

# A STUDY ON ATTITUDES OF SRI LANKAN UNDERGRADUATES TOWARDS GENDER BASED VIOLENCE - A REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

*A review of published articles on attitudes towards Gender Based Violence (GBV) among Sri Lankan undergraduates was conducted. The methodology used in the study was based on the Cochrane Review Method, through which the research question/objective of the study was assessed towards Gender Based Violence by undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. A pre-determined selection criteria was developed and, three articles were systematically selected from a total of 4297 published in multiple databases. The three selected studies included a total of 543 male and female undergraduates. Overall, they had expressed attitudes endorsing the use of violence and victim blaming in various forms of GBV. These highlighted the presence of schemas promoting traditional gender norms, while the need to conduct more studies assessing attitudes towards GBV in Sri Lanka became evident. It is further recognized that these findings should be utilized to develop GBV preventive interventions within the university curriculum and the student services systems.*

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Gender Based Violence (GBV), GBV preventive

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is a pervasive phenomenon that negatively impacts the wellbeing of women around the world. GBV is defined as any act of violence that is directed against a female on the basis of gender, which may inflict physical, psychological or sexual harm, including threat of such acts, any forms of compulsion and restriction of freedom (CEDAW, 1992). Though Sri Lanka lacks an overall statistic on prevalence of GBV, studies suggest that the prevalence rate of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) ranges between 20%-60% among women in different areas of the country based on reported incidents (SLMA, 2011; Guruge et al, 2016). In addition to this, GBV in the form of incest, rape, IPV and dating violence has been reported from various settings, which unfortunately also includes educational institutes (SLMA, 2011), particularly higher education institutions such as universities, considered for this review

A report compiled by the University Grants Commission (UGC), Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA) & CARE organization in 2015, stated that local universities can be identified as sites in which Sexual

and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) takes place. The report attributed this to the refusal of universities to acknowledge incidences of GBV, despite the frequent presence of such practices on campus and within the university community (UGC, FUTA & CARE, 2015). Adding to this, studies conducted at state universities in Sri Lanka related to the prevalence of GBV within universities indicated that it exists mainly in the form of dating violence, ragging and harassment (Gunewardena et al, 2011; as cited in UGC, FUTA & CARE, 2015). In a study conducted among 250 medical students at the University of Colombo, it was shown that students faced GBV incidents during lectures, practical sessions (dissections, laboratories), and discussions and even in clinical appointments. The harassment was physical, sexual, verbal and psychological. Majority of perpetrators were reported as academic staff members (as mentioned in UGC, FUTA & CARE, 2015). Findings from another study highlighted the use of violence by male partners for coercion based on a sample of 283 female undergraduates from 3 faculties of a Sri Lankan university.

Nearly 64% of participants reported incidence of coerced sexual relations, while verbal abuse and physical abuse were also reported. According to the study, abuse was tolerated due to fear of losing the relationship (Gunewardena et al, 2011). Evidently such studies highlight a strong need for addressing and preventing GBV practices among undergraduates, which has become a hindrance to their well-being and education at higher education institutes. The repercussions of such incidents or the psychological impact has been considered negative, as incidents of GBV in universities can lead to mental health, educational and romantic relationship issues among victims (AHRC, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to provide interventions to prevent the incidence of GBV in universities.

In order to create such interventions, it is imperative to first identify the depth and breadth of attitudes held towards GBV among undergraduates. Though studies on prevalence rates assist to highlight specific issues, majority of the studies related to GBV in Sri Lankan universities do not provide a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Therefore, it is a necessity to examine the underlying mechanisms

and discourse connected with language, for effective interventions to be developed to reduce the prevalence of GBV within universities.

