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Reframing silence: Ubuntu feminism and the underreporting of intimate partner violence among South African female students

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ABSTRACT

Ubuntu Feminism, rooted in African philosophy, emphasizes interconnectedness, collective healing, and relational justice. It challenges patriarchal structures by reframing women's struggles not as private matters but as shared community responsibilities. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) remains a silent pandemic disproportionately affecting female students in South African universities, yet it is underreported. This qualitative paper examines the socio-cultural, emotional, and economic factors that contribute to this silence, guided by Ubuntu feminism as a theoretical lens. Data were drawn from 22 postgraduate students across all faculties at a selected university through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were upheld, including the presence of a professional psychologist on standby throughout the interview process to ensure participants' well-being. Findings reveal that victims often prioritize relational harmony over personal safety, internalizing social expectations that uphold male authority and discourage disclosure. Patriarchy, financial dependence, fear of stigma, and emotional attachment intersect to silence victims, reinforcing structural inequalities. Ubuntu feminism reframes IPV as a collective concern, advocating for survivor-centred, culturally grounded interventions that foster supportive campus environments. Recommendations include strengthening reporting systems, financial aid for victims, and education that empowers women and transforms harmful masculinities. This research advocates for justice frameworks that restore voice, agency, and communal solidarity in the fight against IPV.

KEY TERMS: gender-based violence, higher education institutions, intimate partner violence, Ubuntu feminism, underreporting, reframing silence

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse between romantic partners. While IPV can affect any gender, women and girls are disproportionately impacted. This phenomenon represents a pervasive yet largely invisible crisis within South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where the intersection of patriarchal structures, cultural expectations, and economic vulnerabilities creates a complex web of silence around victims' experiences. Despite the alarming prevalence of IPV among female university students, reporting rates remain critically low, perpetuating cycles of violence and denying survivors the support and justice they deserve. The right to be free from violence is violated in this manner. In protection of human rights, this paper examines the socio-cultural, emotional, and economic factors that contribute to the underreporting of IPV among female students to reframe silence through African Theory. The paper will begin with a background overview, followed by a literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. Lastly, conclusions, implications and recommendations will be presented.

BACKGROUND

Globally, an estimated 38% of female homicide victims are killed by intimate partners, highlighting the severity and systemic nature of IPV (WHO, 2021). In South Africa, IPV remains a critical issue, with prevalence rates of sexual violence ranging from 20% to 50%. Of this percentage, 17% of victims identified their intimate partners as the perpetrators (Machisa et al., 2021). Additionally, tragic cases within HEIs reveal the alarming prevalence of IPV. These include the 2020 murder of Asithandile "Kwasa" Zozo, a University of Witwatersrand student killed by her former partner, and the 2023 stabbing of a Cape Peninsula University of Technology student by her partner, events that spotlight the life-threatening reality of IPV in HEIs (University of Witwatersrand, 2021; Patel, 2023). These tragedies, along with many others, demonstrate that IPV is not only a personal tragedy but also a public health crisis and a profound human rights issue. Studies indicate that IPV is deeply rooted in South Africa's structural inequalities, with a report from the University of Venda finding that over 90% of surveyed female students have experienced IPV at some point in their lives (Allen, 2017). The issue of IPV is exacerbated by underreporting, as female students often prefer to confide in their friends and family rather than seek formal help (Mofokeng & Simelane, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded on Ubuntu Feminism, an emerging African feminist framework rooted in the traditional philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness, shared humanity, dignity, and collective responsibility (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015). At its core, Ubuntu is expressed in the phrase "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," meaning a person is a person through other people. Ubuntu Feminism extends this relational perspective to gender justice, asserting that a just society is one where the dignity and well-being of women are intertwined with the health of the entire community. It critiques Western feminist paradigms that often focus on individualism, confrontation, and autonomy as the main means of empowerment (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015; Konik, 2018). While supporting women's rights, Ubuntu Feminism emphasizes restorative approaches, relational ethics, and community healing, particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where traditional cultural influences continue to shape society. It does not reject feminism's call for equality but emphasizes its local relevance, recognizing that African women's experiences of oppression and resistance are rooted in communal life, cultural identity, and moral obligations (Diouf et al, 2023).

