

## Article

# Causal Factors of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG): Perspectives from the Brazilian Higher Education Students

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## Abstract

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains a critical problem within Brazilian higher education institutions, where deep-rooted cultural norms and institutional shortcomings continue to foster unsafe environments for female students. Although national and international bodies have raised concerns, few studies have thoroughly examined the layered causes of VAWG in academic settings using comprehensive analytical methods. This study aims to explore the causal factors of VAWG within Brazilian universities by applying a structured survey and analyzing the responses using the Fuzzy Synthetic Evaluation (FSE) approach. This method allows for a nuanced interpretation of the collected data by assigning weighted values to various contributing factors. The research assessed five major dimensions—individual, interpersonal, institutional, community and societal causal factors. The findings reveal that societal and institutional causes significantly contribute to VAWG, while individual factors play a comparatively minor role. These insights point to the structural and systemic nature of VAWG in academic settings, emphasizing the need for broad reforms. Based on the results, practical recommendations, including cultural reorientation, stricter institutional policies, and gender-sensitive training are recommended. By applying FSE in this context, the study offers a novel approach to evaluating and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in higher education, contributing to a valuable model for future research and institutional policymaking. The results offer critical insights that can guide interventions to foster safer and more inclusive university environments in Brazil.

**Keywords:** violence against women; Brazilian universities; fuzzy synthetic evaluation; causal factors



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## 1. Introduction

Global issues and destructive behaviors that disproportionately affect women and girls are known as gender-based violence (GBV), which is often used interchangeably with violence against women (VAW), violence against women and girls (VAWG), and violence against women and children (VAWC) [1]. These widespread problems include many forms of economic, psychological, sexual, and physical violence [2]. Beyond socioeconomic,

cultural, and geographic barriers, violence against women, girls, and children is a pervasive and deeply ingrained social problem [3]. Since it is widely acknowledged that most GBV occurrences are committed against women and girls, primarily by men, GBV and VAWG are generally used interchangeably. Globally, VAWG is reported as a severe public health concern with far-reaching implications [1–4], which constitutes threat to physical, psychological well-being and violation of human rights.

Globally, one in three women has experienced one form of violence—sexual harassment, physical or psychological abuse [5–8]. About 15% of females had experienced VAWG in North America and Australia, and 19% in New Zealand [9]. Twenty per cent of the intimate partner violence is from the Western Pacific, 22% in high-income nations and Europe, 25% in the Americas, 33% in Africa, 31% in the Eastern Mediterranean, and 33% in South-East Asia [6]. Significant percentage of women aged 16 years or above in Brazil have experienced some kind of physical or sexual assault by an intimate partner or former partner [10]. Ultimately, VAW is a widespread and deeply ingrained problem in the lives of millions of individuals [11]. Despite increasing global awareness, the prevalence of VAW continues to rise, particularly in comparison to one in six men that report violence from their partners or ex-partners [12,13]. Studies revealed that men find it difficult to report violence against them because of fear of not being believed, shame, and stigma around masculinity [13–15]. This persistent issue of VAW is more than a societal crisis, it is a violation that undermines global aspirations for sustainable development, equity, and justice [7,16].

Students on college campuses are reported to be highly conscious of physical financial, psychological, and sexual violence, indicating that they are knowledgeable, involved, and sensitive to the problems surrounding GBV [1,4]. Pupils who are knowledgeable about GBV are probably more sympathetic to the struggles that survivors endure and could actively help to make the atmosphere safer and more welcoming [17]. A study conducted in Brazil found that the primary antecedents of VAWG are the educational institution's actions and inactions, the preference for violence, the aggressors' perception of their efficacy, the influence of their group of friends, and the apparent contradiction between women's strength and vulnerability [18]. The presence of fraternities and athletic teams, cocktail parties, parties with illegal drugs available, hazing of freshmen, and intense athletic competitions among universities are some of the situations that appear to encourage violence against female students [19,20].

Despite the growing scholarly debate on VAWG, limited empirical studies have adopted structured, quantitative methodologies that integrate complex and multidimensional causal classifications such as individual, interpersonal, community, institutional, and societal factors to understand VAWG in Brazilian higher education [18,21–23]. Costa [21] employed a feminist epistemological lens to explore subjective narratives of gender violence in universities through video-activism, yet her qualitative focus lacked a systemic framework for quantifying causal factors. Nakamura et al. [24] provided a national-level meta-analysis of physical violence prevalence. Still, heterogeneity, small sample sizes, and an absence of context-specific insights into university environments limited their study. Similarly, Stochero and Pinto [23] analyzed temporal trends of violence against rural women, identifying physical and psychological violence as predominant, but their findings did not address institutional settings such as campuses. Barbosa et al. [18] proposed a valuable multilevel analysis of antecedents of VAW in higher education, highlighting institutional omissions and peer influences; however, their work remained conceptual, offering limited methodological quantification or prioritization of causes. These limitations underscore the need for a more integrated and computationally robust assessment of causal factors. This study adopts a Fuzzy Synthetic Evaluation (FSE) approach, a multi-criteria

decision analysis tool, to assess and prioritize the causal factors across the five structured dimensions. The originality of this research lies in its structured synthesis of these causal layers through fuzzy logic, which better captures the imprecise and overlapping nature of human judgment regarding complex social issues like violence. By employing FSE, this study offers a novel lens but introduces actionable insights for comprehensive interventions across Brazilian higher education and beyond.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of Violence Against Women and Girls in Brazil