When considering the reasons that lead to the widespread prevalence of GBV, a study by Lips (2010) explains that GBV is largely practiced among individuals who believe that interpersonal violence is a suitable mechanism to solve issues, and in societies which condone the use of violence. Adding to this, Sayem, Begum and Moneesha's (2012) study on IPV has highlighted attitudes as a strong predictor of violence in comparison to social factors. Those who have high levels of acceptance of violence against women are most likely to accept and use violence as an appropriate form of conflict resolution and revenge, especially in the event of partner disputes (Sayem, Begum and Moneesha, 2012). Another factor that provides an explanation is the notion of 'masculine superiority', which has shown to lead to practices favouring GBV (Lips, 2010). However, it shows that women's own attitudes and behaviours towards GBV can also inadvertently enforce such practices, especially by adopting a sense of worthlessness, helplessness and sometimes by

active perpetuation of customs that promote GBV (Lips, 2010). However, the sense of entitlement among men and expectance of submissiveness in women may not be a product of their independent thinking. It has been mentioned that this is related to the cultural and societal norms that have shaped the schematic representations of gender roles (Bem, 1984), leading to superiority and inferiority complexes between the two genders. As this paper focused on reviewing studies about the attitudes of university students towards GBV, it became evident that there is cause for serious concern about the existence of such attitudes and practices that promote GBV within the tertiary education system.

University communities, as a hub of intellectual prominence with teachers and students interacting to build a discourse of higher achievements in education have an obligation to ensure the civic and educational rights of those involved. Mainly since it has been stated that ensuring these rights contribute to upholding community safety, rights and responsibilities (Towl, 2016). According to Towl (2016), graduates are a group who would assume positions of power and responsibility subsequent to higher

education. Therefore, it is evident that universities have a responsibility to shape attitudes of current and future generations. Based on this notion, Towl (2016) further claims that it is important for undergraduates to be exposed to a culture on campus that rejects any form of GBV, as the effects will be felt by society when these graduates undertake their positions of power subsequently.

In consideration of all these factors, this study aims to review previous research that has assessed attitudes towards GBV among Sri Lankan undergraduates, to gain a better understanding of the cognitive, behavioural, social and psychological elements that precedes the development of GBV condoning attitudes.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The Cochrane Review method as published in the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (Higgins & Green, 2011) was adopted as a guideline to conduct this review. The generic steps of a Cochrane Review as mentioned below, were followed accordingly:

1. Formulating a research question

2. Establishing a protocol/selection criteria
3. Search for evidence, critically appraise and extract data from included studies
4. Data synthesis and presentation - explaining the findings and summarizing main findings in a tabular format
5. Interpret and present results and write the review (Henderson, Craig, Willis, Tovey & Webster, 2010)

This section will only concern the first two steps since the results and discussion sections concern steps 3, 4 and 5.

### **Formulating a research question**

As evident from the gap in literature (SLMA, 2011; Guruge et al, 2016; Gunewardena et al, 2011), it was necessary to review studies that have captured the attitudes of local undergraduates towards GBV. Therefore, as the first step of the study, the research question was formulated “to assess the attitudes of Sri Lankan undergraduates towards Gender Based Violence”.

### **Establishing a protocol/selection criteria**

In an effort to avoid author bias during the review study, the Cochrane review recommends that

the selection criteria should be set ‘a priori’ to the search of relevant articles (Higgins & Green, 2011). Therefore, the following criteria was set to narrow the selection:

- Participants – the participants of the selected studies were to include male and female undergraduates of state universities in Sri Lanka
- Constructs measured – the selected studies should have measured attitudes towards GBV
- Methodology – the methods used in the studies were expected to include either Quantitative, Qualitative or mixed methods
- Questionnaires – the nature of the questionnaires used in the studies were to be considered; as being standardized or researcher developed
- Main findings - the main findings of the studies were expected to be related to attitudes on GBV.

