

FACTORS THAT MAY HINDER HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WHO HAVE UNDERGONE SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN PARTIAL
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DECLARATION

I, Were Nicole, M23B15/113, hereby declare that this dissertation titled 'Factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence' is my original work has not been submitted to any other institution for any reward.

For existing studies whose knowledge complemented the research study, proper citation has been applied and recognition as expected by academic standards.

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Date: 22/04/2026

Were Nicole

APPROVAL

This is certification that with the undersigned supervisor's approval, the research study on "Factors that Hinder Help-seeking Behaviour Among University Students who have Experienced Sexual Violence" is therefore prepared for submission to the School of Social Sciences for review.

Mrs. Rosemary Bwire

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rosemary Bwire', with a large circular flourish at the beginning.

Date: 22/04/2026

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ABSTRACT

This study used Uganda Christian University as a point of focus to gather information that explained the emotional and physical factors that discourage university students to seek help after experiencing sexual violence. Both qualitative and quantitative have been utilized as a mixed methods approach. Structured questionnaires were given to participating students to respond to, to be support gathering of quantitative data. Key informant interviews with university administrators and other staff along with review of the student handbook were used to collect qualitative data.

Of the 59 respondents, 36 reported to have experienced sexual violence. The outcomes of the study indicated that if help was sought, most respondents who did depended on informal support networks consisting of friends and family. Major barriers to help-seeking were determined to be physical barriers such as lack of proof and delayed reporting and also emotional barriers such as being afraid of judgement, blaming oneself and fear of retaliation.

The study also clarifies the reason as to why there were no formally documented incidents of sexual violence in the records with university offices. Especially with existing institutional policies and support systems, the clarification indicated underreporting. The study's findings emphasize the need for greater awareness, more convenient access to sources of support and more strategies centred around survivors as a way to promote students help-seeking intentions and actions.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Sexual violence is an act committed against someone's sexual integrity without that person's freely given consent. It can be physical or non-contact, affects all ages and genders, and the person committing it may be known or a stranger. Sexual violence is recognized globally as a major public health and human rights concern that disproportionately affects young people.

Globally, sexual violence has been acknowledged as a critical human rights and public health challenge that significantly impacts youth. Sexual violence has been defined by the World Health Organisation (2002) as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act or unwanted sexual advances made under pressure. It involves rape, that is defined as the penetration of the vagina or anus with a penis, other bodily part or object that I forced or otherwise coerced. Due to their transitional life stages, exposure to peer-driven contexts and social conditions that may normalize silence when it comes to abuse university students represent a particularly sensitive group. The low percentage of help-seeking among victims is still a major concern even though international research has demonstrated high a significant rate of sexual violence within universities. Help-seeking after experiencing sexual violence is affected by a complex interplay of emotional and physical factors as well as service awareness.

After an incident of sexual violence, victims can have weakness, physical injuries, impaired movement and restricted safe access to support networks. Institutional shortcomings such as inefficient transportation, regulated operating hours and long distance from essential services further complicate these difficulties that survivors experience. Also emotional reactions such as fear, guilt, uncertainty and feelings of anxiety of the possibility of being overlooked or dismissed influence decisions to seek help. When it comes to understanding the reason behind avoidance of care, it is crucial to keep in mind the significant role that emotional and physical limitations or barriers play.

Emotional distress is one of the greatest signs of delayed help-seeking or no help-seeking. This has been discovered in studies carried out not only regionally but in global contexts as well. Concerns about privacy, social consequences as well as uncertainty about their experiences classifying as sexual abuse is common in students who have undergone sexual violence. It is rare for physical and emotional factors hindering help-seeking behaviour to exist independently, they complement one another and play significant roles in enforcing silence as a coping mechanism. Despite the availability of formal reporting procedures, survivors continue to be mishandled why the emotional and physical factors hindering help-seeking behaviour are neglected.

With African cultures, gender roles, cultural expectations and stigma associated with victimization frequently influence conversations concerning sexual violence. Social acceptance, moral judgement and family approval are particularly significant. Fear of conflict with those major aspects establishes emotional obstacles to seeking help in any case of sexual violence. Institutional and infrastructure limitations can also restrict physical access to support services. Even as awareness campaigns have spread in certain parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, there is a noticed need of research which focuses on the emotional and physical challenges that university students endure and affect their help-seeking decisions.

Institutional weakness in addressing sexual violence, stigma and victim blaming attitudes was emphasized in findings from studies carried out in Uganda. A lot of reviewed research focuses more on prevalence and legal frameworks than on the lived experiences of survivors attempting to access support. Context based studies on students' decisions following trauma and how they are influenced by emotional and physical challenges are scarce. Without having this knowledge, universities are at risk of adopting policies that overlook the physical and emotional factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among students that have undergone such trauma.

The focus of this study is to identify indicators of sexual violence and to study the emotional and physical factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour of university students. By focusing on these dimensions, the research aims to generate evidence that supports survivor-informed institutional responses and strengthens access to care within higher education environments.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Sexual violence on university students or college students is a prevalent problem that is not frequently reported (CDC, 2020). While sexual violence can occur anywhere to females and males of all ages, university age females between 18 and 21 are more likely to be victimised than other groups. Despite the passage of title IX and other protections through federal and state laws for students, sexual violence and harassment continue to be a barrier to education for too many students (The American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2018). Being a student at university is a challenging experience which mostly occurs during early adulthood, at that stage of human development, an individual experiences more alterations compared to other stages of life. This period of life is best for physical strength, however it is the worst time for mental health due to demanding tasks and other personal problems and challenges students experience. In such situations there is an increase in depression, loneliness and other interpersonal issues amongst students, therefore a high potential for students to seek help. Students also have growing levels of personal, academic, career and interpersonal needs which often leads them to the need for assistance.

Much as the universities have got guiding laws for students, help-seeking behaviour in Uganda Christian University has been hindered among university students who have experienced sexual violence. This continues to be a barrier to education for too many students (The American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2018). The outcome is that many students continue to be negatively impacted by sexual violence and fail to seek help as a result of different hindrances which is unlawful. According to Belly et al (2018), there is extreme variance in how institutions respond to sexual violence across university and colleges, even with the media attention and federal guidance. This research aims at addressing Factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence. An additional concern is that universities make it challenging for students to report on campus, and colleges are not adequately reporting these incidents of sexual violence when they occur. The outcome is that many students continue to be negatively impacted by sexual violence in schools and institutions which is unlawful. The study also looked at examining the attitudes of the students towards seeking psychological help.

Help-seeking behaviour should become a necessity for the students, taking into account that the students experience problems like mental illness, self-hatred among other psychological problems, here the problems that arise are; where the students should go for help and whether

the university provides relevant services for them. The university should provide students with psychological support because the general public and medical practitioners in Africa and Uganda in particular may not have sufficient knowledge about mental and psychological problems.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study served the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of the barriers that prevent university students from seeking help after experiencing sexual violence. It focused on the physical and emotional factors to establish a shift from general discussions of prevalence. The practical and psychological realities that shape survivor behaviour were highlights of the study. This is important to inform the development of interventions which are grounded in actual experiences rather than assumptions.

The study contributes to the provision of evidence to aid the development of survivor-centred policies and support structures. Safe and responsive environments are a requirement that university administration and governance are responsible to provide. Still many interventions available fail because they do not address the actual obstacles students face which can be psychological or physical.

The study gives light to the emotional aspects surrounding help-seeking behaviour. It benefits welfare of students and the university counselling department. Understanding of the emotional factors that influence help-seeking behaviour informs support services and motivates provision of trauma-informed care. Such developments can reduce on self-isolation by survivors, inform interventions to address educational disruption and prolonged emotional distress.

The study builds on existing academic literature on sexual violence within universities. It adds onto literature discussing prevalence of sexual violence and responses to it. By focusing on factors that may hinder help-seeking behaviour with students who have experienced sexual violence. The study provides a foundation for future research on sexual violence and student wellbeing. It also supports national and institutional efforts to promote gender equity, student safety, and public health.

Basically, the study's target is to fill the gap between practice and policy. The research assists in the creation of more effective and efficient support and care systems for university students. By identifying actionable barriers to help-seeking, the research supports the development of more accessible, compassionate, and effective systems

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 Major Objective

To examine the factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence at Uganda Christian University.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives;

1. To identify the indicators of sexual violence among university students.
2. To identify physical factors hindering help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experience sexual violence.
3. To identify emotional factors hindering help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence.
4. To generate evidence-based recommendations to inform development of interventions aimed at improving help-seeking behaviour among survivors of sexual violence.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the indicators of sexual violence among university students?
2. What physical factors hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence?
3. What emotional factors hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence?
4. How can the identified physical and emotional factors inform the development of interventions to improve help-seeking behaviour among survivors of sexual violence?

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focused on specifically on physical and emotional factors hindering help-seeking behaviour among university students of Uganda Christian University who have experienced sexual violence. It examined the indicators of sexual violence that may vary as sexual harassment, unwanted sexual touching, sexual coercion, attempted rape and rape as well as explore the physical and emotional factors hindering help-seeking behaviour of survivors. The study was context-specific carried out using students of Uganda Christian University main campus as subjects therefore not generalized to all universities in Uganda.