In Brazil, the situation is particularly alarming, accounting for 49.5% sexual violence against girls aged 10 to 14, physical violence among women aged 20 to 69, and neglect for elderly women aged 70 and above [25]. The country ranks among those with the highest recorded cases of VAWG [19]. Sadly, there are reports of various forms of abuse, including rape in Brazilian higher education institutions [21] with many victims choosing not to seek help. Holland and Cortina [26] emphasize that, despite increased efforts to support victims, many universities fail to clearly communicate the availability and scope of such assistance clearly. This communication gap, compounded by a widespread belief that institutions will take no effective action, discourages victims from reporting incidents [18,27,28]. Studies by Colpitts [29] and Shannon [30] argue that institutional cultures, especially those shaped by neoliberal ideologies and class privilege, perpetuate environments of power imbalance that fuel acts of violence. A strategic framework emphasizing poverty reduction, women's empowerment, awareness campaigns and efforts to dismantle patriarchal ideologies is crucial in advancing gender equity [7,31].

### 2.2. Causes of Violence Against Women and Girls

Globally, there is an issue with VAW, in which context-specific solutions can be informed by knowledge of their causes. VAW, VAWG, and VAWC are all nomenclature of GBV in the form of harassment, rape, sexual assault, child or forced marriage, insult, beating, and threat of harm, among others [22,24,32]. Research indicates that there is no one cause of violence or one way for it to be committed [33–35]. Violence develops from multiple interacting elements, including personality traits, relationships, household and community structures, developmental history, and relative status of men and women at the micro and macro levels that influence the prevailing norms [2,36,37].

Individual-level factors are often at the core of understanding VAWG, as they reveal personal vulnerabilities, historical experiences, and behavioral tendencies that contribute to abusive dynamics [3]. Socio-demographic characteristics such as age, income, and educational level can heighten exposure to violence, particularly for women who face compounded marginalization [3,38]. Low levels of education, in particular, reduce access to knowledge and empowerment tools, leaving women susceptible to manipulation and control [39]. Substance abuse, including alcohol and drug dependency, is another critical factor, through which perpetrators under the influence are more likely to act violently [38,40]. Individuals who also witnessed or endured violence at home, such as observing their mothers being beaten, often normalize abuse, creating a cycle that persists into adulthood [33,39,41]. Furthermore, mental health issues, personality disorders and cognitive impairments may exacerbate tendencies toward aggression or make victims more vulnerable [42–44].

Interpersonal dynamics also influence the prevalence of VAWG, particularly in intimate and family relationships. Economic stress and poverty are among the most frequently cited triggers of tension within households, often escalating into physical or emotional violence [3,45]. VAWG is further complicated in settings where male dominance is culturally sanctioned, allowing men to exert control over women without consequence. Child,

early, and forced marriages remain deeply entrenched in some communities, reinforcing unequal power dynamics and depriving young girls of autonomy and education [46–48]. Furthermore, interpersonal violence is perpetuated through controlling behaviors, limiting movement, isolating women from social support networks, and denying access to resources, all of which are tactics aimed at maintaining power [44,46,49]. In higher education, these interpersonal factors often play out in students' romantic relationships, roommate coercion, and sexually exploitative faculty-student relationships [23,50,51]. Disparities in educational attainment and age between partners can reinforce imbalanced relationships where younger female students are vulnerable to manipulation and control [52]. Understanding the interpersonal nature of VAWG in these environments highlights the need for institutional support structures, conflict resolution programs, and awareness campaigns that address healthy relationships [42].

On a higher level, communal factors and collective behaviors—normalization of VAW—are embedded in social narratives and cultural practices that deem male aggression as acceptable [39,46,53]. This acceptance often discourages victims from reporting abuse due to shame, fear of retaliation, or distrust in community responses. Opportunistic rape, particularly during crises or conflicts, is another reflection of how communities may fail to protect vulnerable populations or condemn such actions strongly enough [48]. Additionally, targeted VAWG within the community, such as public shaming, harassment, or sexual assaults in communal spaces, further entrenches gender-based discrimination [21]. Harmful practices such as wife inheritance (a practice where a widow is required to marry her late husband's male relative), still observed in certain regions, institutionalize gender inequality and expose women to coercion and abuse [43]. Within the campuses, these community dynamics translate into campus cultures that silence survivors and enable perpetrators [21]. For example, when peers normalize sexual jokes, victim-blaming, or trivialize consent, a hostile climate is created that discourages reporting [54]. Addressing VAWG from a community lens within universities requires creating inclusive campus policies, establishing gender-sensitive support networks, and promoting community accountability [28].