Based on the selection criteria of the study, the keywords used for the search were *GBV attitudes, GBV beliefs, Sri Lankan undergraduates, Sri Lankan University students and Sri Lankan students’ violence*. As the Cochrane Reviews suggests the use of large databases to

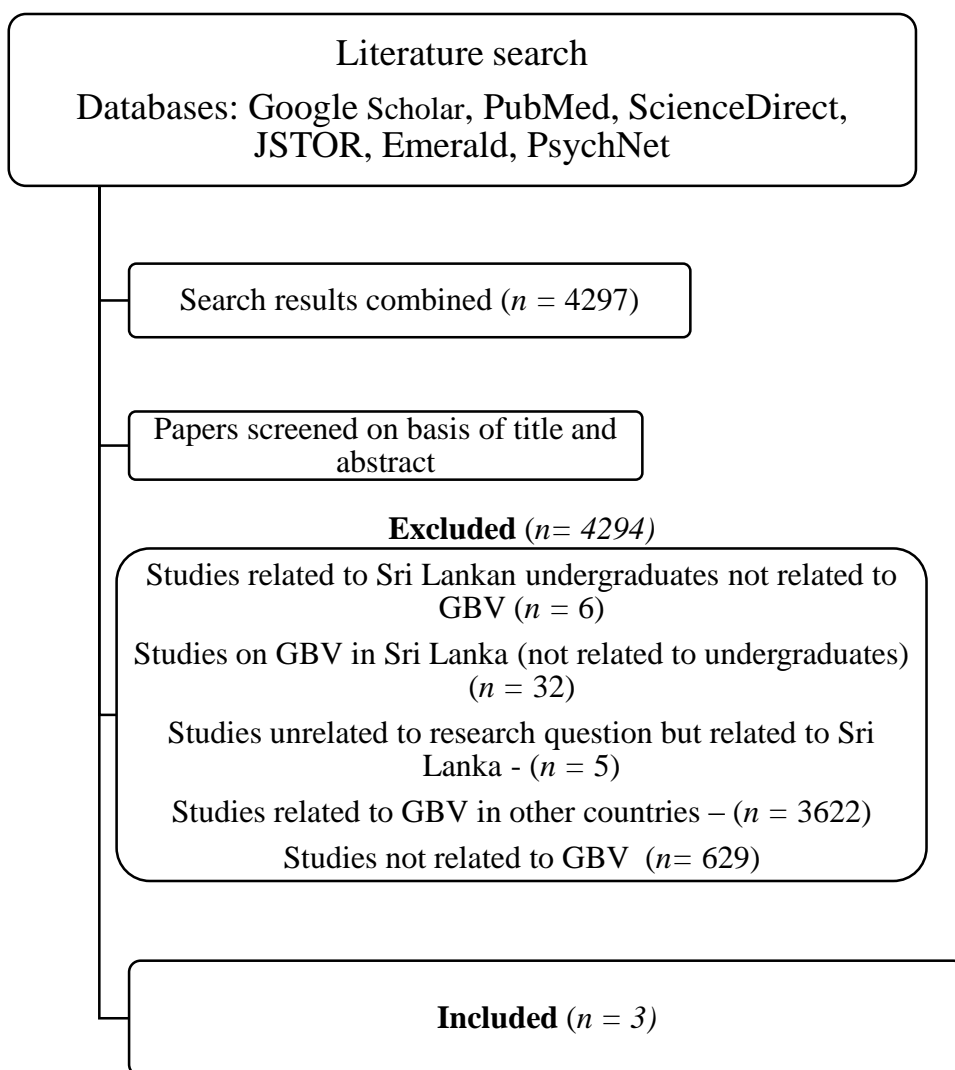
conduct searches; Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Emerald and PsychNet were considered for this review.

### 3. RESULTS

The outcome of the search produced only three articles that adhered to the selection criteria from a total of 4297 articles from the databases used in the study. The three articles that fit the selection criteria were found in Google Scholar from a total of 3660 articles and three articles (which were also found on Google Scholar) in PubMed from a total of 5 articles. The results of other databases (ScienceDirect -196, JSTOR 431, Emerald - 5 and PsychNet - 0) were excluded as it did not fit the selection criteria. The reasons for exclusion is illustrated in Figure 1 along with the search process that was used. The articles were not restricted by time

period (such as the past 10 years), as the option to search for articles from ‘anytime’ was selected. The number of articles that were found were current as at March 2018.

