of teaching and learning resources. In addition, there is a lack of teacher's knowledge and skills of relevant information on issues of sexuality, human development and rape. Moreover, not all schools offer the subject of sexuality to students; where this is offered, it is not compulsory (UNESCO *et al.*, 2012; Kalanda, 2010).

As such, despite studies outlined on sexual violence in secondary schools in Malawi on prevalence, forms, causes, consequences, and policies, scholars have ignored to explore the strategies that secondary schools are using to address sexual violence among students (Malongo *et al.*, 2019; Decker *et al.*, 2018; and Psaki *et al.*, 2017). Yet, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) recognizes the problem of sexual violence in schools and calls upon all schools to ensure that all students are safe and protected from sexual violence and get help and advice (National Education Policy, 2016 and MoEST, 2015). Hence, this study filled this gap by exploring strategies for addressing sexual violence among students in selected secondary schools of the Mzimba district in Malawi.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Description and Rationale of the Study Area**

The study was conducted in Mzimba district in Malawi, in the country's Northern region. According to the 2018 national census, the district has a population of 940,184, of which 97.2 % live in rural areas. The district has an area of 10,473 square kilometres, with most people belonging to patriarchal tribes (NSO, 2019). The study locations were secondary schools where data was collected. These include Ekwendeni Community Day Secondary School, Mzimba Secondary School, and Jenda Community Day Secondary School, representing three district divisions: north, central, and south. In Mzimba district, there are high cases of early marriage among adolescent girls due to unplanned pregnancies. 1 in 3 adolescent girls aged 15-19 have already begun childbearing, of which 48 % give birth before the age of 18. Early marriage is also a huge dominant cause of school dropout among adolescent girls in secondary school, which accounts for 31% of the total dropouts in the district (National and District-level facts sheet, 2019). In 2021, the cases of forced child marriages in the southern part of the district doubled within 10 months compared to the same survey conducted in 2020. Dominant social norms were the main cause for such an increase (Chitete, 2021).

In addition, in 2020, the district was the highest among other 28 districts in the country on reported cases of sexual violence. Similarly, in 2019, 79 cases of sexual harassment were reported in the southern part of the district only. This situation also puts students at high risk of being victims since schools are not isolated from the community (Chitete, 2021 Malawi police, 2020). High cases of sexual violence might be related to Mzimba being a patriarchal society as well as a rural area, which, according to research, is mainly prone to sexual violence. This is due to the normalization of violence, gender disparities, poverty, existence, and deep belief in traditional and cultural norms, among other factors (Molloy, 2017).

Furthermore, in the school setting, there have been stories of sexual violence perpetrated by both teachers and students, of which very few have been reported, documented, and published for public knowledge. In 2018, for instance, three teachers in the district were arrested and interdicted following alleged sexual assault against school girls. Among these, one was impregnated. Some students also reported catching some teachers having sex with school girls within school premises (Chirwa, 2018). Implementing strategies to prevent and address sexual violence in schools is very relevant in this case to protect students from sexual violence at school, reduce school dropout, promote human rights, and increase the socio-economic development of the country. Therefore, conducting this study in this area was relevant to explore strategies used by schools to prevent as well as address the problem of sexual violence in schools.

## **2.2 Research Approach**

The study used a qualitative research approach suitable for examining social problems. It allows the researcher to observe and investigate participants in their natural surroundings while understanding the descriptive nature of the problem. The researchers also get more relevant and in-depth information on the problem under study since participants freely provide their individual experiences (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2009; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The approach was, therefore, relevant for the study to achieve all three objectives of the study. The approach helped the researchers to deeply understand the strategies, their implementation, and the challenges related to the implementation of the strategies used in addressing sexual violence from students and teachers in their natural settings through face-to-face audio narrations.

### **2.3 Research Design**

According to Creswell (2014), research designs are types of inquiry that give light to a particular direction and are used in quantitative, mixed, and qualitative research approaches. Creswell further explains that a researcher develops a case study design to analyse individuals, activities, processes, events, or programs, which is always bounded with time. The study was, therefore, a case study designed to provide the researchers with contextual, concrete, and in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world phenomenon in the natural environment it occurs (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). Hence, the case study was used in an educational context to explore adopted strategies used in selected secondary schools of Mzimba district in Malawi to understand and get fundamental in-depth knowledge from students and teachers on how sexual violence is being addressed.