1.6 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Despite increasing attention to sexual violence, limited research has examined help-seeking behaviour among university students in Uganda. Channels responding to help-seeking are available but still not commonly used. Availability of resources alone is not enough to encourage help-seeking behaviour. Behaviour refers to the way in which one acts or conducts oneself especially towards others. The way one chooses to act is often influenced by a variety of factors. Due to the fact that some students may not seek help, the study explored the underlying factors that may influence students help-seeking decisions. The research is justified by the urgent need to promote safer and supportive academic environments.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Learning Theory. Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive way of understanding how social environments and psychological processes influence help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour is a psychological theory developed by Icek Ajzen a social psychologist. It explains that human behaviour is guided by behavioural intentions, which are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. This theory provides the understanding of why people choose to do certain things and for something to be done there is usually an intention behind it. A person can seek help with the intention to get support and safety because they are positively aware that help-seeking is equal to safety and support. Attitudes refer to an individual's evaluation of a behaviour, subjective norms relate to perceived social expectations and perceived behavioural control reflects a person's belief in their ability to perform a behaviour.

When it comes to sexual violence, 'need' alone is not enough to influence help-seeking behaviour. Survivors' perceptions of their experiences and expectations of social responses play an important role in shaping help-seeking behaviour. Feelings of embarrassment or denial

and fear of stigma can cause students to have negative attitudes towards reaching out. When silence is socially constructed, open communication can be discouraged within peer groups. Students that are concerned with availability, confidentiality and efficiency of support services may feel like they do not have adequate power or confidence to seek help. A survivor's choice to seek help or remain quiet is affected by a combination of physical and social influences.

Because it clarified how institutional trust, social judgement and emotional obstacles affect decision-making following experiences of sexual violence, this theory is crucial to the study. It encourages the investigation of the psychological and physical barriers that prevent university students from seeking help.

Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura an American psychologist. This theory emphasized that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social environments. Individuals model behaviour based on what they observe in peers, authority figures and institutional systems. When certain behaviours are rewarded or normalized, they are more likely to be repeated.

How others respond to disclosure of sexual violence within the university context is a learning point for students about social reactions. If disclosure is disregarded or met with criticism, it reinforces silence as a response among survivors or encourages it as the appropriate response after experiencing sexual violence. On the other hand supportive reactions identify help-seeking as safe and acceptable therefore teaching students that seeking help is an acceptable practice.

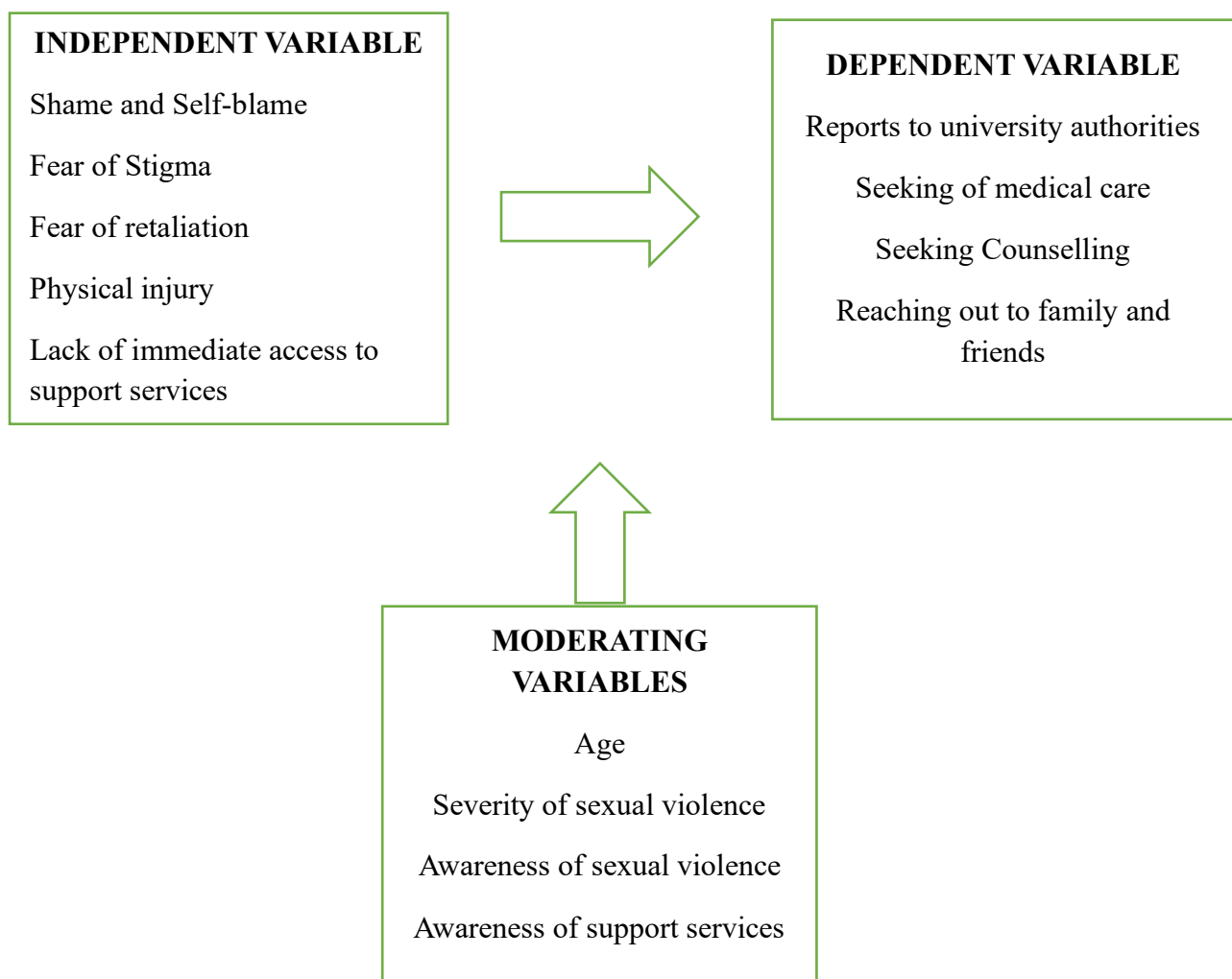
What we observe from our environments significantly influences our behaviour. From our interactions within our environments we learn what is considered acceptable or unacceptable and we adapt. The social learning theory provides clarification on how interactions and campus culture influence help-seeking decisions.

Individual decision making processes were explained by the theory of planned behaviour but the Social Learning Theory defines those choices within a larger social context. When taken as a whole, the theories demonstrate how both external social forces and interior psychological assessments influence help-seeking behaviour. Students don't make decisions on their own. Their actions are influenced by taught standards, expected outcomes and a sense of control over resources accessible to them.

Integration of the theory of planned behaviour and the social learning theory enhanced the study by interconnecting the university environment, social impact and emotional factors. This theoretical framework supported the study's analysis of help-seeking behaviour both as an individual choice and socially influenced reaction.

1.8 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by a conceptual framework that illustrated the physical and emotional factors influencing help-seeking behavior among university students who have experienced sexual violence. The independent variable of this study are categorized into the physical and emotional factors while the dependent variable is the help-seeking behavior as illustrated below;



Emotional factors include fear of judgement, stigma, self-blame, and fear of retaliation. These factors may enforce internal psychological barriers that discourage students from reaching out to disclose their experiences or seek support. For instance, students may avoid reporting incidents due to feelings of shame or concern about how they will be perceived by others.

Physical factors refer to conditions that may affect a student's ability or willingness to seek and access the appropriate help and this can be physical injury, delayed reporting and loss of evidence, distance from support services or lack of immediate access to support services. In most cases, the absence of visible physical evidence or delays in reporting may make it difficult for students to pursue formal help, particularly where institutional processes rely on evidence.

All together, the relationship between these factors and help-seeking behavior may be influenced by moderating variables such as age, awareness of sexual violence and awareness of available support services. These variables may affect how students perceive their experiences and the options available to them, therefore shaping their likelihood to seek help.

Overall, the framework assumed that higher levels of emotional and physical barriers reduce the likelihood of help-seeking while increased awareness and supportive conditions may enhance the likelihood of students accessing support services.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This section reviewed the existing literature aligned with the study objectives and relevant to the research study. The literature is organized thematically and guided by the study's conceptual framework, presenting evidence from global, African, sub-Saharan African, and Ugandan perspectives. The review focused on indicators of sexual violence, physical and emotional factors hindering help-seeking behaviour, and strategies to improve help-seeking among university students who have experienced sexual violence.

2.1 Indicators of Sexual Violence Among University Students

Globally, sexual violence among university students is recognized as a significant public health and human rights issue. According to the World Health Organization, sexual violence is regarded as any sexual act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting, sexual violence does not remain limited to intercourse, it is experienced in different forms that can be physical which includes attempted rape, groping, fondling or grabbing, forced kissing, sexual assault by partner, pressure or manipulation into sexual activity and reproductive coercion. It can also be non-physical which includes unwanted sexual comments or jokes, lewd gestures, cat calling, persistent unwanted romantic or sexual advances, emotional pressure, guilt or threats to obtain sex, sharing sexual rumours, unwanted sexual messages, explicit photos.

