

Cohabitation, Intimate Partner Violence, and Femicide among Female Tertiary Students in South Africa: A Scoping Review

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Gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) remain pervasive challenges in South African higher education, with female students experiencing disproportionate vulnerability. While the risks of intimate partner violence (IPV) are increasingly recognized, the specific role of cohabiting living arrangements as a contextual risk factor remains underexplored and insufficiently synthesized within the existing literature. This scoping review aims to systematically map and synthesize available evidence on the intersection between cohabitation, IPV, and femicide among female students at South African tertiary institutions. Specifically, it seeks to identify the factors influencing students' decisions to cohabit, examine the documented manifestations of GBVF within cohabiting relationships, analyse the effects on students' academic and personal well-being, and pinpoint gaps in the current evidence base. A scoping review was conducted following the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley and refined by Levac. A comprehensive search of electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Sabinet, Google Scholar, and PubMed, was undertaken for peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, and institutional reports published between 2000 and 2025. Studies were included if they addressed cohabiting relationships among tertiary students in South Africa and reported on outcomes related to GBV, IPV, or femicide. Data were extracted using a standardized charting form and synthesized thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. The review reveals a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and relational factors that link cohabitation to elevated GBVF risks among female students. Key drivers of cohabitation identified across the literature include structural factors, such as inadequate on-campus accommodation, high residence fees, and financial insecurity; personal and relational factors, including the pursuit of autonomy, privacy, and emotional/physical intimacy; and institutional failures in providing supportive housing policies and effective GBV response mechanisms. The synthesized evidence further indicates that cohabiting female students experience heightened vulnerability to physical, emotional, and sexual IPV, with significant consequences including coercive control, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, academic disruption, and mental health challenges. Notably, the review identifies a critical gap in literature directly linking cohabitation to

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femicide outcomes, suggesting an urgent need for targeted research in this area. This scoping review provides a comprehensive synthesis of evidence on cohabitation as a contextual driver of GBVF risk among South African female tertiary students. The findings underscore the need for multi-sectoral interventions that address not only individual-level attitudes and behaviours but also the structural and institutional determinants of vulnerability. Recommendations include reforming university accommodation policies, strengthening on-campus GBV prevention and response infrastructures, integrating cohabitation-specific risk assessments into student support services, and implementing educational programmes targeting both men and women. The review also highlights significant research gaps, particularly regarding femicide and longitudinal studies, which should guide future inquiry.

Keywords: scoping review, cohabitation, intimate partner violence, femicide, gender-based violence, tertiary students, South Africa

1. Introduction

Background and Context

Gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) have emerged as a critical global concern, with women and girls bearing the disproportionate burden of violence across all spheres of life, including institutions of higher learning (Banda-Chitsamatanga & Ntlama, 2020; Ndlovu et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that globally, approximately one in three women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Furthermore, one in five women will experience rape or attempted rape during their lifetime (Mengesha et al., 2020). These statistics underscore the pervasive nature of GBV, which transcends geographical boundaries, age, gender, race, religion, culture, and ethnicity (Sardinha et al., 2022).

Despite extensive scholarly attention and numerous interventions by governments, civil society, and international organizations, the prevalence of GBV continues to escalate (Makhene, 2022). South Africa, in particular, has earned the distressing distinction of having one of the highest rates of violence against women globally (Ross et al., 2022). The South African Police Service (2022) reported that approximately 50% of female homicide cases in the country stem from intimate partner violence, positioning IPV as the second-highest contributor to the disease burden in South Africa (Ross et al., 2022). This

alarming trend extends to tertiary institutions, where female students face heightened vulnerability to various forms of GBVF, often in contexts that remain hidden from institutional oversight (Buiten & Naidoo, 2020; Ndlovu et al., 2020).

Cohabitation, defined as non-marital living arrangements between intimate partners, has become increasingly prevalent among tertiary students globally and within South Africa (Sassler & Miller, 2011; Mligo & Otieno, 2018). While cohabitation may offer perceived benefits such as financial efficiency, intimacy, and autonomy, research suggests that it also exposes female students to elevated risks of IPV and other forms of GBVF (Kasim & Falola, 2017; Makhene, 2022). The private nature of cohabiting arrangements often shields these relationships from institutional oversight and parental awareness, creating environments where violence can persist undetected and unreported (Gold, 2012; Mligo & Otieno, 2018).