### **2.4 Targeted Population**

Population is a set of cases from which the study sample is obtained (Taherdoost, 2016). The proposed study was conducted in three secondary schools selected based on being within the area of study, accessible, located in a rural area with various traditional social norms and practices, and very close to busy markets which are prone to sexual violence. The population comprised students (prefects), teachers (discipline committee members, form teachers, teacher counsellors), and key informants (head teachers, deputy head teachers, and District gender officer). This population was selected because it actively operates within the school setting in which the strategies are adopted and implemented, and they are key informants with vast knowledge of the topic under study.

### **2.5 Sample Size**

Sample size refers to the total number of people or small group of subjects selected from the population to participate in the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). This study's total sample consisted of fifty-four (54) members. This sample size was attained when the data collected reached the saturation point. This is when the researcher did not get any new information from the respondents. The sample size was generated from three secondary schools, which were chosen on the basis that they are within the district, accessible, and in rural areas that are prone to sexual violence. Secondary schools were chosen because they consist of a significant number of students in the adolescence stage, which is so prone to sexual violence.

Different school stakeholders, such as head teachers, teachers, and students, were selected as respondents for the study. Much as the school has many



stakeholders, the selected ones were believed to have the knowledge and adequate information about the topic under study due to the roles and responsibilities they play at school. Head teachers were, therefore, chosen because they are the overseers of all activities at the school. They are responsible for coordinating school activities and maintaining moral values and discipline.

In addition, teachers such as Deputy Head teachers, teacher counsellors, discipline members, and form teachers were selected because they are responsible for maintaining discipline, providing counselling and guidance, participating in formulating class and school rules, and solving disciplinary issues at the school. Lastly, students could not be left behind since they are both the perpetrators as well as victims of sexual violence, according to this study. Prefects were selected as the respondents among all the students. This was because they are the representatives of fellow students, assist in maintaining discipline, check students' welfare, and act as a bridge between the administration and fellow students. As such, they were believed to have relevant knowledge related to the study (Secondary School Management Handbook, 2013).

## **2.6 Sampling Procedure**

The researchers used purposive and convenience sampling procedures to select study participants. The school has a large population, so not everyone can be used as a respondent to the study. As such, these two sampling procedures were applied to select respondents. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents with knowledge and relevant information on the topic under study (Sabri, 2013; Creswell, 2009). Hence, purposive sampling was used to select all participants, including gender officers, head teachers, deputy head teachers, disciplinary committee members, teacher counsellors, form teachers, and student prefects. These are school stakeholders who are believed to have knowledge and relevant information on the strategies used to address sexual violence among students in secondary schools.

This sampling procedure alone was not adequate to select respondents for the study. As such, convenience sampling was also used to select respondents. Convenience sampling was used because respondents were willing and available to participate in the study (Sabri, 2013; Creswell, 2009). Convenient sampling was used on the sample selected through purposive sampling. It was an appropriate sampling procedure to select respondents from a large sample, such as teachers and student prefects. The prefects and teachers available and ready to give information were visited and engaged in the study. Therefore, 24

teachers and 24 students were selected as respondents for the study using convenient sampling.

## **2.7 Data Collection Methods**

Numerous methods were applied to collect data for the study based on the objectives and the research paradigm employed. This qualitative research used two data collection methods: focused group discussion and interviews. These methods helped the researcher collect narrative data for triangulation purposes, in which two or more data collection methods are recommended (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is the kind of discussion whereby the researcher gets face-to-face with participants with similar characteristics and interests to collect relevant information for the study. It was relevant for this study as it allows respondents to interact and remind one another of important concepts, which brings accurate and vast data for the study for a short time (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Focus group guides with unstructured questions were used to be well-focused on the study objectives and get adequate information. Students and teachers used the FGD due to their large number (Walliman, 2015 & Krueger, 2002). Eight student prefects from each conveniently selected school participated in the FGD. In addition, eight teachers from each school were purposively and conveniently selected to participate in the FGD.

Firstly, the researcher introduced herself, explained the aim of the study, and assured respondents of confidentiality. The researcher then asked for oral consent from the respondents to participate in the study and give relevant information about the study, which was granted. Consent was also given to record the discussions using a cell phone only to use the recordings during data analysis. Some key points were also noted and written down during discussions. The discussions were conducted in quiet and safe rooms for a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum time of 60 minutes for each FGD.