Research that was conducted within the regions of North America and Europe identify unwanted sexual comments which are verbal statements of a sexual nature directed at an individual without their consent causing discomfort, fear, humiliation or distress, unwanted sexual touching that involves non- consensual physical contact with a person's body in sexual nature such as touching breasts, buttocks, genitals without consent or forced kissing, groping and cornering someone in a sexual way, pressure into sexual activity that involves persuasion, manipulation into or persisted encouragement by one person of another to engage in sexual acts against their will without the use of physical force, online sexual harassment which involves unwanted sexual behaviour conducted through digital platforms including social media, messaging apps or email, attempted rape, and rape as common indicators, often perpetrated by acquaintances or peers (Anderson, 2022).

Studies carried out in African contexts hinted similar indicators, with additional emphasis on power imbalances, transactional relationships, gendered and cultural norms that normalize harassment and coercion (Kebirungi, 2021). Unequal distributions of authority, status, resources or influence may affect a person's ability to freely give or refuse consent, such power imbalances may occur between a third year student and a first year student or a financially dependent student and a sponsor or partner when one holds authority, financial control or social influence the navigation around consent becomes complicated. Relationships may rely on the exchange of material, financial, academic or social benefits for example financial support in exchange for intimacy, gifts or any other form of assistance tied to sexual expectations.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, studies reported sexual violence indicators including coercion, forced sexual acts, and survival sex, particularly among economically vulnerable students (Jewkes, 2015). Vulnerable students are often compelled to engage in sexual activity following intimidation, threats, manipulation, misuse of authority or abuse of power through threats of violence, blackmail, exploiting intoxication and using of economic dependence as leverage.

Ugandan studies carried out in institutions of higher learning identify sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances, coercive relationships, and rape as prevalent forms of sexual violence (Lubaale, 2023). Limited awareness of institutional definitions contributes to underreporting, supporting the framework's emphasis on contextual and institutional dynamics. Sexual harassment is often normalized as "flirting" or "joking" which minimizes its seriousness. Unwanted sexual advances go beyond casual attraction, they include repeated requests for dates after refusal, sending unsolicited sexual messages or images, following someone persistently, threats after rejection. Gender norms sometimes frame male persistence as romantic determination which can blur consent boundaries this creates emotional pressure especially for students who may fear being labelled as arrogant or social isolation.

2.2 Emotional Factors Hindering Help-Seeking Behaviour

According to the World Health Organization, a large population of survivors do not seek help from formal or informal support systems. The World Health Organization's research on violence against women highlights that stigma, shame and fear of community judgment discourage disclosure while lack of awareness of services, distrust in health and legal systems further prevent survivors from accessing care.

Emotional obstruction from help-seeking behaviour following sexual violence is rooted in stigma, fear of social judgment, and cultural expectations of silence significantly discourage survivors from seeking help (Bhana, 2018). In many African contexts, deeply embedded gender and cultural norms shape how survivors interpret their experiences and how they feel about seeking help, these norms influence emotional responses which play a role in influencing help-seeking behaviour. In many African societies, a woman's sexuality is linked to family dignity or sexual matters are considered private which may leave survivors feeling intense shame, fear of disgracing their family or guilt for bringing problems.

In sub-Saharan Africa, emotional distress is often internalized due to fear of retaliation and victim-blaming while structural challenges such as inadequate service availability compound these barriers (Jewkes, 2015). Often there are beliefs that women provoked sexual attention through dress and behaviour, refusal of sex in relationships is deemed disrespectful and that silence implies consent and these kind of beliefs cause victims to experience self-blame, embarrassment, fear of judgement or the fear of being considered as promiscuous. When sexual violence occurs with romantic relationships survivors may struggle with confusion, minimization and eventually learned helplessness.

2.3 Physical Factors Hindering help-seeking behaviour.

Physical barriers refer to practical and structural challenges that limit access to support services such as medical care, counselling, and reporting systems. These barriers are external to the individual and can significantly delay or prevent help-seeking among university students who have experienced sexual violence (Lucea et al, 2024).

One major physical barrier is the limited accessibility of services. University health and counselling services may operate during restricted hours, have long waiting times, or be difficult to access. These challenges can make it difficult for students to seek help, especially when they are managing academic responsibilities and other commitments. Research showed that difficulty in physically accessing services is one of the main reasons many survivors do not receive timely care (Reinholdz et. al 2025). On the contrary, findings from the study revealed that counselling services operating with trauma-informed approach to support

students emotionally or psychologically do exist within accessible hours but still remain underutilised by students.

Inability to access appropriate services. Appropriate services can be understood as interventions tailored to address a particular issue. Not all service providers may be in touch with the difficult nature of sexual violence. Because of this experiences can be dismissed or mishandled. Limited understanding surrounding sexual violence by individuals or organisations expected to provide support affects the quality of care. Shortage of trained professionals and lack of specialized care can contribute to low use of formal services among survivors. For example, offices such as the university police often focus more on procedure than on sensitive nature of sexual violence. This puts survivors at risk of retraumatization.

Financial constraints also act as a barrier to help-seeking. Help-seeking can be ignored as action because of financial constraints. Some students struggle with financial insecurity. The impact of sexual violence on one's life is quite heavy and often requires a holistic approach in order for survivors to heal. However, many survivors are unable to meet the costs that would allow them to access the appropriate services especially therapy. Good quality care is usually expensive and the inability to afford can discourage people from seeking help. This is particularly relevant in low and middle income settings where students may already face economic challenges.

Access to support can also be significantly affected by geographical location. Services offering the appropriate care to survivors of sexual violence are yet to be established in every area. In some cases, a survivor of sexual violence might be unable to access the required services because of the distance between where they reside and the currently existing support centres. Distance can also cause add extra costs for a victim when they attempt to move these distances.

Lack of awareness about available services is also an important factor to consider when examining barriers to help-seeking. Many students are not fully informed about where to go or how to access support after experiencing sexual violence. Services that respond to survivors of sexual violence are not talked about enough. The understanding of the value of services such as therapy or counselling is low. Research indicates that uncertainty about how to navigate support systems can prevent survivors from initiating help-seeking. Due to this help is not actively sought.

Institutional and procedural barriers can also make it difficult for students to report incidents. They are usually complicated and lengthy which might be necessary in order to get justice for

survivors. For survivors, these procedures may prolong the situation and cause distress. Complexity of reporting systems and lengthy administrative processes may discourage survivors to involve administrative roles because of their fear for administrative processes. They are more likely to indulge in support from channels that allow them to feel comfort or safety.

Overall, these physical barriers significantly limit access to support services and contribute to low levels of help-seeking among university students who have experienced sexual violence. Addressing these barriers is essential for improving access to care and encouraging timely help-seeking.

Other than structural weaknesses, students' views on support offered by the university also has an effect on students' willingness to seek help. A number of students remain unwilling to use the services available at the university because of mistrust in their response and fear of negative outcomes. According to research trust and confidence in lack of judgement are key for institutional functioning. When survivors do not have trust in an institution to respond to their need, the role played by the institution is ignored or not made use of (Zinzow et al., 2021; Ogedegbe et al., 2025).

Social and cultural norms also affect this. Victims of sexual violence especially in many African cultures are subjected to stigma, criticism and often go through denial instead of receiving support. This affects how survivors interact with formal support systems and are more likely to avoid them.

Findings from the current study reflect this concern. A significant number of participants expressed discomfort with utilizing institutional support services, citing fear of judgment and lack of trust in the university's ability to respond effectively. To add, awareness of available services was divided, with 30 out of 59 respondents reporting that they were unaware of support services, while 29 being aware. This suggests that both limited awareness and lack of trust in institutional systems contribute to low help-seeking behaviour among students.

2.4 Strategies to Improve Help-Seeking Behaviour

The World Health Organization (2021) advocated for a comprehensive set of strategies to improve help-seeking behaviour among survivors of sexual violence. Its clinical and policy guidelines emphasize the need for healthcare providers to offer confidential, empathetic, and survivor-centred care. These approaches help to build trust between survivors and support

services, which increases the likelihood that survivors will seek formal help. However, although these policies exist at a global level, questions remain about how effectively they are implemented within institutions, especially in higher education settings. It is important to ask whether these policies consistently reflected in survivor care and whether students perceive these services as safe, accessible, and trustworthy. These concerns are central to understanding whether global guidelines translate into practical support for survivors, which is a key focus of this study.

Through enhancing provider capacity, help seeking behaviour can be encouraged. This can be done by increasing accessibility to services or tailoring support programmes for the convenience of survivors and providing compassionate trauma-informed care. Research demonstrates that interventions that integrate these aspects are more successful in encouraging disclosure and engagement with formal support systems. It can be ruled as important to employ peer support programmes, awareness campaigns and confidential reporting systems to overcome emotional and structural barriers. The conceptual framework's emphasis on institutional, social and cultural aspects that affect help-seeking behaviour is closely related to these interventions.