The intersection between cohabitation and GBVF among tertiary students in South Africa remains insufficiently understood and inadequately addressed in both research and policy. Although extensive literature exists on GBV in higher education contexts, limited scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to the role of cohabiting living arrangements in facilitating or exacerbating

violence against female students (Makhene, 2022). This gap is particularly concerning given the unique vulnerabilities that cohabiting students face, including reduced access to institutional support structures, social isolation from peer networks, and the normalization of violence within intimate relationships (Gold, 2012; Kasim & Falola, 2017).

The South African context is especially relevant due to the country's high rates of GBVF, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, and the significant socio-economic challenges facing tertiary students (Ross et al., 2022). Many students from low-income backgrounds are compelled to seek alternative accommodation arrangements, including cohabitation, due to the shortage of affordable on-campus housing and the high cost of private accommodation (Mligo & Otieno, 2018). These structural factors create conditions in which female students become dependent on male partners, perpetuating power imbalances that increase vulnerability to GBVF (Hooks, 2000).

This scoping review addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors influence female tertiary students' decisions to enter cohabiting living arrangements in South Africa?
2. What are the documented manifestations and experiences of GBVF within cohabiting relationships among tertiary students?
3. What are the academic, psychological, and social effects of cohabitation-related GBVF on female students?
4. What gaps exist in the current evidence base regarding the intersection between cohabitation and GBVF in South African tertiary institutions?

The aim of this review is to systematically map and synthesize existing literature on the intersection between cohabitation, IPV, and femicide among female students at South African tertiary institutions, thereby providing evidence to inform prevention and intervention strategies.

Defining Key Concepts

Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

Gender-based violence is defined as any act or threat by individuals or institutions that inflicts physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm on a person based on their biological sex, gender

identity, or social gender norms (United Nations, 1989). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) further specifies that GBV includes physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the family, the general community, or perpetrated or condoned by the state. More specifically, Ross et al. (2022) define GBV as violence arising from unequal power relations between male and female partners in relationships, a definition that resonates with the South African context where patriarchy and gender inequality remain deeply entrenched.

Femicide, a term that has gained prominence in South African discourse, refers to the intentional killing of women and girls because of their gender (Ndlovu et al., 2020). The high incidence of femicide in South Africa, particularly in intimate partner contexts, has prompted significant scholarly and policy attention. The convergence of GBV and femicide (GBVF) in policy discourse recognizes the continuum of violence that ranges from harassment and abuse to fatal outcomes, and the need for integrated responses (Buiten & Naidoo, 2020).

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence refers to any assaultive and coercive behaviour that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to a person by a current or former intimate partner (Iman'Ishimwe Mukamana et al., 2020). IPV encompasses physical violence, sexual violence, psychological aggression, and controlling behaviours, and affects individuals across all cultures, socio-economic groups, and relationship types, including married, cohabiting, and dating relationships (Krug et al., 2002). Research consistently demonstrates that women of reproductive age are at highest risk of IPV, with significant consequences for physical and mental health (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2013).

Cohabitation

Cohabitation refers to non-marital heterosexual or same-sex living arrangements in which couples share a residence and are involved in an intimate relationship (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Cohabitation has become increasingly common in both Western and developing countries since the late twentieth century, driven by changing social attitudes towards marriage, gender roles, and religion (Kaufman, 2018). Among tertiary students,

cohabitation has emerged as a prevalent living arrangement, often motivated by the desire for autonomy, intimacy, and shared financial responsibilities (Kasim & Falola, 2017). However, the nature and motivations for cohabitation vary significantly, with some students entering such arrangements by choice, while others are compelled by structural factors such as accommodation shortages (Mlilo & Otieno, 2018).

In the South African higher education context, cohabiting arrangements range from mutual agreements between partners for convenience to relationships characterized by significant power imbalances, often involving older male partners providing financial support to younger female students (Ross et al., 2022). This diversity in cohabitation typologies underscores the need for nuanced understanding of the relationship between cohabitation and GBVF.