In the context of IPV, Ubuntu Feminism provides an understanding of IPV not just as individual abuse, but as a disruption of relational harmony, a betrayal of shared humanity, and a violation of communal ethics. From this view, the underreporting of IPV among female students is not only due to fear or shame but also reflects deeply rooted expectations to maintain relational unity, uphold cultural respect, and prevent bringing dishonor to families or communities (Ngcobo et al, 2025). Ubuntu Feminism also helps illuminate how patriarchal values, toxic masculinities, and economic dependency are not isolated factors but are reinforced through communal norms and historical structures (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Ngcobo, et al., 2025). For instance, the idea that a woman must endure hardship to preserve a relationship is not only a personal belief but often a communal expectation. Ubuntu Feminism challenges such norms by advocating for just relationships, where everyone upholds dignity and equality, and where men are called into ethical partnership, not dominance.

LITERATURE

The literature reviewed in this study was searched on Google Scholar and the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) Library websites. The UNIZULU Library collection includes African Journals Online (AJOL), and the author reviewed literature from 2015 to 2025. The author identified 25 relevant sources for this study, which are

summarized in Table 1. After analysis, five themes were identified: patriarchy, ignorance, protecting partners, shame and stigma, and financial dependence.

Literature included in the literature review

Table 1: Articles included in the review

Article number	Title	Authors	Year published	Summary
1	Intimate partner violence among female students at a rural university in Limpopo Province, South Africa: A mixed methods study with intervention implications (Master's thesis, Duke University)	Allen	2017	Highlights high IPV prevalence and underreporting due to fear, stigma, and institutional inaction in rural HEIs.
2	Using thematic analysis in psychology	Braun & Clarke	2006	Presents a guide to thematic analysis, helpful in analysing qualitative data.
3	The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development	Chitando, Okyere-Manu, Chirongoma, & Dube	2024	Provides a conceptual foundation on Ubuntu and its role in challenging inequality, relevant to reframing silence on IPV.
4	Ubuntu feminism: Tentative reflections	Cornell & Van Marle	2015	Introduces Ubuntu feminism, emphasizing collective care and dignity, supporting the study's feminist lens.
5	Our Ubuntu: a black feminist turn	Diouf, Dyer, Ecclesiastes, & Gilbert	2023	Discusses Black feminism and Ubuntu, advocating for African-centered approaches to GBV and silence.
6	Gender-based violence against women in South Africa	Dlamini & Makhaye	2023	Argues for community involvement in addressing GBV, indirectly supports university community responsibility.
7	Gender-based violence against women in South Africa	George	2020	Highlights GBV prevalence and the cultural stigma that drives underreporting.
8	Towards a feminist ethics of ubuntu: Bridging rights and ubuntu	Gouws & Val Zyl	2015	Proposes a feminist Ubuntu ethics that values relational dignity, aiding the study's framework.
9	Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight	Hlatshwayo	2020	Explores intersectionality in HEIs, showing how race, gender, and culture influence IPV experiences.

10	First-year female university residence students' experiences and constructions of gender and sexuality in the context of gender-based violence in South Africa (Doctoral dissertation)	Kabaya	2021	Unpacks how gender norms and sexuality are experienced in residences, fostering vulnerability to IPV.
11	The feminisation of gender-based violence at an institution of higher learning in South Africa	Kanjiri & Nomngcoyiya	2021	Explores how GBV is feminized and normalized in HEIs, discouraging reporting.
12	Ubuntu and ecofeminism: Value-building with African and womanist voices	Konik	2018	Links Ubuntu with feminist thought, supporting alternative and humanizing frameworks, such as Ubuntu feminism.
13	Factors associated with female students past year experience of sexual violence in South African public higher education settings: A cross-sectional study	Machisa, Chirwa, Mahlangu, Sikweyiya, Nunze, Dartnall, ... & Jewkes	2021	Identifies predictors of sexual violence and silence in HEIs, strengthening the empirical background.
14	A scourge of sexual victimisation of female students: Experiences and perceptions from selected university communities in South Africa	Makhaye & Ajani	2023	Examines lived experiences of victimization and community responses, connecting to underreporting.
15	Suffering in Silence: Reasons Why Victims of Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions Choose Not to Report Their Victimization	Mdletshe & Makhaye	2025	Explores factors contributing to underreporting in HEIs, including fear, stigma and shame, patriarchy, and financial dependence.
16	Exploring the Complexities of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: A Comprehensive Analysis	Merino & Afa	2025	Reflects on structural and cultural silences in GBV, offering context for underreporting.
17	Mission Impossible: What Will It Take to Change MENTALITIES Towards Reduction of Gender-based Violence and Femicide in Higher Education Institutions?	Mofokeng & Simelane	2024	It highlights resistance to changing masculinities in HEIs, contributing to the perpetuation of violence and silence around GBV.
18	Investigating social-cultural factors contributing to low reporting levels of gender-based violence cases	Mutambo	2023	Details cultural and social barriers that deter GBV reporting, applicable to HEIs.
19	Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Ubuntu in Addressing Gender-Based Violence Against Young Women in Rural KwaZulu-Natal	Ngcobo, Khalema, Masuku, Mlondo, Mncube, Ramphabana, &	2025	Explores how Ubuntu and indigenous values can be used to tackle GBV in rural HEIs.