In the African context, studies emphasize the significant role of institutional commitment, staff training, and the provision of gender-sensitive services. (Bhana,2018) highlighted that when institutions show clear commitment to addressing sexual violence, students develop greater trust in reporting mechanisms, which reduces delays and reluctance in seeking help. Cultural sensitivity, staff empathy, and clearly defined policies also help reduce fear of stigma, retaliation, or victim-blaming which are key emotional and structural barriers identified in the conceptual framework.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, peer support systems and stigma-reduction initiatives have been shown to improve survivors' willingness to seek assistance (Jewkes,2015). Peer-led awareness programs, survivor networks, and mentorship initiatives create solidarity and normalize help-seeking behaviour. This addresses interpersonal and group-level social influences highlighted in the conceptual framework. These approaches also relate to Social Learning Theory, where students observe and model positive help-seeking behaviours from peers and mentors, reinforcing healthier responses within their social environment.

Studies conducted within Uganda emphasized practical strategies tailored to suit the local context. (Lubaale,2023) recommended strengthening counselling services, increasing

awareness of available reporting mechanisms, and integrating cultural and religious sensitivity into interventions. These strategies build institutional trust and address culturally specific barriers that may prevent disclosure and engagement with formal support systems. To add, integrating trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches ensures that the emotional needs of survivors are addressed alongside procedural and structural improvements.

In conclusion, the study showcases how personal, societal and institutional aspects affect help-seeking decisions. Improving knowledge and access of support for university students that have undergone sexual violence requires an approach that involves multiple levels to address emotional, physical and social barriers to help-seeking. Effective interventions need coordination between policy, practice and lived experiences of survivors.

2.5 Summary of Literature Review

Studies across different educational institutions showed that sexual violence is a significant social issue in higher education. Research from North America and Europe reported high levels of sexual harassment, coercion, and assault among university students. However, even while many students experience sexual violence the number of students that formally report the incidents or seek professional help is low.

Most global studies used quantitative surveys to measure prevalence and patterns. While these studies played an important role in showing how widespread the problem is, they often do not explore in detail how institutions respond or how students make decisions about seeking help. This shows the need for studies that also include qualitative methods to better understand institutional processes and survivor experiences.

Studies carried in African universities recognise sexual harassment and coercion as a common social ill. Studies from countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya show that gender power imbalances, lecturer-student relationships, and peer pressure contribute to sexual violence on campus.

Although some universities have counselling centres and gender offices, research shows that students are not accessing the appropriate and adequate help required after experiencing sexual violence which raises concerns as to whether students are aware of these services or their level of trust in them. However, many African studies rely mainly on surveys and do not fully explore how institutional systems operate or how survivors experience support services.

Online literature also revealed that students often rely on peer support rather than formal services (Alonso,2023). Peer groups can either encourage or discourage reporting. When universities actively promote awareness and provide confidential services, reporting tends to improve slightly. However, physical barriers such as inconvenient office locations, restricted operating hours, and lack of clear communication continue to limit access to support services.

There is still limited research examining how physical and emotional barriers interact to influence help-seeking behaviour. To add, few studies combine quantitative data with interviews from institutional staff, leaving a gap in understanding how support systems function internally.

Literature from Ugandan research confirmed that sexual harassment and coercion are present in higher education institutions. Students report experiences such as unwanted advances, transactional relationships, and pressure from individuals in positions of authority. Despite the existence of institutional policies and counselling services, reporting rates remain low. Studies suggest that students fear stigma, reputational damage, and lack of confidentiality. In faith-based institutions, religious and moral expectations may further increase feelings of shame, making disclosure more difficult.

Most Ugandan studies focus on describing the prevalence of sexual violence rather than deeply examining the factors that influence help-seeking behaviour. Limited attention has been given to how physical accessibility, emotional factors, and institutional trust work together to influence whether students seek help. To add, behavioural theories are not applied to their full capacity to explain how attitudes, social norms, and perceived control affect reporting decisions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Research Design

The study applied a mixed methods research approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of the physical and emotional factors influencing help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence.

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), mixed methods designs are particularly suitable when neither quantitative or qualitative approaches alone are sufficient to capture the depth of a research problem. Sexual harassment and help-seeking behaviour within higher institutions of learning represent multifaceted social issues that involve measurable patterns as well as deeply personal and institutional experiences.

The quantitative aspect allowed for measurement of the prevalence and strength of the relationships between the variables such as physical barriers, emotional barriers and help-seeking behaviour. The purpose of the qualitative aspect provided and supported in-depth insights into students' lived experiences and socio-cultural influences that may not fully be captured with structured questionnaires. The integration of both methods enhanced the validity and provided a richer contextual understanding.

3.1 Study Population

The study population consisted of undergraduate Social Work students enrolled at Uganda Christian University purposively selected due to the nature of the academic focus on social issues such as sexual violence, their engagement with social issues provides a valuable perspective in examining how emotional and physical factors influence help-seeking behaviour and their academic exposure may shape their awareness, perceptions, and attitudes toward sexual violence and help-seeking.

3.2 Sample Size Determination

3.1 Table of Number of Participants

Year	Number of Students
Year ONE	40
Year TWO	33
Year THREE	27

The target population for this study consisted of 178 social work students enrolled at the university. Due to time and logistical considerations, it was not feasible to collect data from the entire population. Therefore, a sample size of 100 students was selected to participate in the study. The sample was considered adequate to provide meaningful insights into the factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence.

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3.3 Sample Selection Technique

The study used proportionate stratified sampling to ensure fair representation of each year of study due to the fact that help-seeking behaviour and exposure to sexual violence may vary across academic levels due to differences in maturity, awareness of support services and social integration within the university environment. The student population will be divided into three strata based on year of study (year 1 to year 3). The sample for each stratum was calculated using the formula:

$(\text{Stratum population} \div \text{Total population}) \times \text{Total sample size}.$

Year One consisting of 72 students will contribute 40 respondents, Year Two consisting of 58 students will contribute 33 respondents and Year Three consisting of 48 students will contribute 27 respondents to ensure representation across the different academic levels.

Within each year of study, participants were selected using simple random sampling from available class lists in order to minimise sampling bias and increase representatives of the study population.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

3.2 Table of Data Collection Tools

Tool	Type of Data	Participants
Questionnaire	Quantitative	Students
Interview Guide	Qualitative	Key Participants

3.4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was a set of questions that the researcher used in the field to collect information from the respondents

This instrument consisted of a section to capture background variables such as age, gender and year of study which allowed contextual interpretation of findings followed by a section to take note of indicators of sexual violence intended to measure the occurrence of sexual violence using yes/no/prefer not to say items. This format was used because it captured factual experiences rather than attitudes and reduces emotional burden on respondents. Section C captured the physical and emotional barriers that can hindered help-seeking behaviour that uses the Likert-scale, a tool that measured psychological and situational factors that hindered help-seeking behaviour. Section D explored the help-seeking behaviour which examined whether help was sought and identifies formal and informal support. Section E probed concerning strategies to improve help-seeking by assessing perceptions of interventions that would encourage reporting and support-seeking.

The questionnaire format allowed standardized data collection, enhanced comparability across participants, and supported statistical analysis aligned with the research objectives.

3.4.2 Interview guide

The interview guide was a set of listed questions which the researcher herself used to ask questions and instantly filled in the answers from key informants.

A structured interview guide was developed for the key informants. The guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed information regarding institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, response procedures, and perceived barriers to help-seeking among students who experience sexual violence. The questions explored areas such as the availability and accessibility of support services, confidentiality practices, challenges encountered in handling reported cases, cultural and gender-related influences affecting reporting, and institutional preparedness in responding to sexual violence. This approach was appropriate for capturing both procedural and experiential insights from university officials, it therefore enriched the qualitative analysis and strengthened navigation with student-reported data.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Having obtained permission from the school of social sciences, the researcher obtained a letter that introduced her to the key informants to obtain official permission to collect data from respondents later introduced to the key informants who gave their insights on the factors hindering help-seeking behaviour among university students that have experienced sexual violence that was used as qualitative data, the researcher then collected data with help of research assistants that was later subjected to data analysis.

3.3 Table of Key Informants

S/N	Participant	No. Of Respondents
1.	Counselling Department	1
2.	Police	1
3.	Chaplain	2
4.	Hostel Custodian	1

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS software used to analyse quantitative data and NVIVO version 15 was used to analyse attitudes, perceptions, ideas and opinions that were derived from the qualitative data collected.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Owing to the sensitive nature of the study topic, strict ethical principles were observed throughout the research process to protect the dignity, rights, and well-being of all participants. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the school of social sciences. The participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, procedures involved and their rights as participants. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences. The study did not require respondents to provide their names or any personally identifying information in order to protect their identities. All data collected was treated as confidential and was accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisor. For sensitive questions, participants were not required to disclose details they were uncomfortable sharing.

3.8 Methodological Constraints

The approach of this study presented several constraints that could influence the data collection process and interpretation of the findings. The study used a method of convenience sampling with Social Work students as the focus which becomes a limitation to being able to choose students randomly from the entire student body. As a result, the findings did not fully represent the experiences of all university students.