Methodology

Research Design

This article adopts a scoping review methodology to systematically map and synthesize existing literature on the intersection between cohabitation, intimate partner violence, and femicide among female students at South African tertiary institutions. The scoping review approach, as articulated by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), is particularly suited to this study because it allows for the identification of the breadth and depth of available evidence, clarifies key concepts, and identifies gaps in the literature, thereby informing future research and policy directions. Unlike systematic reviews that focus on answering specific, narrow questions, scoping reviews are designed to map the existing literature on a broader topic, making them appropriate for exploring emerging or complex fields where the evidence base is still developing (Munn et al., 2018).

The choice of a qualitative approach aligns with the exploratory nature of this review, as the phenomenon of cohabitation and its links to GBVF is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and institutional contexts that are best understood through interpretive analysis of existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative lens enables this review to unravel the multiple factors that inform students' choices to cohabit, analyse

their experiences of GBV within these relationships, and enhance the body of knowledge available for preventative and intervention measures.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of electronic databases was conducted to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, and institutional reports published between 2000 and 2025. The selection of this timeframe ensures coverage of literature from the period when cohabitation among tertiary students began to receive significant scholarly attention, while also capturing contemporary developments in research on GBVF in South Africa.

The following databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science, Sabinet, Google Scholar, and PubMed. These databases were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage across disciplines including sociology, psychology, public health, gender studies, and education. The search strategy combined keywords and subject headings related to the core concepts of the review, including:

- □ "cohabitation" OR "cohabiting" OR "living arrangement" OR "co-residence"
- □ "gender-based violence" OR "intimate partner violence" OR "domestic violence" OR "femicide"
- □ "tertiary students" OR "university students" OR "higher education students" OR "college students"
- □ "South Africa"

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine search terms. Additionally, hand-searching of reference lists of included studies and relevant review articles was conducted to identify any additional sources not captured by the database searches. Grey literature was identified through searches of institutional websites, including the Department of Higher Education and Training, the South African Council on Higher Education, and reports from NGOs and civil society organizations working on GBV in higher education.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in this review if they met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Addressed cohabiting relationships among

tertiary students (undergraduate or postgraduate) in South Africa

2. Reported on outcomes related to GBV, IPV, or femicide

3. Were published between 2000 and 2025

4. Were published in English

5. Employed empirical research designs (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) or were systematic/scoping reviews

6. Were peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, or institutional reports

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused on GBVF in non-tertiary populations without specific attention to students

2. Addressed cohabitation in general populations without distinguishing student sub-groups

3. Did not specifically examine the relationship between cohabitation and GBVF

4. Were opinion pieces, editorials, or commentary without empirical or theoretical grounding

5. Were published before 2000

Data extraction was conducted using a standardized charting form developed specifically for this scoping review. The form was piloted on a small sample of articles and refined to ensure relevance and consistency. The following data were extracted from each included study:

- ☐ Bibliographic information (author, year, title, journal, country)
- ☐ Study aim and research questions
- ☐ Study design and methodology (including sample size and characteristics)
- ☐ Theoretical framework
- ☐ Findings related to cohabitation and GBVF
- ☐ Contextual factors influencing cohabitation
- ☐ Effects of cohabitation-related GBVF on students
- ☐ Recommendations and implications

Data Synthesis and Thematic Analysis

The extracted data were synthesized using thematic analysis, following the six-step iterative process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and later

used by other researchers (Nowell et al., 2017; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This process unfolded as follows:

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data. This involved reading and re-reading the included articles to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content, arguments, and findings. Relevant passages were copied and pasted into a data extraction spreadsheet, and initial notes were made regarding potential patterns and themes.

Step 2: Initial generation of codes. The data were systematically coded to identify features of interest related to the research questions. This was an iterative process in which codes were generated inductively from the data, rather than being predetermined by the researchers' expectations.

Step 3: Searching for themes. The initial codes were examined to identify potential themes that captured broader patterns of meaning. Themes were identified at both the semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) levels, allowing for the identification of patterns not immediately apparent in the data.