In total the selected three studies included 543 participants, two studies included both male and female undergraduates (Haj-Yahiya & de Zoysa, 2007; Axemo et al., 2018) while one study constituted of male undergraduates (Darj et al., 2017). All the three studies assessed attitudes towards wife beating (Haj-Yahiya & de Zoysa, 2007) and attitudes towards various forms of GBV (Axemo et al., 2018; Darj et al., 2017). It must be mentioned that the methodologies in the selected studies were different to one another, one being strictly qualitative (Haj-Yahiya & de Zoysa, 2007), one with mixed methods (Axemo et al., 2018) and one using only a qualitative approach (Darj et al., 2017). A summary of the main findings is mentioned in table 1 below.



*Figure 1: Identification and selection of studies for the review.*

*Table 1: Summary of main findings*

Study	Participants	Method	Main Findings	Recommendations
Haj-Yahiya & de Zoysa (2007)	476 undergraduates 241 – female 235 – male	Quantitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Between 7.2% and 33.4% of the participants believed that in some occasions wife beating is justified.</li> <li>Male participants were significantly more likely than their female counterparts to justify wife beating (<math>r = -.21</math>, <math>p &lt; .001</math>).</li> <li>Between 14% and 24% of the sample believed that women benefit from beating. Males showed a greater tendency than females to believe that women benefit from beating (<math>r = .26</math>, <math>p &lt; .001</math>).</li> <li>Between 8.2% and 63.1% participants felt that battered women are responsible for their beating. Male participants were more likely than their female counterparts to perceive battered women as responsible for their beating (<math>r = .20</math>, <math>p &lt; .001</math>).</li> <li>A between 71.7% and 86.1% of the participants believed that wife abuse is a social problem and should be considered as such by social agencies and the law.</li> <li>Between 33.3% and 48.2% of the participants believed that abusive husbands were</li> </ul>	<p>Future studies to – Examine cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes towards wife beating.</p> <p>Interventions – To include information on GBV in medical curriculum, provide skills for communicating with abused wives and their perpetrator husbands/or partners.</p>

			responsible for their violent behavior. Females showed a greater tendency than males to perceive husbands as being responsible for wife abuse ( $r = -.19, p = .001$ ).	
Axemo et al. (2018)	Quantitative = 25 participants 16 female, 9 male Qualitative (from the same sample) 7 female, 8 male	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quantitative</li> <li>44% of female students agreed with "If a woman doesn't physically fight back, it's not rape" compared to 33% of male students (pre-test).</li> <li>44% male students and 38% female students agree that "In any rape case, one would have to question whether the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation" (pre-test).</li> <li>56% of female students agreed with "Some women ask to be raped by the way they dress and behave" while 70%-80% male students agreed with the same (both pre and post-test).</li> </ul> <p>Qualitative Themes found during the focus group discussions were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusion of GBV training as part of curriculum,</li> <li>The bystander effect in GBV events</li> <li>Ways in which academics and security personnel can be used to monitor and prevent GBV incidents</li> </ul>	<p>Further research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A longitudinal approach, and survey both educators' and students' experiences of violence, ragging and on training modules of GBV within Universities.</li> </ul> <p>Interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To provide the piloted intervention in the study during orientation week at universities.</li> </ul>