Towards the end of the FGD, pairwise ranking was also conducted for teachers. This is the method of comparing a set of available options based on the preferences or experiences of the group of respondents. Pair votes are done in which each option available is compared to each other on the list of options. The option with more scores is automatically the winner among the list of options (Kyne, 2023 Russell, 1997). Teachers were chosen to be respondents to the pairwise ranking due to their professional roles and responsibilities in maintaining the welfare of the students at school. In addition, teachers are key implementers

of school strategies, check their effectiveness, and monitor students' behaviours. As such, they were believed to be relevant respondents to compare the strategies that are important in addressing sexual violence among students in schools.

An interview refers to the exchange of ideas between two or more people, whether face to face or by phone, on the topic that shows interest. Interviews are used to collect more detailed information from a small population (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Hence, the study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews using guiding questions, which helped the interviewer focus on the study's objectives. This allowed for free expression of views, insight, and additional information through facial expression (Sabri, 2013). The interviews were conducted with key informants selected, including head teachers, deputy head teachers, and gender officers due to their smaller numbers. Firstly, the researcher introduced herself, explained the study's aim, and assured confidentiality. The researcher then asked for oral permission from the respondent to give information and record the discussion, which was granted. Furthermore, the researcher asked for permission from the respondents to record the discussions, which was granted. Each interview was conducted in a quiet and safe room for a time frame of between 30 to 45 minutes.

Documents are private and public records concerning the study that the researcher may need to use or find out from the participants. These may include disciplinary reports, letters, and meeting minutes (Creswell, 2012; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The researcher used documents such as journal articles, teacher's codes of conduct, secondary school management handbooks, safe school training manuals, life skills and social and development studies curriculum, disciplinary reports, and school rules and regulations to understand the data collected sincerely. This helped the researcher to avoid bias and establish credibility of the research (Bowen, 2009).

## **2.8 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of searching and arranging the data from the field to understand and write it down so that it is available for others to read. The process encompasses many steps, such as reading, transcription, coding, interpreting, and report writing (Creswell, 2009; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The thematic data analysis method was used to analyse the data collected for this qualitative research approach.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are different phases for data analysis in thematic analysis, which were used in this proposed study to analyse

data from interviews and FGDs. The audio recordings were frequently listened to familiarise me with the data and transcribed by changing the data from verbal to written scripts. Data in local languages, Chitumbuka and Chichewa, were also transcribed into English with trained translators' help. The transcribed data were then coded by highlighting the ideas related to the study's objectives to get a meaningful data group. Similar codes were grouped to create categories named to create themes. Furthermore, themes were refined to get only those related to the study's objectives to ensure the study's validity. Lastly, the themes were defined, re-named, and presented in the written report by relating findings to related research findings from different parts of the world.

Data was then presented in tables to show frequencies and percentages to give more meaning and conclusions of the study findings. Quotations and phrases from the transcripts derived from the respondents were also used to support ideas and present experiences. Pairwise ranking was also used to compare the effectiveness of the strategies used to address sexual violence among students. This was done by asking teachers as the main implementers of the strategies to compare strategies in pairs on how effective they are in addressing sexual violence among students at school.

## **2.9 Validity and Reliability of the Study**

To ensure the quality of qualitative research, the researcher must establish trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative research involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Therefore, this study considered trustworthiness to ensure its quality is not compromised. To ensure the credibility of this study, triangulation, which is the use of multiple data collection methods, was used (Lincoln *et al.*, 1985). The researcher used different data collection methods in the qualitative research approach employed for the study. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis were used to collect data for the study to understand the topic under study better. This refers to generalizing or applying the study findings to other contexts (Lincoln *et al.*, 1985). In qualitative research, the researcher does not assert the generalization of the study findings. However, it can be done by those who wish to compare the findings with their contexts (Stahl and King, 2020). This study's findings apply only to Malawi, specifically to the three Ekwendeni, Mzimba, and Jenda secondary schools in Mzimba district.

According to Lincoln *et al.* (1985), dependability is when the study findings are consistent, and another researcher can repeat the study and still get the same

findings. In qualitative research, this is achieved by checking the accuracy and whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions relate to the data collected. In this study, dependability was assured through supervisors' frequent checking of the study findings concerning the data.