Step 4: Reviewing themes. The potential themes were reviewed and refined by checking them against the data to ensure they were coherent and adequately supported by evidence. The following questions guided this review: "Does each theme have adequate supporting data? Are the data included coherent in supporting that theme? Are some themes too large or diverse?" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Step 5: Defining and naming themes. The refined themes were clearly defined, with the scope and content of each theme articulated. Themes were named in ways that captured their essence clearly and concisely.

Step 6: Producing the report. The analysis was written up, incorporating the identified themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. This writing process involved revisiting earlier steps and ensuring that the themes were grounded in the data.

Quality Appraisal

As this is a scoping review rather than a systematic review, a formal quality appraisal of included studies was not conducted. The primary aim of a scoping review is to map the existing literature and

identify research gaps, rather than to evaluate the quality of individual studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). However, attention was paid to methodological rigour where possible, and the strengths and limitations of the included literature are acknowledged in the discussion.

Limitations

This scoping review is subject to certain limitations. First, the search was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research published in other languages. Second, the focus on South African higher education may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts, although many of the identified factors may be relevant globally. Third, the lack of formal quality appraisal means that some included studies may be of limited methodological rigour. Finally, the reliance on published literature means that findings from unpublished research or institutional reports may be underrepresented.

3. Findings

The thematic analysis of the included literature yielded four major themes that address the research questions: (1) factors influencing students' cohabitation decisions; (2) manifestations of GBVF within cohabiting relationships; (3) effects of cohabitation-related GBVF; and (4) research gaps and limitations. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Factors Influencing Students' Cohabitation Decisions

The literature identifies a complex array of interrelated factors that influence tertiary students' decisions to enter cohabiting living arrangements. These factors can be broadly categorized as structural/institutional factors, personal/relational factors, and socio-cultural factors.

Structural and Institutional Factors

The most frequently cited factor driving students toward cohabitation is the shortage of adequate, affordable on-campus accommodation (Kasim & Falola, 2017; Mligo & Otieno, 2018). In South African tertiary institutions, the demand for student housing far exceeds supply, leaving many students without institutional accommodation options. As Mligo and Otieno (2018) observe, the inability of university authorities to provide sufficient hostel accommodation forces students to

seek alternative housing arrangements, including cohabitation with intimate partners. This finding resonates with the broader literature on student housing in South Africa, which has highlighted the crisis of accommodation shortages and the proliferation of informal and unsafe housing options (Mncedisi & Mthembu, 2020).

Financial constraints are another significant structural factor compelling students toward cohabitation. Many South African students come from low-income backgrounds and struggle to meet the costs of tuition, accommodation, and daily living expenses (Ross et al., 2022). In this context, cohabitation may be seen as a financial necessity rather than a lifestyle choice, as shared living expenses can reduce the financial burden on both partners. However, this financial interdependence also creates power imbalances that increase vulnerability to GBVF, as female students who are financially dependent on male partners may feel unable to leave abusive relationships (Hooks, 2000).

Additional structural factors identified in the literature include restrictions on opposite-sex visitation in university hostels (Mligo & Otieno, 2018); dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of institutional meals; lack of entertainment and social activities on campus; and tensions or conflicts with roommates in institutional accommodation (Kasim & Falola, 2017). These factors contribute to a perception among students that cohabitation offers greater autonomy, privacy, and comfort than institutional living arrangements.

Personal and Relational Factors

The desire for autonomy and independence is a significant personal factor driving students toward cohabitation (Gold, 2012; Mligo & Otieno, 2018). For many students, leaving home and entering tertiary education represents a transition to adulthood, and cohabitation may be seen as a marker of adult status and decision-making autonomy. Gold (2012) observes that distance from the family of origin and exposure to diverse models of intimate relationships at university create opportunities for students to explore alternative relationship arrangements that may not be supported or approved by their families.

The pursuit of intimacy and emotional connection is another important relational factor in students'

decisions to cohabit. Kasim and Falola (2017) note that for many students, cohabitation is a natural progression from dating to a more committed relationship, providing opportunities for shared daily experiences and emotional closeness. Similarly, Anoyase (2020) suggests that some couples view cohabitation as a step towards marriage, using the living arrangement to assess compatibility and the quality of their relationship.