The study also employed the use self-administered questionnaires that collected data from respondents. While questionnaires allow for efficient data collection from a larger group of participants, they would rely on the honesty and willingness of respondents to disclose sensitive information. Given the sensitive nature of sexual violence, some participants felt uncomfortable sharing personal experiences, which influenced the responses provided.

Additionally, the study was conducted within a particular timeframe, which affected the number of responses collected. Time constraints limited the ability to follow up with all respondents who receive questionnaires.

Still despite the noted limitations, appropriate measures were taken to ensure that the data collected remained confidential and was analysed carefully to produce meaningful findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis, presentation and interpretation of data collected on the study concerning the ‘Factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence’. The data analysed in this chapter was obtained through structured questionnaires administered to students as well as notes compiled from key informant interviews with selected university authorities. In addition, relevant institutional documents, particularly the student handbook were reviewed to provide insight into the policies and procedures guiding the reporting and handling of sexual violence as an issue of conduct within Uganda Christian University.

The chapter begins with presenting the response rate and the demographic characteristics of the respondents. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of findings related to students’ experiences of sexual violence, their help-seeking behaviours and the factors hindering them from seeking help. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics, percentages, and a chi-square test to determine significance in relationships between variables. The chapter also includes findings from key informant interviews and the review of institutional policies in order to provide a broader understanding of institutional response to sexual violence within the university.

4.1 Response rate

Out of the 100 questionnaires distributed for this study, 59 completed responses were received at the time of analysis, representing students from the second and third year cohorts. Responses from first year students were not fully collected by the time of data analysis and therefore are not included in the findings presented in this chapter. While this was a limitation on the representation of all academic years, the data from second and third year students still provided meaningful insights into the factors that influence help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence. Furthermore, the study’s qualitative data collected through key informant interviews supplements these findings and helped provide a comprehensive understanding of the institutional and social factors affecting students’ help-seeking behaviour. This limitation was acknowledged and considered in the interpretation of the study results.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study included a total of 59 respondents representing social work students from the second and third year cohorts. Examination of demographic characteristics provides important context for understanding help-seeking behaviour and the factors influencing students' decisions to report experiences of sexual violence.

In terms of the academic year, second year students accounted for 23 respondents (39%) while third year students accounted for 36 respondents (61%). This distribution ensures that the perspectives captured cover students at different stages of their social work program.

Regarding gender, the respondents were almost equally split, 30 male students (51%) and 29 female students (49%). This nearly equal distribution allowed for meaningful comparisons of experiences and perceptions across genders which is particularly relevant in this study.

Concerning awareness of university support services 30 respondents (51%) indicated that they were unaware of the available support services for students who had experienced sexual violence, while 29 respondents (49%) reported being aware of these services. This highlights a potential factor influencing help-seeking behaviour as students who are unaware of available support may be less likely to seek help. This is illustrated in the table below;

4.1 Table of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	30	50.8%
	Female	29	49.2%
Year of Study	Second	23	39.0%
	Third	36	61%
Awareness of Support Services	Aware	29	49.2%
	Unaware	30	50.8%

The majority of respondents were evenly distributed by gender, with slightly more males (50.8%) than females (49.2%). Third year students (61%) formed the largest group compared

to second year students (39%). Awareness of support services was nearly equal among respondents, indicating that half were aware and half unaware of the available mechanisms for support.

4.3 Experiences of Sexual Violence Among Students

Out of 59 respondents, 36 respondents reported to have experienced the listed forms of sexual violence such as unwanted sexual comments, unwanted sexual touching, pressure into sexual activity, online sexual harassment and sexual coercion. Help-Seeking Behaviour Among Students is as illustrated in the table below;

4.4 Help-Seeking Behaviour Among Students

4.2 Help-Seeking Behaviour by Gender (Students Who Reported Sexual Violence, n=36)

Gender	Sought Help	Did not seek help	Total	% that sought help	% that did not seek help
Female	10	13	23	43.5%	56.5%
Male	7	6	13	53.8%	46.2%
Total	17	19	36	47.2%	52.8%

The data illustrated that help-seeking behaviour did not differ significantly between male and female students. Slightly more male students (53.8%) sought help compared to female students (43.5%) while a greater proportion of females (56.5%) did not seek help. Overall, less than half of the students who experienced sexual violence sought help.

The table below shows help-seeking Behaviour by Awareness of Support Services (Students Who Reported Sexual Violence,

4.3 Help-Seeking Behaviour by Awareness of Support Services (Students Who Reported Sexual Violence, n=36)

Awareness of Services	Sought Help	Did Not Seek Help
Aware	12	9
Unaware	5	10
Total	17	19

Awareness of support services appears to influence help-seeking behaviour. Students who were aware of available services were more likely to seek help (57.1%) compared to those who were unaware (33.3%). Those without awareness primarily relied on informal support networks, highlighting the importance of promoting knowledge of formal support mechanisms within the university.

The study considered the help-seeking behaviour of the 36 respondents who reported experiencing sexual violence which was an indicator that while sexual violence affected a number of students not all of them sought support highlighting a gap between experiencing violence and accessing help.

Out of 59 respondents, 36 reported experiencing sexual violence. Still of the 36 respondents, 17 (47%) sought assistance of some kind while 19 (53%) did not seek out any assistance at all. A majority of the respondents who did seek help leaned on informal support networks, this including friends or family.

“When it comes to sexual abuse students prefer to talk about it among friends but reports to the office are once in a blue moon.” (University Chaplain, interview, March 2026)

Similarly, another informant noted that:

“Students choose to talk to friends or family members, yet the first people that they should take the matter to is the police” (University Police Officer, interview, March 2026)

These responses imply that personal networks in the lives of university students are the preferred go to compared to formal networks. Students may feel more at ease discussing their challenges with trusted individuals that could be friends or family which can also explain the assumed mistrust that university students might have towards the university’s processes.

Even while the data collected from the study showed that cases of sexual violence do occur, findings from key informant interviews also revealed that there were no officially documented cases of the sort, particularly at the time of study. As the university counsellor explained,

“We do get students that have experienced abuse, but we are aware that there are many more out there than we get” (University Counsellor, interview, March 2026)

This indicates that although counselling services are available for utilization, a larger number of cases may remain unreported.

The 19 respondents who did not seek help highlight the barriers that prevent students from disclosing their experiences. Key factors include fear of judgement, self-blame, lack of awareness of sexual violence, fear or retaliation. Together these findings demonstrate that experiencing sexual violence does not automatically lead to help-seeking and that social, cultural and institutional factors strongly influence students' decision to come forward.

4.5 Institutional Response to Sexual Violence

Based on the examination of the university student handbook, Uganda Christian University has policies communicating expected student behaviour and guiding their response to instances of sexual assault and harassment.

“i. Any student who is found involved in acts of sexual immorality, adultery, fornication or sodomy – inside or outside the University shall be guilty of an offence”

“ii. Any student who is accused of sexual harassment, lewd gestures and comments, unwanted advances, or other immoral behaviour shall be guilty of an offence.”

“iii. Any student accused and convicted of rape or defilement shall be expelled from the University.”

Despite the existence of these policies, key informant interviews revealed challenges in formal reporting. The University police officer explained:

“The cases of sexual abuse in our records are not there even students that have made reports do not even give the name of the person who they say has sexually abused them and that cannot build a case” (University Police Officer, interview, March 2026)

This reinforces the suggestion of behaviour of survivors attributed to fear of retaliation, emotional attachment to the perpetrator or concerns about the potential consequences of formal reporting.

When sexual violence is reported long after it occurs, the university police shared that it is difficult to address. Their role or function relies heavily on evidence in order to adequately support those that are victims of sexual violence.

“A student can come after a week or month and it becomes impossible to create a case because there is no evidence” (University Police Officer, interview, March 2026)

In the event some students decide to come forward with the experiences which can happen weeks or months after. However, the likelihood of a case to progress is low because of the lack of evidence. Without evidence, formal disciplinary and legal actions can be considered ineffective in responding to the case of sexual violence. This exposes a weakness in structure when it comes to supporting survivors of sexual violence because of the inability to defend survivors unless the case of sexual violence is reported within the restricted time frame.

University counselling services as shared by the counsellor, prioritize emotional wellbeing and growth of students. This is a significant difference from administrative functions that are more focused on formal reporting and disciplinary procedures. The university counsellor pointed out how crucial it is to focus on the healing and development of survivors. This can be done by establishing a secure and encouraging space that allows survivors of sexual violence to share their experiences and deconstruct self-blame.

The data collected from these sources were an indicator that although institutional policies or reporting mechanisms exist, there may be differences in how sexual violence is responded to which may influence students’ help-seeking behaviour.

Regarding the university’s response to sexual violence, the study recognized a difference in the way formal support networks operate and the way survivor centred support service function. Formal support networks operate within administrative and proof based frameworks. They emphasize investigation and responsibility which may be necessary to obtain justice but in most cases is insensitive to survivor’s experiences.