Darj et al., (2017)	42 male students in 7 focus groups	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themes found during the discussion were :</li> <li>• GBV unacceptable but exists – change in attitudes towards GBV</li> <li>• Presence of sexual harassment, female tolerance of violence,</li> <li>• Men's right to punish</li> <li>• Fixed gender roles - Patriarchal values accepted in society, female mobility control</li> <li>• Multiple factors cause GBV – Alcohol, genetics, cultural acceptance of violence, low education, lack of communication</li> <li>• Prevention of GBV - girls and boys should be equally socialized, life skills education, premarital counselling</li> </ul>	Interventions - Shared education and community mobilization for prevention of GBV
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In terms of the attitudes that were depicted in the studies, both male and female participants showed instances in which violence was justified with victim blaming. For example, in the study by Haj-Yahiya and de Zoysa (2007), it showed that 7.2% - 33.4% of the participants believed that in some occasions wife beating is justified with male participants more likely than their female counterparts to justify wife beating ( $r = .21$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The same study (Haj-Yahiya & de Zoysa, 2007) showed that male participants

were more likely than their female counterparts to perceive battered women as responsible for their beating ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It was noted that 7%-33% may include a large variation of the attitudes of participants justifying wife beating. This result was derived from the revised scale of the Inventory of Beliefs About Wife Beating, developed by Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, and Linz (1987) in the Haj-Yahiya and de Zoysa study. As a point of criticism, these numbers suggest a wider variation of beliefs

than a uniformed belief regarding the attitudes held towards wife beating among a group of medical students. However, similar to the findings of the Haj-Yahiya and de Zoysa study, the study by Axemo and colleagues (2018) highlighted that 56% of female students agreed with the statement “some women ask to be raped by the way they dress and behave” (p. 14), while 70%-80% male students agreed with the same in both pre and post-tests, signifying that the training programme used as an intervention could not alter their pre-existing attitude. In the focus group discussions of the Darj and colleagues’ study (2017), it was found that under the theme of ‘a man’s right to punish his wife’, participants reported that a woman’s submissiveness during domestic arguments can avoid violence, otherwise the man is compelled to hit, unable to control his anger. Overall, the three studies showed that certain forms of GBV are seen acceptable to both male and female undergraduates included in this review study.

Based on such findings, the authors of all three studies have suggested the need for introducing interventions and providing knowledge on equitable practices. As the Haj-Yahiya and de Zoysa

(2007) study was conducted among medical students, they have proposed the need to include information on GBV in to the curriculum, as well as to introduce appropriate methods of communicating with future patients who might be victims of GBV. It was also recommended to examine experiences of GBV among students as well as academics in the university system, which may show the extent to which it exists. Another suggestion was to include an educational session to create awareness on GBV during the freshers’ orientation (Axemo et al., 2018) and to introduce the notions of equal opportunities to both men and women within the education system and general public (Darj et al., 2017).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Sri Lankan undergraduates’ attitudes towards GBV showed justification of wife beating and victim blaming among both female and male undergraduates (Haj Yahiya & de Zoysa, 2007; Darj et al., 2017; Axemo et al., 2018). They imply the presence of schemas of gender norms favouring victim blaming (Unger, 2001). For example, Grubb

and Turner (2012) states that schemas of rape myth acceptance tallies with the notion that “people generally get what they deserve” (p. 14), and the extent to which an individual adheres to traditional gender role beliefs is a significant predictor of rape myth acceptance. Such schemas may have reinforced the idea that violence is an appropriate form of reaction to certain events. According to Lips (2010), around the world incidents of GBV is characterized by a sense of male superiority, regarding violence as a private matter (in families) and the belief that violence is an appropriate response to issues. Such attitudes tends to support the development of beliefs that women are to be used and abused as needed and further to reinforce the belief that under certain circumstances, wife beating or rape can be allowed (Lips, 2010). Since women tend to internalize such beliefs due to socio-cultural expectations of female submissiveness and male entitlement (Lips, 2010), the outcomes of such belief system can only be considered negative and detrimental to the whole society with regards to gender equity. Even though the results cannot be generalized to the whole population due to the small number of studies

being included in this review, it indicated that such beliefs justifying GBV and perpetuating victim blaming exists within the university system. It is of concern that these students are the ‘highly educated’ youth cohort which are to undertake positions of power in society.