Sexual gratification, while not always explicitly acknowledged, is also a factor in students' decisions to cohabit (Mligo & Otieno, 2018). Cohabitation provides a private space for sexual intimacy, which may be constrained in institutional accommodation due to restrictions on opposite-sex visitation and concerns about privacy. However, the emphasis on sexual intimacy in cohabiting relationships also exposes female students to risks of unwanted sexual activity and coercive control (Paterson, 2017).

Socio-Cultural Factors

Despite the increasing prevalence of cohabitation among young people in South Africa, socio-cultural attitudes towards cohabitation remain complex and often negative. Religious and traditional belief systems typically discourage non-marital cohabitation, and many parents and communities disapprove of students entering such arrangements (Mligo & Otieno, 2018). This disapproval often means that students keep their cohabiting arrangements secret from their families, reducing the support network available to them and increasing their vulnerability to GBVF (Gold, 2012).

Sassler and Miller (2011) note that cohabitation has evolved from being viewed as an "abnormal lifestyle" to a normative experience for young adults in many contexts. However, this evolution is uneven across different socio-cultural groups, and students from more conservative backgrounds may face greater stigma and secrecy around their cohabiting arrangements. This secrecy is particularly problematic when violence occurs, as victims may be reluctant to seek help from families or institutional authorities for fear of exposure and judgment.

Manifestations of GBVF within Cohabiting Relationships

The literature reveals that female students in

cohabiting relationships experience multiple forms of GBV, including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial violence. These forms of violence are often interconnected, creating patterns of coercion and control that have significant consequences for victims' well-being.

Physical Violence

Physical violence, including slapping, pushing, hitting, kicking, and the use of weapons, is a common manifestation of IPV among cohabiting students (Yllo & Straus, 2016). Research in the United States found that cohabiters, particularly those under 30 years of age, experience higher rates of physical violence than married couples (Yllo & Straus, 2016). Although this study was not specific to university students, its finding regarding the elevated risk among younger cohabiters is applicable to the student population, which is largely within the 18-30 age bracket.

In the South African context, physical violence in cohabiting relationships is often normalized or justified through patriarchal ideologies that position male partners as having authority over female partners (Ross et al., 2022). This normalization of violence is reinforced by broader social attitudes that view family and intimate partner violence as a private matter rather than a public concern. As Yllo and Straus (2016) argue, the acceptance or tolerance of spousal violence is not only part of folk culture but is also entrenched in legal systems that have historically treated domestic violence as a private issue.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence within cohabiting relationships takes multiple forms, including coerced sexual activity, rape, and other forms of sexual assault (Paterson, 2017). The private nature of cohabiting arrangements creates conditions in which sexual violence can occur with minimal risk of detection or intervention (Joseph, 2015). Paterson (2017) observes that sexual violence appears to be spreading rapidly, moving from endemic to pandemic proportions in many contexts, with tertiary institutions being particularly affected.

The prevalence of sexual violence among female university students is concerning, with studies suggesting that between 20% and 25% of college students experience sexual violence or IPV during their studies (Palmer et al., 2018). Female students

are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence by intimate partners and, in some cases, by lecturers and other institutional authorities (McMahon et al., 2013). The power imbalances inherent in these relationships often lead to underreporting, as victims may fear retribution, judgment, or the negative consequences of disclosing abuse.

In the South African context, sexual violence has been described as the "silent killer" of female university students (Adams et al., 2013). The pattern of inequalities between male and female students, combined with the normalization of coercive sexual behaviour, creates environments in which sexual violence is both common and hidden (Ross et al., 2022). Research conducted in South Africa reveals high levels of GBVF-related crimes in institutions of higher learning, with many cases remaining unreported due to fear, shame, and lack of trust in institutional responses (Ndlovu et al., 2020).

Emotional and Psychological Violence

Emotional and psychological violence includes verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, isolation, and controlling behaviours (Iman'Ishimwe Mukamana et al., 2020). In cohabiting relationships among students, these forms of violence may be expressed through excessive calling or texting to monitor whereabouts, demands to account for time spent away from the partner, and attempts to control relationships with peers and family members.