An important distinction between the institutional responses that seek justice and those that provide emotional support is realised which would suggest the need for a more integrated approach that balances both accountability and survivor care in responding to sexual violence.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Introduction

This section of the study discusses the findings of the study in relation of the research objectives, reviewed literature and theoretical framework. It interprets the results and explains their significance in understanding the factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence. The discussion also compares the study findings with previous empirical studies and theoretical perspectives including the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura and the Theory of Planned Behaviour by Icek Ajzen.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

5.1.1 Indicators of sexual violence among university students.

The objective of identifying indicators of sexual violence among university students was achieved using findings of the study which indicated a number of respondents reporting to experience different or multiple forms of sexual violence such as unwanted sexual comments, unwanted sexual touching, pressure into sexual activity, online sexual harassment and sexual coercion within the university environment which suggests that sexual violence remains a prevalent concern amongst university students.

However, what was identified was the normalization of certain forms of sexual violence within the university and broader Ugandan context. Commonly behaviours such as persistent pursuit, verbal sexual comments or unwanted physical advances are often perceived as part of normal courtship rather than as violations of a student's rights or consent. During the key informant interview with the university chaplain, a perspective emerged reflecting social and cultural norms around romantic relationships. When discussing persistent romantic pursuit, he stated;

“A boy persisting on romantically pursuing a girl is natural because she will still say yes in the end” (University Chaplain, interview, March 2026).

Reluctance to report can be enforced by the previously shared perspective. Students not being able to identify certain behaviour as sexual violence can result into students invalidating the experiences of others or their own. Not being able to identify can also contribute to the normalization of lewd behaviour.

The level of knowledge and understanding of what sexual violence is within the university setting is a major concern. Consideration of boundaries and respect in relationships is overlooked because different forms of sexual violence may be interpreted as typical gender

behaviour. This lack of awareness can be harmful not only to potential victims but also to those who may unknowingly engage in behaviours that contribute to unsafe or uncomfortable situations for others.

If students do not clearly recognize certain experiences as forms of sexual violence, the chances of them speaking up about their experiences lowers. This highlights the importance of increasing awareness and education among university students about the different forms and indicators of sexual violence.

Limited understanding of what constitutes sexual violence may itself be a barrier to help-seeking behaviour. When certain harmful behaviours are normalized or misunderstood, survivors may not immediately identify their experiences as sexual violence, which can delay disclosure or prevent them from seeking support. At the same time, individuals who engage in such behaviours may not recognize the seriousness of their actions, which contributes to the continued normalization of sexual violence within the university environment.

5.1.2 Factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour.

The study objectives to identify both physical and emotional factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour was achieved using data collected from both questionnaires and the key informant interviews revealed that several social, cultural and institutional factors influence whether students decide to seek help or remain silent about their experiences.

One of the key factors identified was fear of judgement and social stigma which suggests presence of broader cultural attitudes toward sexual violence.

“Some students fear to be seen as weak or they believe that coming for counselling would could others to tie them to be living with mental illnesses” (University Counsellor, interview, March 2026).

This illustrates the societal and peer perceptions of strength and mental health that discourage students from accessing professional support. Such internalized stigma reinforces silence and aligns with broader cultural norms where vulnerability is often viewed negatively.

It was also highlighted that when sexual violence occurs within a romantic relationship such as with a boyfriend, reports can easily be dismissed as personal relationship conflicts.

“Sometimes sexual abuse is reported by students who have been in relationships with the person they are reporting and without evidence it can be interpreted that because of an argument they had, the girl reporting is making the claims” (University Police Officer, interview, March 2026).

Still this perception can discourage students from seeking help because they may feel that their experiences will not be taken seriously. Intimate partner sexual violence is an often over-looked form of sexual violence, it is an under-researched phenomenon and due to its complex nature that balances love and fear, individuals that experience it have unique needs in terms of seeking care (Wado et al., 2021). This signals a need for consideration of intimate partner violence within both institutional frameworks and awareness programs.

Fear of the reporting process was identified as another important factor as a barrier to help-seeking.

“The questioning survivors have to go through when it comes to legal processes can be overwhelming and even cause self-blame” (University Counsellor, interview, March 2026).

To relive trauma is something that no survivor desires to go through for this study particularly sexual violence which is why when it comes to formal processes of reporting sexual violence it is emotionally difficult. Survivors are often taken through uncomfortable or blaming questions, particularly when dealing with law enforcement or institutional authorities, survivors may internalize the idea that they are responsible for the violence they experienced and due to this, survivors are put in position where they feel shame and the chances of this happening reduces the likelihood of whistleblowing or reporting sexual violence.

Also the generational gap between students and institutional authorities was pointed out in the interview with the university counsellor.

“Students may fear to share their challenges because the students do not view them, the counsellors as professionals but elders, and it is expected from elders to receive judgement rather than help. For example, if a student is abused by a partner they may be viewed as to not have been focusing on books” (University Counsellor, interview, March 2026).

The university counsellor explained that students may hesitate to approach university staff because they expect criticism or misunderstanding from older authority figures. In many African cultural contexts, young people often assume that elders will judge their behaviour

especially when the issue involves intimate relationships. This perception can prevent students from seeking help even when support services are available.

Additionally, lack of awareness about available support services was identified as a contributing support services was identified as a contributing factor. As shown in the demographic findings, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they were unaware of the support services available to students experiencing sexual violence. When students are not aware of where to for help, they are less likely to access institutional support systems.

Overall, these findings address the study objective of examining the factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students and demonstrate that help-seeking behaviour among university students is influenced by a complex interaction of personal, social and institutional factors. Fear of judgement, self-blame, distrust in institutional systems and lack of awareness all contribute to the reluctance of students to seek help after experiencing sexual violence. It is crucial for universities that aim to create supportive environments where survivors feel safe and encouraged to report their experiences to address the barriers

5.1.3 Help-Seeking Behaviour Among university students.

The data obtained from sources used to inform the study indicated that students' help-seeking behaviour following experiences of sexual violence is influenced by multiple social and personal factors. The analysis of questionnaire responses revealed that the number of students who sought help was nearly equal to those who did not, with only a single-student difference. Important to note even with those who sought help, informal support, primarily from friends or family members was preferred.

This pattern reflects the assumption that students might feel more confident when reaching out to personal reliable resources of support. It is common for students to have fear of reaching out to university support networks also recognised as formal support networks. To add, self-blame and guilt is not unusual among students especially due to the occurrence of sexual violence within an intimate relationship. Recognition of sexual violence can be unclear, personal feelings towards the perpetrator can cause internal conflict and there can be fear of having experiences rejected.

Previous research on sexual violence among university students similarly suggested that survivors of sexual violence frequently rely on informal support networks before considering formal reporting mechanisms (Mennicke, 2019). This reinforced the earlier point where the university police officer comments on students' first response being reliance on informal support networks but also resonates with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, as students' decisions to seek help are influenced by social norms, perceived outcomes of reporting, and perceived behavioural control. The major takeaways from data collected shed light the importance of understanding not only whether students seek help but also the type of support they consider safe and accessible, which has significant implications for designing responsive institutional support systems.

An additional perspective emerged from the key informant interview with the university police.

“How come people or children in rural areas make reports to the police when they have been sexual abused and a university student cannot?” (University Police, interview, March 2026)

This observation adds on to the important questions about the factors that influence reporting behaviour among university students.

In the context of relationships, one may feel uncertain when it comes to determining whether what they experienced was sexual violence especially because of feelings involved as well as manipulation for romantic partners that can make one's judgement unclear for instance survivors can start to internalize feelings of self-blame by believing that they are responsible for what happened because they were in a relationship with the perpetrator such thinking can cause survivors to dismiss their own experiences and feelings while believing that even others will dismiss their experiences and feelings.

5.1.4 Institutional response to sexual violence

The university does have policies in place that guide institutional response to sexual misconduct, the data collected to support the study suggest that the presence of such policies are not alone efficient to promote help-seeking behaviour. Some respondents expressed the view that strengthening university policies alone may not significantly improve help-seeking behaviour or address sexual violence as a challenge in the university in response to section F of the questionnaire that lists strategies that respondents believe can improve help-seeking behaviour. A student respondent highlighted that:

“Boys do not seem to have comprehension of the word ‘no’ and they should be held accountable otherwise they will continue to do what they are doing, the blame will continue to be put on girls yet it is boys that do not understand consent” (respondent, March 2026).

This insight lays out that having institutional policies alone is not enough to effectively address sexual violence on campus if issues like low awareness, low accountability and little understanding of consent are not also addressed. It points to the need for university environments to combine policy measures with practical education on consent, healthy relationships and gender norms, so that students can better recognise, understand and respond to situations of sexual violence.

University policies alone are not reliable to inform help-seeking behaviour. The policies do not address the fear, anxiety or distrust that survivors have after experiencing sexual violence. This is all confirmed in the responses from students. Addressing sexual violence requires more depth which is confirmed with results from the study. While the university may have formal procedures outlined in documents such as the student handbook, the respondent feedback implies that students may still doubt whether reporting will lead to meaningful support or action.

Coordination between university policy frameworks and students’ lived experiences is significant and needed. Existence of reporting mechanisms is not enough to influence students’ decision to seek help but also by their confidence that they will be treated with understanding, confidentiality and fairness. The effectiveness of policies in encouraging help-seeking behaviour may depend not just on their presence but also on how they are implemented and how students perceive the university’s response to survivors of sexual violence.