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20	University of the Western Cape suspends man caught allegedly stabbing CPUT student	Patel	2023	News report on GBV in HEIs, illustrating the urgent need for preventive and support measures.
21	Experiences of healthcare staff in forensic care facilities supporting sexual violence survivors in Tshwane, South Africa	Randa & McGarry	2023	It focuses on how stigma silences many victims, leading to healthcare issues. It also discussed support mechanisms for survivors of IPV.
22	Remember GBV victims	University of the Witwatersrand	2021	Institutional acknowledgment of GBV and the importance of remembering and supporting victims.
23	Prevalence and predictors of gender-based violence among Wolkite University female students, southwest Ethiopia, 2021: Cross-sectional study	Workye, Mekonnen, Wedaje, & Sitot	2023	Identifies GBV patterns and risk factors among students in a similar HEI context.
24	Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates 2018 – Executive Summary	World Health Organization	2021	Global data on IPV prevalence and underreporting, offering comparative context.
25	The scourge of gender-based violence (GBV) on women plaguing South Africa	Yesufu	2022	Discusses GBV prevalence and inadequate state response, reinforcing silence and inaction.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) remains a pervasive issue within HEIs, particularly among students who cohabit with their partners. Workye et al (2023) observed that IPV is notably more prevalent among cohabiting intimate partners, often due to gendered expectations that women perform domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning. When these expectations are unmet, men may assert power through violence, undermining the Ubuntu principle of shared responsibility and mutual care (Ngcobo et al., 2025). From an Ubuntu feminist lens, such violence reflects a breakdown in communal and relational ethics, where interdependence and mutual respect are replaced by domination and control. In Kabaya's (2021) study, a female participant described being physically abused for not complying with such demands yet remained silent for fear of losing her partner. This silence signifies an expectation to uphold relational harmony, even at the expense of personal safety. Ubuntu feminism aims to reframe this by affirming that individual dignity should never be compromised for social unity (Gouws & Van Zyl, 2015).

Kabaya (2021) highlights that the feminisation of violence, where women are seen as natural victims and men as natural aggressors, is sustained by deeply rooted social norms. Dlamini and Makhaye (2023) argue that in societies with entrenched gender hierarchies, such violence is normalized and even justified. These hierarchies not only violate women's bodily autonomy but also erode the collective humanity that Ubuntu calls for. For instance, in a study by Kanjiri and Nomngcoyiya (2021), male university students expressed resistance to gender equality, viewing female empowerment as a threat to cultural heritage. He (participant) shared that his authority, learned from a patriarchal household, was challenged at university, prompting him to use violence to reaffirm his dominance. From the Ubuntu perspective, this reflects the misuse of culture to legitimize harm. Ubuntu feminism calls for a cultural revival that honors traditions of mutual respect and relational justice, not subjugation. Ubuntu feminism also offers a compassionate critique of stigma and silence surrounding IPV, where victims do not report their victimization due to fear of judgment and shame (George, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study using a hermeneutic approach to explore postgraduate students' perspectives on underreporting of gender-based violence (GBV) at a selected university. The study involved in-depth interviews with 22 students. These students were purposively selected, and snowball sampling was utilized to expand participation. The inclusion criteria requested that students be registered and aged 20-40. All faculties were sampled, ensuring balanced representation across disciplines. Additionally, both female and male were considered further balancing gender equity.

Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place in a private setting and lasted about 20 minutes each. English was the primary language used during the sessions, with IsiZulu used to clarify points when needed. Ethical standards were strictly maintained, and participants signed informed consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. To further protect the well-being of the participants, the researcher arranged for a professional psychologist to be on standby throughout the data collection in case some questions triggered trauma in the participants.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse the data. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher manually coded the data by identifying key phrases and grouping them into themes. An inductive approach was applied to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data. The themes were refined and validated through repeated engagement with the transcripts. Verbatim quotes were used in reporting to support the findings and maintain authenticity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zululand's ethics committee, and all data were stored securely in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act No. 4 of 2013 (POPIA). Personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality. In the discussion of findings sections, students are referred to as S1 to S22.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings behind the non-reporting of IPV among female students at South African universities, drawing on participants lived experiences, observations, and cultural contexts. Through the lens of Ubuntu Feminism, these findings are interpreted not just as individual or private struggles but as reflections of broader communal failures to protect and affirm the dignity of women. Ubuntu Feminism recognizes that when one member of the community suffers, the entire community is wounded, and healing must therefore be collective and restorative (Gouws & Van Zyl, 2015).