Ross et al. (2022) note that controlling behaviour and verbal abuse are often normalized in intimate relationships among South African students, making it difficult for victims to recognize these behaviours as abusive. The intensity of emotional and psychological violence may also obscure the other forms of abuse occurring in the relationship, as victims may focus on managing the emotional turmoil rather than recognizing the patterns of coercion and control.

Financial violence, which involves controlling access to financial resources, restricting financial independence, and using money as a tool of coercion, is also prevalent in cohabiting relationships among students (Hooks, 2000). Female students who are financially dependent on their male partners are particularly vulnerable to this form of violence, as they may be unable to leave the relationship without losing financial

support necessary for their studies and daily living (Ross et al., 2022).

Effects of Cohabitation-Related GBVF on Female Students

The violence experienced by female students in cohabiting relationships has far-reaching effects on their academic performance, psychological well-being, and physical health. These effects are interconnected, creating cycles of harm that can persist long after the abusive relationship ends.

Academic Consequences

The most immediate and visible effects of cohabitation-related GBVF are academic. Students who experience violence in cohabiting relationships often face significant disruptions to their academic progress, including poor concentration, absenteeism, and dropping out of courses (Palmer et al., 2018). The stress and trauma of violence can interfere with meeting academic demands, leading to declining grades and, in some cases, withdrawal from studies (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

Mligo and Otieno (2018) found that cohabiting students in Tanzanian universities performed worse academically than their non-cohabiting peers, a finding that is likely applicable to the South African context. The authors suggest that cohabitation creates a "dual burden" for students who must balance the demands of their studies with the challenges of maintaining an intimate relationship, and when that relationship is abusive, the burden becomes even more pronounced.

The financial implications of declining academic performance are also significant, as students who fail or drop out may lose scholarships or bursaries, and may be unable to access further funding for their studies. This financial strain can trap students in abusive cohabiting relationships, as they may see no alternative means of supporting their education (Ross et al., 2022).

Psychological Consequences

The psychological effects of GBVF on female students are profound and long-lasting. Survivors of intimate partner violence commonly experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Iman'Ishimwe Mukamana et al., 2020). In the context of cohabiting relationships, the psychological effects

of violence are compounded by isolation and secrecy that often characterize such arrangements (Gold, 2012).

Ross et al. (2022) found that female university students in South Africa who experienced IPV reported feelings of shame, fear, and self-blame, which further impeded their ability to seek help. The internalization of violence, as described by Hooks (2000), creates conditions in which women accept a "mark of victimization without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage." This internalized oppression perpetuates the cycle of violence, as victims may not recognize their right to live free from abuse.

The stigma associated with cohabitation and the secrecy surrounding such arrangements further compound the psychological effects of violence. Students who cannot disclose their living arrangements or their experiences of violence may lack access to the social support necessary for coping and recovery (Gold, 2012).

Physical Health and Sexual Consequences

The physical health consequences of GBVF in cohabiting relationships are both immediate and long-term. Physical violence can result in injuries ranging from bruises and broken bones to more severe injuries requiring hospitalization (Krug et al., 2002). Sexual violence carries risks of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, as well as unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions (Mlilo & Otieno, 2018).

Unwanted pregnancies are a particularly significant consequence of violence in cohabiting relationships among students. Research on early sexual debut among South African youth reveals that a significant proportion of young women experience unplanned pregnancies, many of which result from coercive sexual encounters (Harrison et al., 2005; Manzini, 2015). In cohabiting relationships, the pressure to engage in sexual activity is intensified by proximity and the expectation of intimacy, increasing the risk of unwanted pregnancies.

The decision-making around unwanted pregnancies is often constrained by the abusive context of the relationship. Students who become pregnant may face pressure from their partners to ~~terminate the pregnancy, leading to both physical~~

and psychological risks associated with unsafe abortions (Mlilo & Otieno, 2018). The stress of pregnancy, combined with the demands of parenting, often leads to dropping out of studies, further entrenching the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

Research Gaps and Limitations

The review of the literature reveals several significant gaps in current research on the intersection between cohabitation and GBVF among South African tertiary students.

Limited Focus on Femicide

The most significant gap identified in this review is the limited attention to femicide as an outcome of violence in cohabiting relationships among students. While the literature documents high rates of GBV among cohabiting students, research explicitly linking cohabitation to femicide is scarce. This gap is particularly concerning given South Africa's high rates of femicide and the fact that many femicide cases occur in intimate partner contexts (Ndlovu et al., 2020).