Cases of sexual violence were not documented. This would suggest that there were no cases but is actually an indicator that cases go unreported. 37 respondents reported to have experienced sexual violence but police have no records of sexual violence. Even as it happens within the university it is not being addressed. This indicates a gap between the university policies and addressing sexual violence. While institutional policies and support systems exist within the university, a range of psychological, social, cultural, and institutional factors continue to influence students' willingness to seek help. Survivors may struggle with internal barriers such as shame and self-blame, while social attitudes may normalize certain behaviours or dismiss cases that occur within intimate relationships. At the same time, institutional processes such as formal reporting procedures, evidentiary requirements, and perceived judgment from authority figures may discourage students from coming forward.

As a result, many students appeared to rely on informal sources of support such as friends and family rather than engaging with formal institutional mechanisms. This too reflected the gap between the existence of university policies and students' confidence in the systems designed to support them. Addressing sexual violence within university settings therefore requires not only the presence of policies, but also efforts to build trust, promote supportive attitudes, and ensure that institutional responses are sensitive to the realities faced by survivors.

This is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, as early attitudes and awareness may influence future help-seeking decisions.

5.2 The Theory of Planned Behaviour

This theory explains that a person's behaviour is influenced by three main things: their attitudes toward the behaviour, the social pressure they feel from others, and their perceived ability or control over performing the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)

The study's results reflect these elements in such a way that many students who experienced sexual violence did not seek formal help, even with the existence of support services. This may be explained by their attitudes toward reporting sexual violence. From the key informant interview with the university counsellor, it was identified that some students might not be receptive to counselling or professional psychological support because they fear being labelled or perceived as weak by others, also some students may believe that reporting will not lead to meaningful support or that authorities will not take their experiences seriously, especially when

incidents occur within intimate relationships, it may be interpreted as unresolved relationship issues.

As a university student especially within African context, 'cohabiting' is looked down upon especially in a school environment. Something we learn is to stay loyal to the pursuit for education. Getting involved romantically in most situations brings about shame and guilt. Reporting an act of violence from a partner can be expected to create more problems and this perception reduces motivation to seek formal help. From this we see clearly that social expectations influence students' decisions about whether to report sexual violence. Survivors fearing judgement, anticipating receiving blame and uncertainty of how others may perceive the situation is common and was confirmed by the study. When violence in a relationship is reported, the 'claims' are said to be made out of spite. Too often focus is then given to the 'conflict' and not the sexual violence.

Another important component of the Theory of Planned Behaviour is perceived behavioural control, which refers to a person's belief about how easy or difficult it is to execute a role or perform a behaviour. In this study, several factors identified reveal that students may deem getting help as difficult, risky or fully within their power including the fear of criticism from authority figures, the complicated nature of formal reporting processes, and the belief that delayed reporting would not lead to any meaningful action. As a result, students may feel that seeking help from formal institutions is difficult or ineffective, which discourages them from reporting incidents of sexual violence.

5.3 Social Learning Theory

This theory suggests that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs through observing others and through the norms that exist in their social environment (Bandura, 1977)

The results of this study indicate that social norms and learned behaviours may influence how students perceive sexual violence. Some respondents, particularly several male students, did not clearly recognize certain behaviours as indicators of sexual violence and instead viewed them as harmless or normal interactions. This suggests that some attitudes towards gender relations and sexual behaviour may be shaped by social environments where certain behaviours are normalized.

We learn that, individuals often adopt behaviours that they see being accepted or practiced within their community. If certain actions, such as persistent advances or unwanted touching, are socially interpreted as normal ways of pursuing a romantic partner, students may not recognize them as forms of sexual violence. This normalization can contribute to environments where harmful behaviours continue without being questioned.

The Social Learning theory also gives background as to why survivors may choose informal support systems rather than formal support systems. Students may learn from the interactions they have had within their social networks that discussing personal experiences with friends or family members is more acceptable and easier to navigate than reporting incidents to formal authorities where there is uncertainty or doubt in the formal processes. In addition to our learning and development within society that has conditioned us to see family and even friends as major sources of support in our lives in the event of hardship. As well as owing to the fact that we interact and relate with family and friends on a deeper level, allowing trust to be formed and established which is not the same in the relation or interaction that we have with formal systems. Therefore, help-seeking behaviour may be directed toward trusted individuals rather than institutional structures.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the major findings of the study, the conclusions drawn from the results of this study, and recommendations based on the results of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the key insights regarding the factors that hinder help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence and to propose possible strategies that could improve support systems for students.

6.1 Summary of the Major Findings

The study carefully identified and examined the common factors that had a role in affecting help-seeking behaviour among the students who have experienced sexual violence. Responses from 59 respondents provided an illustration that sexual violence is a significant issue within the university environment, while also proving that a considerable number of students do not seek help after experiencing it.

Out of the 59 respondents, 36 respondents reported to have experienced sexual violence but only 17 sought help, while 19 did not seek help. It was identified that among who sought help, the majority relied on informal sources of support such as friends, peers, and family members. This result was an indicator that students may be more inclined to using informal support networks before considering formal support services after experiencing sexual violence.

The deductions from the data collected supported the development of the insight that awareness of support services plays an important role in influencing help-seeking behaviour. The results confirmed that students who were aware of available support services went on to seek help while those who were unaware preferred to deal with the outcomes of their experiences themselves. Still it was important to note that awareness alone was not guarantee that students would seek help, therefore bringing to attention other barriers such as fear, stigma, and institutional attitudes also influence help-seeking decisions.

A number of factors were identified to play a role in hindering help-seeking behaviour from questionnaires and key informant interviews. These factors were identified as fear of judgment, self-blame, stigma associated with sexual violence, and concerns about confidentiality. As an example, the generational gap between students and institutional authorities was identified as a barrier, as students often fear criticism or misunderstanding from older staff members.

Institutional responses to sexual violence were also discovered as discouraging especially in the event of sexual violence involving intimate partners that can sometimes dismissed as “relationship issues,” which held back survivors from reporting their experiences or invalidating their own experiences in correspondence to the requirement and need for evidence and timely reporting in order to get justice for the survivor.

To add, some students, especially male respondents were not fully aware that certain behaviours identify as sexual violence. Some indicators of sexual violence were brushed off as normal behaviours especially in the pursuit of romantic relationships and this calls for attention to the role of social and cultural norms in shaping perceptions of violence.

6.2 Limitations

6.2.1. Limited Sample Size

Although 100 questionnaires were distributed, only 59 responses were obtained and used for analysis. The 59 responses were able to provide useful insights into the experiences and perceptions of students but the results of the study conducted may not fully represent the views of the entire student population.

6.2.2. Study Conducted Within One Academic Program

The target population were students doing Social Work and Social Administration who in total were 178 students. Due to that the data collected was less likely to fully reflect the experiences of the students from other faculties within the university. Perception or understanding of sexual violence can most definitely differ between schools or faculties in the terms of awareness, attitudes, or experiences.

6.2.3. Sensitivity of the Topic

Sexual violence is a sensitive topic for any person that has experienced violations to their autonomy. Responding to questions that explore sexual violence can easily trigger unwanted feelings that survivors have struggled with. Discomfort could have rose by sharing personal experiences or opinions related to sexual violence, which could have resulted in underreporting or limited disclosure during data collection.

6.2.4 Variation in Response Rates

While this study did not specifically investigate response patterns across year groups, an observation was made in the difference in response between first-year students and second-

and third-year students. With second and third year students the response was quick and easily sparked discussion whereas responses from first year students was reluctant and were not obtained throughout the data collection period which may imply that awareness and engagement differ across academic levels.

6.2.5. Time Constraints During Data Collection

Data collection was scheduled to occur within a particular time frame, which limited the probability of responses from all targeted participants, particularly first-year students who had not yet returned their questionnaires at the time of analysis. As a result, the final sample analysed consisted only of the responses that were available within the established data collection period of 3 days and the extension of one week.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed as discussed below;

There is need for increased sensitization programs aimed at educating male students about consent and the importance of respecting boundaries in relationships. Feedback from some respondents pointed out that behaviours which are sexually violating may be influenced by misconceptions about consent and the idea of rejection. It is advisable that students are involved in educational sessions that clearly discuss the concept of consent as well as the significance of respecting a partner's choice not to participate in certain sexual activity. This might reduce misunderstandings about sexual behaviour and empower students to build healthier and polite relationships with one another.

Improved efforts in raising awareness among students about sexual violence is necessary. For the purpose of popularizing conversations regarding consent, safe relationships and the resources that are available. While sexual violence cannot particularly be completely eradicated, the information obtained from awareness campaigns can enable students to defend themselves and those in their proximity against sexual violence.

Institutional responses to sexual violence need to be trauma-informed and survivor-centred. Training should be provided to university staff, including campus security and administrative personnel, to improve their understanding of trauma and the complexities surrounding sexual violence reporting.

University counselling services should be advertised and made more accessible to students. Institutions ought to try creating a setting where professional support is also seen as safe and reachable because many students rely on informal support networks

Peer led support programs or trained student advocates could enhance support for survivors. Students and groups within the university community might want to consider creating peer support initiatives because students tend to feel more comfortable speaking with peers like how survivors feel better speaking to other survivors.