Patriarchy as a violation of communal dignity

My take on this is that even university is the reflection of the larger society and outside there we have kids that grow up at home with domestic violence. Only to find that the parent or a mother is doing nothing about it. Or heard that the mother next door is being beaten [uyashaywa], and you see bruises, but the father never gets arrested. So how can we expect people growing up in a society like that to be able to come forward with such issues and report for themselves if it is something that we don't see outside? So, I think the matter of reporting/non-reporting is a systematic issue. We can try to solve it at the university level. However, I do feel that it is informed by what is happening outside (S2, female student).

This reflection reveals how patriarchal norms, normalized through generations, have become embedded in the everyday lives of students.

Ignorance and the silencing of suffering

Ignorance plays a significant role in why some victims of IPV do not report their experiences. The participants were asked whether they would report their victimisation whenever they happened to become the victims of IPV. Their response was as follows:

I think it will depend on the severity of the GBV. I feel like if you broke my arm, leg, I would report. But if it just bruises, I won't report because I don't see a need that I could let people laugh at me for having a bruise. I can just lie about it and say I fell because that is what we do (S2, female).

Protecting the abuse: love, loyalty, and relational ties

One of the less acknowledged but powerful reasons victims of IPV do not report their abuse is the desire to protect their partner. This often stems from emotional attachment, love, shared responsibilities such as parenting, or

concern for the partner's future (Diouf et al, 2023). The following assertions confirm this:

I think others are not reporting because of love, they keep on believing that the person will change. But in the end, it will end up with the person hurting you more than he ever does before. There was someone who was beaten in an off-campus residence. I was also staying there. So, this person hit her girlfriend and ran away. So, her friends told her to report. U girl (this girl) said, "She can't report because they both come from the same place, and he is her baby dad. So, if she reports him, he will be expelled from the university and go to jail. So, what will happen to the baby after the baby daddy is arrested?" (S6, male).

Fear of stigma and communal shame

Fear of stigma is a powerful barrier that prevents many victims of IPV from reporting their abuse. In many communities, especially close-knit or traditional ones, the fear of being judged, blamed, or humiliated often outweighs the desire to seek justice or protection (Merino & Afa, 2025). The participant explains:

What I can say is that people are living in this way of thinking 'what will people say'. This is what hurt them the most because they think that people will know that...this...and that...happened in their relationship (S7, female).

Financial dependence as a barrier to reporting

Financial dependency creates a power imbalance that is often weaponized by abusers. This is evident in the following assertions:

You should remember that not every student is funded; others may experience GBV from people who support them financially. They fear that if they report, they won't get any financial support since they are depending on their perpetrators financially (S12, male).

I think money, money in financial dependence. As students some of us are married. So, if you are financially dependent on someone, obviously it is going to be hard to report because you don't have the means to support yourself (S13, female).

DISCUSSION

This study found that patriarchy, ignorance, stigma, emotional loyalty, and financial dependence are key contributors to the underreporting of IPV among female students. Through an Ubuntu Feminist lens, these are not just personal barriers, but failures of communal ethics, relational accountability, and restorative support. Ubuntu feminism challenges patriarchal norms and toxic masculinities that legitimize violence against women in the name of tradition or male authority (Gouws & Van Zyl, 2021; Ngcobo et al., 2025). This study highlights how patriarchal standards learned at home can manifest in HEIs, thereby shaping an individual's willingness to report violence. When patriarchy teaches communities to ignore violence, it erodes shared humanity. S2's assertion that IPV is a "systematic issue" echoes Ubuntu Feminism's position that non-reporting is not merely a failure of individual courage, but a symptom of collective desensitization to injustice. Silence around IPV is therefore a communal failure that requires cultural re-education and a renewal of intergenerational values rooted in care, justice, and equality (Chitando et al, 2024).

According to Konik (2018), Ubuntu Feminism recognizes that knowledge and awareness are not merely academic ideals but essential tools for liberation and dignity. When victims minimize abuse, believing that only severe violence warrants a response, they internalize a culture that undervalues their own worth. This reflects a fractured sense of communal worth, where minor injuries are endured silently to maintain peace. In Ubuntu terms, every form of harm compromises the spiritual and emotional well-being of the community, not just the victims (Gouws & Van Zyl, 2015). Thus, education should not only inform women of their rights but also rebuild the moral consciousness of the broader community, especially among men, about what constitutes harm.