The limited research on femicide and cohabitation may reflect a broader reluctance to confront the potential severity of violence in student relationships. However, as Ndlovu et al. (2020) argue, understanding the factors that contribute to femicide is essential for developing effective prevention strategies. This review highlights the urgent need for research that specifically examines the pathways from cohabiting relationships to fatal outcomes among female tertiary students.

Lack of Longitudinal Studies

Most of the literature reviewed relies on cross-sectional designs, which limit understanding of the temporal dynamics of cohabitation and GBVF. There is a notable lack of longitudinal studies tracking students' experiences of violence over time, examining how patterns of violence evolve as relationships progress, and identifying risk and protective factors.

Limited South African-Specific Research

While there is a growing body of research on GBVF in South African higher education, studies specifically examining the role of cohabitation as a risk factor remain limited. Much of the literature on cohabitation among students comes from other contexts, particularly the United States and other

Western countries, and may not fully capture the unique social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the South African context.

Underrepresentation of Institutional Factors

Although structural factors such as accommodation shortages are identified as drivers of cohabitation, the literature provides limited analysis of institutional responsibility for addressing these factors. Research examining how institutional policies contribute to or alleviate the conditions that force students into cohabitation is needed to inform policy reforms.

Underreporting and Sample Biases

Many of the studies reviewed rely on self-report data, which may be affected by underreporting due to stigma, fear, or shame associated with GBVF. Additionally, studies that recruit participants from university support services may overrepresent more severe cases of violence, while missing those who do not seek help.

Discussion

Synthesis of Key Findings

This scoping review has mapped the existing evidence on the intersection between cohabitation, IPV, and femicide among female tertiary students in South Africa. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, institutional, personal, and socio-cultural factors that link cohabitation to elevated GBVF risks, with significant consequences for students' academic, psychological, and physical well-being.

The review confirms earlier assertions (Makhene, 2022; Kasim & Falola, 2017) that cohabitation is not merely a private choice but is often driven by structural and institutional factors beyond students' control. The shortage of affordable on-campus accommodation and the financial pressures facing students create conditions in which cohabitation becomes a necessity rather than a freely chosen lifestyle. This finding has significant implications for institutional responsibility in GBVF prevention, as universities must address the accommodation crisis as part of their broader GBVF response strategies.

The finding that female students in cohabiting relationships experience elevated rates of IPV, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial violence, aligns with international evidence (Yllo &

Straus, 2016; Iman'Ishimwe Mukamana et al., 2020) and highlights the need for targeted interventions for this population. The private and often secretive nature of cohabiting arrangements creates conditions in which violence can persist undetected, and students may lack access to the support networks and institutional responses available to students in campus residences.

The effects of cohabitation-related GBVF on students' academic outcomes, psychological well-being, and physical health underscore the urgency of addressing this issue. The finding that violence in cohabiting relationships leads to poor academic performance, stress, and mental health challenges suggests that GBVF is not only a social justice issue but also a significant threat to educational outcomes and the transformation potential of higher education in South Africa.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review have important theoretical implications for understanding the intersections between structural inequality, cohabitation, and GBVF. The concept of internalized oppression, as articulated by Hooks (2000), provides a framework for understanding why many female students remain in abusive cohabiting relationships despite experiencing violence. The expectation of passivity and subordination that characterizes patriarchal socialisation, combined with financial dependency and social isolation, can lead women to accept violence as an inevitable part of their intimate relationships.

The findings also underscore the importance of an intersectional approach to GBVF, which recognizes the ways in which multiple forms of inequality and oppression intersect to shape vulnerability to violence (Crenshaw, 1991). In the context of tertiary education, female students' vulnerability to GBVF in cohabiting relationships is shaped not only by their gender but also by their socio-economic status, race, and age. Students from low-income backgrounds, who are often dependent on male partners for financial support, face heightened vulnerability, as do those who are younger and less experienced in navigating intimate relationships.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of this review have several

implications for policy and practice in South African higher education.