In order to make sure that reporting methods and procedures in the university setting are attentive to the realities of delayed reporting they should be revised. Along with being a legal problem, sexual violence should be acknowledged as a traumatic event that calls for psychological and emotional support.

The university environment significantly influences whether survivors of sexual violence feel safe to report incidents and seek support (Jones, 2025). This study suggests that survivors are more likely to seek support and start the healing process when institutions offer accessible and encouraging reporting procedures. Victims may endure extended psychological suffering and loneliness if the environment does not encourage whistleblowing or does not react appropriately. Research has also shown that the effects of sexual assault might go beyond psychological distress and affect a student's academic path. Some survivors may stop participating in school activities or drop out of university entirely. This may have a lasting impact on their sense of accomplishment, personal objectives and career aspirations.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS

6.4.1 Social Change

Positive social change is defined as “a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies and actions to promote the worth, dignity and development of individuals, communities, organisations, institutions, cultures and societies” (Walden University 2022, Para.I). While the issue of sexual violence is still a concern for this university, there are some opportunities to improve the university's response to and prevention of sexual violence.

6.4.2 Interpersonal Level

Within the interpersonal level, if changes are made to ensure that survivors have the knowledge to access services and resources and how to report, then survivors will feel more comfortable reporting and seeking services and resources. In addition, survivors' attitudes towards themselves and their views of themselves will be more positive. This university may want to consider increasing their efforts starting with the guild president's office and engaging all other offices as well to ensure that there is ongoing education for students, faculty and staff as to the resources and support that is available and the steps to access resources and support. Within this level if trained on intervention efforts, prevention efforts, bystander interventions and how to influence and address negative attitudes and behaviours of friends and acquaintances there may be a decrease in attitudes and behaviours that perpetrate sexual violence. In addition, there could be an increase in support of friends and acquaintances who are survivors.

6.4.3 Institutional Level

The university uses policies and procedures to implement intervention services and resources as well as prevention programs and resources. This level would also include how the university handles collecting sexual violence data and how that data is reported.

6.4.4 Public Policy

This level includes laws and policies at the local state and national levels, within this study the positive social change that can occur is if national guidance document based on the federal regulations are edited to provide survivor centred approach to addressing such at the university campus.

6.5 Conclusions

Ultimately, help-seeking behaviour among university students who experience sexual violence is influenced by a combination of social, cultural, and institutional factors.

This study confirmed that sexual violence is a prevailing social issue within the university setting. Even as it has affected a number of students' lives, most hesitate to seek the appropriate support for reasons identified in this study as fear of stigma, anticipation of judgement from society and institutional responses that are short of trauma-informed care. Immediate persons such as friends and family also recognised as 'informal' networks of supply were

acknowledged to play an important role in providing emotional support and are usually the first point of contact for survivors.

Students 'choosing' not to seek help yet they are aware services that respond is a misconception for the reason that awareness of support services alone does not encourage help-seeking because there are underlying factors such as cultural perceptions of sexual violence and survivors' internal experiences of self-blame, fear of judgement or criticism which significantly influence students decide to report accidents or seek help.

Therefore being a need for survivor-centred support systems to back up the confidence in policies set to address sexual violence as a social ill.

Sexual violence should not be understood solely as a criminal offence that requires legal investigation and evidence. It is at the same time a deeply traumatic experience that can have long lasting psychological emotional and social consequences for survivors. Focusing on legal procedures and the need for evidence by institutions can overlook the complex emotional impact that such experiences have on individuals. Survivors often struggle with fear, shame, self-blame and emotional distress long after the incident has occurred, which can significantly affect their willingness and ability to report the incident or seek formal help. As highlighted by the university counsellor during the key informant interview, sexual violence must be approached not only as a legal matter but also as a traumatic experience that requires compassion, psychological support and survivor- centred responses. Recognizing the trauma associated with sexual is therefore essential for creating institutional support systems that truly meet the needs of survivors.

6.6 Areas for Further Research

Exploration of help-seeking behaviour among students in multiple universities to provide a broader understanding of how institutional environments influence reporting and support-seeking decisions. Additionally, further studies should push for focus on male survivors of sexual violence, as their experiences and help-seeking patterns remain under-researched in many contexts.

Culture and traditions play a significant role in shaping behaviour. Amongst our societies in Uganda, there are particular values and beliefs that influence our attitude towards sexual violence that also affect our decision to seek help. As revealed in the study certain behaviours that constitute sexual violence are normalized or dictated as normal gender roles that surround courtship practices. It is recommended that future research acknowledge and dissect the African traditions to understand the effect they have on behaviours such as help-seeking and to address the misconceptions about sexual violence, what it constitutes of and how it can be addressed within the African context.

The psychological and emotional impact on survivors of sexual violence should be of common interest across all platforms that discuss sexual violence. Most studies focus on reporting mechanisms, legal responses or prevalence rates while the psychological and emotional impact has less coverage yet the impact that sexual violence has on individuals plays a significant role in affecting people's lives distorting welfare which calls for attention to the emotional realities created by sexual violence. This could help communities and institutions face the reality of sexual violence and its impact on psychological wellbeing allowing them to respond with greater empathy and support.

Interview Guide for Key Informants

Introduction

My name is Were Nicole, I am a student pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration. I am carrying out a research study exploring physical and emotional factors that hinder help-seeking among university students who have experienced sexual violence for the purpose of better understanding the factors influencing whether or not the appropriate support is accessed.

All responses will remain strictly anonymous, confidential and solely used for academic research purposes.

Key Informants: Director of Students Affairs, Member of Counselling Department, Chaplain, Police

What is your position of service?

Can you describe your role and responsibilities at the university?

How long have you been involved in student welfare or related services?

Have often do you hear about sexual violence among university students?

From your view which students are more vulnerable to sexual violence?

How have you witnessed university students to be physically affected by sexual violence?

What are the emotional outcomes that university students experience after experiencing sexual violence?

Do the students reach out when they have experienced sexual violence?

How are complaints of sexual violence reported, documented, and followed up?

What types of support are currently provided to students who report sexual violence?

Have you observed differences in help-seeking behaviour among different student groups? (according to year of study)

Why do you think some students feel discouraged to report sexual violence?

In your view, what do you think can be done to improve help-seeking behaviour among university students who have experienced sexual violence?

Is there anything else you would like to share about supporting students who experience sexual violence?

UGANDA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL
ADMINISTRATION
QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Were Nicole, I am a student pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration. I am carrying out a research study exploring physical and emotional factors that hinder help-seeking among university students who have experienced sexual violence for the purpose of better understanding the factors influencing whether or not the appropriate support is accessed.

All responses will remain strictly anonymous, confidential and solely used for academic research purposes. However, some questions relate to sensitive experiences and in case the questionnaire causes any discomfort or distress, you are encouraged to seek support from a trusted figure or university counselling service.

SECTION A:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Year of Study:
4. Are you aware of any particular university services that support students who have experienced sexual violence? (Please tick suitable answer)
 - a) Yes ☐
 - b) No ☐

SECTION B: Indicators of Sexual Violence.

Have you experienced any of the following? (Please tick suitable answer)

1. Unwanted Sexual Comments

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Unwanted Sexual Touching

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ Prefer not to say

3. Pressure into sexual activity

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ Prefer not to say

4. Online Sexual Harassment

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ Prefer not to say

5. Sexual Coercion

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ Prefer not to say

SECTION C: Physical Factors Hindering Help-Seeking Behavior

If you have experienced any of the situations listed above, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements concerning seeking help. (Tick most suitable answer)

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unsure
1.	Physical injuries made it difficult for me to seek help.					
2.	I feared further physical harm if I reported the incident.					
3.	I felt too physically exhausted or unwell to seek help.					
4.	I did not have safe or reliable transport to access help.					

SECTION D: Emotional Factors hindering Help-Seeking Behavior

(Tick most suitable answer)

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unsure

1.	I felt ashamed about what happened.					
2.	I blamed myself for what happened.					
3.	I feared being judged by others.					
4.	I feared not being believed.					
5.	I felt afraid of the perpetrator.					
6.	I felt confused about whether what happened was sexual violence.					
7.	I preferred to handle the situation on my own.					

(Adapted from the Likert Scale 1932)

SECTION E: Help-Seeking Behavior

After the incident was any help sought?

- a) Yes ☐
- b) No ☐

If yes, from whom?

- a) Friends or Peers ☐
- b) Family members ☐

- c) University Counselling Services ☐
- d) Local Authorities ☐
- e) Health Professional ☐

SECTION F: Strategies to Improve Help-Seeking Behavior

(Tick most suitable answer)

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unsure
1.	Increased awareness about sexual violence would encourage help-seeking.					
2.	Confidential reporting systems would encourage help-seeking.					
3.	More accessible counselling services would encourage help-seeking.					
4.	Peer support programs would encourage help-seeking.					
5.	Stronger university policies would encourage help-seeking.					

(Adapted from the Likert Scale 1932)

Thank you for your time and participation😊

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