The study also reveals a painful reality that many victims put their partner's future above their own safety. In doing so, they not only remain trapped in harmful relationships but also unintentionally shield the perpetrators from accountability (Makhaye & Ajani, 2023; Mdletshe & Makhaye, 2025). Ubuntu Feminism does not dismiss these emotions as weakness. Instead, it understands them as symptoms of a deeply relational ethic, where the well-being of others, especially children or partners, is prioritized, sometimes at the expense of self (Ngcobo et al., 2025). However, Ubuntu insists that love must never come at the cost of dignity or safety (Cornell & Van Marle, 2015). In this view, protecting an abuser is not an act of loyalty, but a denial of communal justice.

In addition, the participants in this study express how victims prioritize their self-reputation over safety and

justice. They are concerned with what people will say when they find out about their victimization. Randa and McGarry (2023) explain that victims often fear being blamed or ostracized by their communities. This fear reflects a cultural landscape where victims are shamed into silence, not only for the abuse itself, but for daring to speak out. According to George (2020), this makes it difficult for survivors to come forward. Stigma alienates victims and compromises *ubuntu* (the collective spirit that demands inclusion, affirmation, and empathy). When survivors fear judgment, the community fails its duty to uphold justice and healing (Mutambo, 2023).

Economic inequality is a key contributor to IPV, particularly among female students who rely financially on their partners. George (2020) and Yesufu (2022) argue that poverty increases vulnerability to violence, especially in underdeveloped or economically strained regions. The participants in this study highlight how reliance on partner financial support can make individuals endure abuse silently. Ubuntu Feminism asserts that economic injustice is a gendered injustice and that poverty strips individuals of both voice and agency (Chitando, et al., 2024). When a student must choose between personal safety and survival, it indicates that the community has failed to provide the conditions necessary for a dignified life. An Ubuntu approach insists that no woman should be economically enslaved to preserve a relationship or access education (Konik, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that underreporting is not merely the result of individual fear or indecision but is deeply rooted in systemic patriarchy, emotional loyalty, economic dependence, societal stigma, and ignorance about what constitutes abuse. These factors are perpetuated by cultural norms that emphasize relational silence over personal safety, thereby reinforcing cycles of violence and invisibility. Ubuntu Feminism offers a powerful lens through which to understand these dynamics. It reframes IPV as not a private issue but a communal concern and a violation of relational ethics, dignity, and shared humanity upon which African communities are built. The continued silence around IPV among female university students signals the need for holistic and culturally grounded interventions, approaches that address both the individual trauma and the broader communal responsibilities involved. Ending IPV and the silence that surrounds it will require a societal shift that extends beyond institutional policy to transform cultural consciousness, particularly in relation to gender, power, and relational justice.

IMPLICATIONS

Ubuntu Feminism offers a hopeful and grounded way to address IPV, holding the community accountable while emphasizing the survivor's humanity. As long as violence against women is met with silence, excuses, or isolation, the vision of ubuntu remains unfulfilled. Restoring dignity and safety to female students is not just a women's issue; it is a moral, cultural, and communal responsibility. This new perspective explains why female students often remain silent about their experiences of IPV. Through an Ubuntu Feminist lens, silence is not only about individual fear or shame but also a sign of communal disconnection, a breakdown in the relationships meant to provide protection and voice. When communities do not create safe spaces for disclosure, they unintentionally sustain the silence that allows violence to persist. The underreporting of IPV is thus seen as a collective failure rather than an individual weakness, requiring community-driven solutions that rebuild the relational networks vital for speaking out and healing. Therefore, this paper argues that ending silence around IPV involves more than encouraging individuals to report; it requires restoring the communal fabric that makes speaking safe and meaningful within the interconnected reality of ubuntu.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Universities should launch ongoing education campaigns that draw on African cultural values to challenge the normalization of IPV. These campaigns should emphasize that violence violates not only the victim but the fabric of the entire community, drawing on *Ubuntu* principles to foster empathy, shared accountability, and moral courage.
- Universities should invest in non-judgmental, confidential, and trauma-informed support services, including on-campus counselling, peer support groups, and accessible reporting mechanisms. These services should affirm the dignity of survivors and avoid retraumatizing them.
- To reduce economic dependence on abusive partners, institutions should offer targeted financial aid for students experiencing IPV. This is vital in restoring agency and ensuring students can pursue education safely and independently.
- Violence prevention efforts should include transformative dialogues with male students, challenging harmful masculinities, and encouraging alternative models of manhood based on care, responsibility, and equality. These programs should promote Ubuntu-aligned masculinities, where strength is measured by protection and mutual respect, not dominance.

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