Conformability is the degree of neutrality in research in that the researcher is not biased in presenting the study's findings. In qualitative research, this can be achieved in different ways, such as by supporting findings, interpretations, and conclusions by the data and triangulation (Creswell, 2014 & Lincoln et al., 1985). The researcher, therefore, ensured the conformability of this study by using only the data from the respondents and through triangulation by using multiple data collection methods. Furthermore, quotes and phrases from respondents' audio narrations are used to present the findings, which has also increased conformability.

## **2.10 Ethical Issues Considerations**

According to Creswell (2014), collecting data in any research needs to be ethical because individual participants and the research sites are respected. Ethical issues in research aim to protect the study's participants, assure them of their security, and promote and win participants' trust among others (Kothari, 2004). Such being the case, the researcher adhered to all rules and regulations concerning conducting research in Malawi from data collection, data analysis, and data presentation. Permission for conducting the research was requested from the State University of Zanzibar and the Northern Region Education Division office (NED). Written consent was given from the university and the Education Division Office to collect data for the study. In addition, oral informed consent was given by specific schools after providing the consent letters. Pre-arrangements of the days to collect school data were also done through phone calls with the head teachers. The researcher also got oral informed consent from all the participants to participate in the study and record the discussions before conducting interviews and FGD. The participants were also allowed to withdraw from the study anytime they wished.

Creswell (2014) emphasizes ensuring the participants' privacy and transparency at any level of the study. Therefore, the participants' Confidentiality and anonymity were highly considered and assured to all participants. No participant was asked to give their name or personal particulars during the study. This has also been considered in the analysis and presentation of the findings, as no names, physical identities, or personal details of the participants were shared. In addition, a safe and comfortable environment was used to ensure the privacy

and safety of the participants. Lastly, the participants' privacy was further assured by erasing all the recordings for interviews and FGD immediately after analysis.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results related to the relevance of the implementation of strategies for addressing sexual violence among students in secondary schools. Clear information about this objective was collected using focus group discussions, interviews, and documentary analysis. The following themes are derived from the data collected, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Relevance of Strategies in Addressing Sexual Violence among Students**

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Increased awareness of sexual violence issues	54	100
The proper discipline of students	53	98
Decreased cases of sexual violence	50	93
Creating a conducive and safe environment for students	45	83
Increased reporting of sexual violence issues	40	74

**Source: Field data (June, 2023)**

#### 3.1 Increased Awareness of Violence Issues

The findings of the study indicated that all the respondents, representing 100%, admitted that strategies used in schools have increased the awareness of sexual violence among students and teachers. The results obtained also explain that both students and teachers at least have knowledge of sexual violence issues in all schools. Strategies such as sexual education, community involvement, professional development for teachers, and guidance and counselling were revealed to bring awareness to sexual violence issues. The awareness programs are conducted regularly by teachers and different stakeholders invited to the school to talk to students about issues of sexual violence. Some NGOs, in collaboration with the district gender office and Ministry of Education, also provide awareness to students and teachers. All students and teachers are requested to attend different awareness programs the school provides. By attending these programs, students' and teachers' awareness of forms, causes, consequences, and prevention measures of sexual violence is raised. Concerning this, respondents had this to say during the FGD:

*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).*

Similarly, other respondents admitted that:

*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).*

One-on-one interviews also had similar views:

*Both teachers and students are aware of most sexual violence issues. No one can give an excuse of ignorance for sexually violating others at this school. Awareness has been conducted, and we will still do it (HT 2).*

On the same, gender officers in the district had the same views during the interview:

*In collaboration with the school administration, we sometimes organize awareness campaigns that incorporate messages of sexual violence through songs, drama, poems, talks, and storytelling, among others. Students and teachers are attracted to such messages and acquire relevant knowledge and skills related to sexual violence (Gender Officer).*

Lu *et al.* (2022) also had similar findings in a study conducted in primary and secondary schools. Preventive programs for sexual abuse helped students gain different knowledge related to sexual abuse. Among the knowledge gained were the sexual abuse prevention self-protective and information.

### **3.2 Proper Discipline of the Students**

Proper discipline of the students was mentioned by 53 respondents, representing 98%, as one of the relevant strategies in addressing sexual violence among students in school. The impact of implementing students' codes of ethics, guidance and counselling, sexual education, and community involvement has led to most students changing behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes towards others. Awareness of forms of sexual violence, effects, prevention mechanisms, sexual reproductive health, and gender issues conducted by teachers as well as stakeholders has a significant impact on students' discipline at school. Most students involved in FGD sessions claimed that they are aware of good morals,

the effects of sexual violence, and the benefits of respecting oneself and others; as such, they act accordingly.