Education is believed to close the gap between vulnerability to GBV and empowerment of women. This is supported by research as educational institutes have shown potential to play a proactive role in the prevention of GBV through lobbying for women’s human rights (Bott, Morrison and Ellsberg, 2005) and equity among the genders, which can impact on attitudinal change.

Nevertheless, unfortunately the results of this review did not show support for this type of benefit from education similar to other research conducted in this area. According to Bott, Morrison and Ellsberg (2005), evidence from many middle and low-income countries show that schools and universities of such countries have many aspects to develop with regards to the prevention of GBV. They (Bott et al 2005), cite the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment by educators and students as an example to make their

argument. They further mention that educational institutes such as schools and universities cannot act as positive agents in GBV prevention as long as the social environment of such institutes condone discrimination and GBV practices (Bott, Morrison and Ellsberg, 2005). This has been shown in the reports produced on attitudes towards GBV from local universities in Sri Lanka indicating that they are evidently susceptible to such practices (SLMA, 2011; UGC, FUTA & CARE, 2015).

It is therefore important to strengthen attitudes that reject GBV among university students to ensure wellbeing and the right to education for everyone. The development of such attitudes can be facilitated within universities through effective interventions. As per the suggestions from the studies, interventions which can create awareness on harmful effects of GBV and encouraging re-evaluation of inequitable socio-cultural norms and practices is highly recommended. Sri Lankan universities have a responsibility towards current and future generations to ensure a safe environment for both sexes to gain an education without negative effects of practices such as GBV. Therefore, enforcing the existing

policies and laws of Sri Lanka which promote gender equity holds the key to such processes. Overall, the studies also emphasized that students should be encouraged to inculcate equity to their student culture by providing opportunities based on skills, instead of stereotypical gendered assumptions. In addition, interventions should be introduced for students as well as teachers and non-academic administrative staff of higher education to ensure the sustainability of such practices. Most importantly, such interventions must include both males and females, since the findings show that females either knowingly or unknowingly govern 'stereotypical' female behaviours and condone violent male behaviours, which in turn promotes acts of GBV.

The recommendations provided by the three studies included in this review clearly shows that it is imperative to include information of GBV and introduce effective preventive action within the university curriculum. In addition, the review outcome strongly highlights the importance of integrating gender equitable norms into state level tertiary education, without which the preventive

process of GBV may seem impractical.

The review also highlights the need for conducting further research to confirm these results using undergraduates of state universities, since the selection was limited to only three studies from a total of 4297, which were not homogenous in their respective methodologies used. Thus, the review lacks a stringent mechanism of comparing the quality of the studies. This stems from the issue that there is lack of published research related to the topic of attitudes towards GBV among undergraduates, in comparison to prevalence studies using the same sample population. From a psychological perspective, such studies are crucial to understand the existence of GBV in the form of ingrained social norms, beliefs and values related to male and female ideals within the university community. These can also decode methods by which changes in attitudes can be encouraged among the student population. It is also acknowledged that studies related to GBV are frequently carried out in the country. However, as the number of publications that result from such studies are limited, it restricts the knowledge base and

recommendations that can be used when developing interventions to the local student population. Finally, it also limits the understanding of the depth and breadth of the issue being investigated.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This review study was conducted to examine the evidence for attitudes towards GBV among Sri Lankan undergraduates in state universities. All three studies with a total of 543 participants from 3 published studies included both males and female undergraduates.

The results indicated attitudes that accepted instances of GBV, denoting that in certain events, mainly domestic disputes and rape, violence seemed to be accepted as an appropriate response. Such findings highlight the importance of conducting further research in this regard to clarify and confirm these findings which were derived from a limited number of available publications.

In addition, all three studies emphasized the need to introduce intra-curricular programmes to change such attitudes. Therefore, the need for conducting further research and increasing the awareness of social norms/practices which

condone GBV is essential to create a higher education system that can produce graduates who will ensure equity for both sexes in Sri Lankan society.

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