Expanding Institutional Accommodation

The most immediate policy implication is the need for universities to expand affordable on-campus accommodation. The housing crisis is not simply an administrative issue but a significant driver of GBVF, as students forced into cohabitation due to lack of accommodation face heightened vulnerability to violence. Universities must invest in expanding their residential capacity and developing alternative housing solutions, such as partnerships with private providers or government housing schemes.

Strengthening GBVF Policies and Responses

Universities must strengthen their GBVF prevention and response mechanisms to address the specific needs of cohabiting students. This includes developing policies that explicitly address the risks associated with off-campus and cohabiting arrangements, providing support services that are accessible to students living off campus, and fostering a culture of reporting that reduces the stigma associated with disclosure.

Peer Support and Bystander Intervention

The literature suggests that peer support and bystander intervention can be effective strategies for addressing sexual violence and IPV on campus (Palmer et al., 2018). Universities should develop programmes that train students to recognize signs of abuse in their peers, intervene safely and effectively, and provide support to those experiencing violence. Bystander intervention programmes are particularly important for addressing violence in cohabiting relationships, which often occur outside the reach of institutional authorities.

Financial Support and Economic Empowerment

The financial dependency that characterizes many cohabiting relationships is a significant risk factor for GBVF. Universities should explore ways to reduce students' financial dependency on intimate partners through increased bursaries, scholarships, and other forms of financial support. Additionally, programmes that promote economic empowerment and financial literacy among female students can reduce vulnerability to economic

abuse.

Educational Programmes

Prevention of GBVF in cohabiting relationships requires comprehensive educational programmes that address both the structural determinants of vulnerability and the individual attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate violence. Programmes should address gender norms, relationship expectations, consent, and healthy relationship dynamics. Importantly, programmes must engage men and boys as allies in prevention, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality (Flood, 2015).

Recommendations for Future Research

The significant research gaps identified in this review highlight the need for further research on the intersection between cohabitation and GBVF among South African tertiary students.

Research on Femicide

There is an urgent need for research that specifically examines the pathways from cohabitation to femicide among female students. Studies that combine quantitative analysis of femicide cases with qualitative exploration of the dynamics of abusive cohabiting relationships would be particularly valuable for informing prevention strategies.

Longitudinal Research

Longitudinal studies that track students' experiences of cohabitation and GBVF over time are needed to understand the temporal dynamics of violence and identify risk and protective factors. Such research would also provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of violence on students' educational and life outcomes.

Institutional-Level Research

Research examining how different institutional contexts affect students' vulnerability to GBVF in cohabiting relationships is needed to inform targeted interventions. This includes research on housing policies, support services, reporting mechanisms, and the campus culture around relationships and gender.

Intervention Research

There is a need for research that evaluates the effectiveness of different interventions for preventing and responding to GBVF in cohabiting

relationships. This includes research on the effectiveness of campus accommodation policies, support services, educational programmes, and peer support initiatives.

Conclusion

This scoping review has provided a comprehensive synthesis of evidence on the intersection between cohabitation, intimate partner violence, and femicide among female tertiary students in South Africa. The findings reveal that cohabitation is not simply a lifestyle choice but is often driven by structural and institutional factors, including accommodation shortages and financial constraints. Cohabiting female students experience elevated rates of violence, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse, with significant consequences for their academic performance, psychological well-being, and physical health.

The review has identified significant gaps in the current evidence base, particularly regarding femicide outcomes, longitudinal dynamics, and the role of institutional policies in shaping vulnerability. These gaps highlight the need for

further research to inform evidence-based interventions.

Addressing GBVF in cohabiting relationships among tertiary students requires a multi-level approach that addresses structural determinants, strengthens institutional responses, and promotes cultural change. Universities have a responsibility not only to respond to violence when it occurs but to create environments that prevent violence from occurring in the first place. This requires investment in accommodation, financial support, comprehensive policies and procedures, and a campus culture that values gender equality and respectful relationships.

The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated. As South Africa continues to grapple with some of the highest rates of violence against women globally, the tertiary education sector has a crucial role to play in breaking the cycle of violence and building a more just and equitable society. By addressing the specific vulnerabilities of cohabiting students, universities can contribute to the broader national effort to end GBVF and create safe, supportive environments for all students.

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