*We have seen our fellow students expelled from school for sexually violating others at school. We have learned from them and also changed our behaviours and attitudes towards others. We have also learned 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).*

Similarly, teachers had this to say:

*Students have changed their behaviours and attitudes towards one another due to the knowledge they have gained through different strategies implemented. We do not have issues of drug and substance abuse as well as sexual abuse at our school nowadays. They are aware of the implications of immoral behaviours in their lives and behave well (FGD 1).*

Similar information was also obtained during face-to-face interviews with the key informants, who also claimed that strategies helped in promoting good morals and behaviour among students:

*Discipline of students is good nowadays. Students follow rules and regulations that have shaped their morals. Students dress correctly, such as long skirts for girls, and there is social distance between students and teachers of the opposite sex. Discipline cases have also been reduced, and this has a significant impact on addressing sexual violence among students in schools (HT 2).*

The findings are similar to the study conducted by Ondicho et al. (2020), who found that strategies used to address sexual violence in schools have a great impact on changing the behaviour of students. Increased awareness of sexual harassment issues and rules and regulations helped students change their behaviour and be well-disciplined.

### **3.3 Decreased Cases of Sexual Violence**

During FGD and interviews, teachers and students admitted that the strategies used in addressing sexual violence among students in secondary schools have helped to reduce sexual violence among students. 93 per cent of the respondents reported that implementing strategies such as students' codes of ethics, sexual education, students' involvement, teachers' codes of ethics, safe environment, and guidance and counselling have a great impact on reducing cases of sexual violence among students. The findings also indicate that in all schools, the strategies have contributed to the decrease in cases of sexual violence. The



efforts of disciplining and giving punishments such as rustication and suspension to students and teachers who have been reported for sexually violating others have also helped in preventing more sexually violent acts among students at school. One respondent said this during the face-to-face interview:

*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).*

Similarly, during FGD, respondents had this to say:

*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).*

Lu *et al.* (2022) also found out that school-based programs addressing sexual abuse among students in schools combat sexual abuse in schools. Strategies that address the needs of children with disabilities and different age groups, exposure to cases of sexual abuse, positive feedback and training of the teachers were some of the programs that were revealed to have a great impact on reducing cases of sexual abuse among students

### **3.4 Creating a Conducive and Safe Environment for Students**

A total of 83 per cent of the respondents from teachers and students claimed that most of the strategies implemented to address sexual violence also create a safe and conducive environment for students at school. Students learn without being intimidated by the teachers or fellow students. Even the renovation of the physical infrastructures, such as installing enough lights in the classrooms, hostels, and corridors, has prevented possible perpetrators of sexual violence from indulging in sexual acts. Furthermore, monitoring of the school premises by guards and teachers during the day and night and separating boys and girls during study time were some of the measures identified as very relevant in creating a safe environment at school. The following were explained by students admitting that they feel safe at school due to the strategies used:

*"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).*

To concur with this, other respondents said this during FGD:

*"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).*

Similarly, one key respondent admitted that:

*"The school has been renovated to make it safe for students. At first, students were using one water tap, and we were receiving many reports of sexual violence. We have installed other taps to increase social distance between boys and girls. We do not even allow students to visit teachers' houses to prevent issues of sexual abuse "(HT 1).*

This, therefore, explains clearly the strategies used to address sexual violence among students. This is so because strategies have brought changes in the school environment, which have increased the social distance between students and teachers as well as prevented sexual violence by possible perpetrators. The environment is, therefore, safe for students from sexual violence and conducive to learning.

The above findings correlate with the findings by Lu *et al.* (2022) in school-based prevention programs in addressing children's sexual abuse. The study found that implementing such programs created a supportive school environment for children. A supportive environment contributes much to the safety of students in schools and addresses sexual violence among students.

### **3.5 Increased Reporting of Sexual Violence Issues**

The study also found that the implementation of the strategies has increased the reporting of sexual violence cases, especially by students. 74 per cent of the respondents, most of them being students, admitted that students are empowered to report cases of sexual violence to officials. Strategies such as student involvement, guidance and counselling, community involvement, and sexual education have equipped students with several reporting mechanisms for any sexual abuse encountered. This has led to an increase in reporting cases of sexual abuse among students in schools and breaking the silence. During FGD with students, they responded by admitting that:

*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 Head teacher and form teachers on issues that concern us (FGD 2).*

To concur with this, one respondent said that:

*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).*

The same findings were found in a study by Lu *et al.* (2022) in which school-based programs empowered students to disclose sexual acts. The programs provided awareness to students to understand that as victims, it is not their fault to be sexually abused. As such, they are free to report sexual cases at any time since it is never too late to report any case of sexual abuse. In addition, the program identified trusted adults to whom students were free to disclose cases of sexual violence.

## **1. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **3.1 Conclusion**

The study concludes that the effective implementation of targeted strategies significantly mitigates the prevalence of sexual violence. By examining the impact of these strategies, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how various interventions can be employed to create a safer and more conducive learning environment.

Firstly, the impact of awareness programs; the study found that awareness programs play a crucial role in reducing sexual violence. By educating students, teachers, and the broader school community about the nature and consequences of sexual violence, awareness programs help create a more informed and vigilant community. Increased awareness leads to better identification and reporting of incidents, which is vital for timely intervention and support.

Secondly, teacher training and involvement; training teachers to recognize, prevent, and respond to sexual violence is pivotal. Teachers are on the front lines and can act as both deterrents and first responders to incidents of sexual violence. The study underscores the necessity for continuous professional development programs that equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to handle such sensitive issues appropriately.

Thirdly, support systems for victims and perpetrators; the provision of robust support systems for victims of sexual violence is essential. These systems should include psychological counselling, medical care, and legal assistance to help victims recover and reintegrate into the school environment. Additionally, the

study highlights the importance of providing psycho-social support to perpetrators to address underlying issues and prevent recurrence.

Fourthly, improving school policies and discipline; effective school policies that are strictly enforced can significantly deter sexual violence. The study found that schools with clear, well-communicated policies and consistent disciplinary actions against offenders had lower incidences of sexual violence. This includes creating clear reporting mechanisms and ensuring that all cases are treated with the utmost seriousness.

Fifthly, a safe and conducive school environment; creating a safe school environment is fundamental. This includes physical safety measures such as secure school premises, as well as fostering a school culture that promotes respect and inclusivity. Schools that have successfully implemented these strategies reported fewer cases of sexual violence and a more positive overall school climate.

Lastly, enhanced reporting mechanisms; the study emphasizes the need for effective reporting mechanisms. When students feel safe to report incidents without fear of retribution, the likelihood of addressing and reducing sexual violence increases. Confidentiality and protection for those who report are critical components of an effective reporting system.

### **3.2 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the study makes several key recommendations as follows:

- i. Comprehensive training programs; implement ongoing training programs for teachers and school staff on how to handle sexual violence cases. This should include identifying signs of abuse, understanding the legal framework, and providing appropriate support to victims.
- ii. Enhanced support services; establish comprehensive support services for victims, including counselling, medical care, and legal assistance. Schools should also offer psycho-social programs for perpetrators to address behavioural issues and reduce the likelihood of repeat offences.
- iii. Policy development and enforcement; develop and enforce clear, strict policies on sexual violence. These policies should include clear definitions of unacceptable behaviour, procedures for reporting and investigating incidents, and consistent disciplinary measures for offenders.
- iv. Creating safe school environments; invest in measures to ensure the physical safety of students, such as secure school premises and supervised

areas. Additionally, promotes a school culture that values respect, inclusivity, and the well-being of all students.

- v. Effective reporting mechanisms; establish and promote confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms. Ensure that students are aware of how to report incidents and that they feel safe doing so. Protect the confidentiality and safety of those who report.
- vi. Community and stakeholder engagement; engage the broader community, including parents, local authorities, and NGOs, in efforts to combat sexual violence. Collaborative efforts can enhance the effectiveness of strategies and ensure a supportive environment for students.
- vii. Regular monitoring and evaluation implement a robust system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies. Regular assessments can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that interventions are responsive to the needs of students.

Therefore, by adopting these recommendations, policymakers, school administrators, and education stakeholders can make significant strides in eradicating sexual violence among students in secondary schools in Mzimba District, Malawi. The study's findings provide a solid foundation for informed decision-making and the development of effective interventions that prioritize the safety and well-being of all students.

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