At institutional and organizational levels, including educational systems and humanitarian structures, one major institutional gap is the underrepresentation of women in the security and enforcement sectors [3,21,45]. This gender imbalance at the institutional level often leads to insufficient understanding, attention, or sensitivity toward female-specific vulnerabilities, especially in reporting and handling abuse cases [55]. Additionally, suppressed civil societies and inactive watchdog mechanisms allow violations to persist, as institutional accountability is compromised or nonexistent [43,56]. In conflict-affected settings, this suppression becomes even more acute, with VAWG rising in tandem with a weakened legal system. Women and girls may be coerced into sexual favor in exchange for access to aid, grades, or essential services [42]. The use of rape as a weapon of war or a strategy of dominance reflects the most egregious form of institutionalized violence, often going unpunished due to porous justice systems [57].

At the broadest level, societal structures and ideologies underpin and perpetuate VAWG. A pervasive culture of impunity, where abusers face minimal or no consequences, emboldens further violations [43]. In many societies, the legal and judicial systems are either too weak or too biased to protect victims, allowing perpetrators to act without fear of reprisal [58]. Unequal gender dynamics, shaped by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, relegate women to subordinate positions, often justifying violence as a tool for male control or discipline [3,7,39]. These societal beliefs are internalized from a young age and reinforced through media, education, and religion. The normalization of hypermasculinity, especially in war-torn or militarized contexts, glorifies aggression and views emotional restraint as weakness, further marginalizing women and girls [47,53]. Patriarchal systems uphold

male entitlement over women’s bodies, time, and resources, contributing to widespread acceptance of violence and sexual coercion [49,51]. Due to broader societal expectations, female students may face systemic disadvantages in course enrolment, academic opportunities, or leadership positions [59]. Moreover, sexual harassment is often trivialized as part of “campus life,” discouraging women from pursuing education or silencing their voices [21,60]. However, academic institutions have the unique potential to challenge and reform societal norms by fostering critical dialog, integrating gender studies, and modeling inclusive governance. By positioning themselves as agents of change, universities can break the societal cycle of VAWG in the academic environment [21,61]. The summary of the causal factors of VAWG and their classification retrieved from extant literature is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of causal factors.

Code	Factor Causes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
<i>Individual causal factors</i>																	
IUC1	Socio-demographic	✓	✓	✓				✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
IUC2	Alcohol and drug abuse		✓	✓							✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
IUC3	Low education	✓			✓			✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
IUC4	Experience of violence during childhood		✓					✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓
IUC5	Mental health and disabilities; personality disorder	✓	✓		✓				✓								
IUC6	Displacement, separation from family, and female-headed households		✓	✓				✓	✓						✓	✓	✓
IUC7	Witnessing mother being beaten	✓							✓								✓
<i>Interpersonal causal factors</i>																	
TUC1	Stress and poverty/economic stress	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TUC2	Conflict or dissatisfaction in the relationship	✓						✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
TUC3	Male dominance in the family	✓								✓							
TUC4	Child, early, and forced marriage		✓			✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
TUC5	Unequal power and controlling behaviors		✓					✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TUC6	Changing gender roles due to conflict & displacement		✓			✓		✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
TUC7	Disparity in education attainment	✓										✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Community causal factors</i>																	
CUC1	Normalization of violence and VAWG	✓	✓		✓			✓				✓	✓	✓			✓
CUC2	Opportunistic rape		✓			✓			✓	✓					✓		
CUC3	Community violence targeting women		✓					✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
CUC4	Wife inheritance							✓		✓		✓				✓	
CUC5	Weak community sanction against VAWG	✓						✓									✓
<i>Social causal factors</i>																	
SUC1	Culture of impunity		✓					✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	
SUC2	Unequal gender dynamics	✓	✓		✓			✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	
SUC3	Patriarchal norms and practices		✓				✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
SUC4	Lack of rule of law		✓					✓				✓				✓	
SUC5	Emphasis on hyper masculinities	✓											✓	✓			
<i>Institutional causal factors</i>																	
UUC1	Lack of female representation in the security sector		✓					✓		✓			✓				✓
UUC2	Suppressed civil society		✓						✓			✓	✓		✓		
UUC3	Abuse of power by humanitarians		✓														
UUC4	Use of rape as a weapon of war		✓														
UUC5	Forced enlistment/abduction of women and girls		✓			✓			✓	✓							
UUC6	Lack of attention to VAWG in peace agreements		✓					✓					✓		✓		

Note: 1—WHO [45]; 2—Murphy et al. [3]; 3—Wachter et al. [38]; 4—Gibbs et al. [39]; 5—Ellsberg et al. [48]; 6—Sikweyiya et al. [49]; 7—Veronese et al. [52]; 8—Taiebne [44]; 9—Ibekwe et al. [47]; 10—Washington et al. [35]; 11—Zinyemba and Hlongwana [55]; 12—Falak [43]; 13—Bengesai and Chikhungu [46]; 14—Awang et al. [42]; 15—Rugira [40]; 16—Modise and Modise [33].



### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employs the Fuzzy Synthetic Evaluation (FSE) technique to systematically assess the causal factors contributing to VAWG in Brazilian higher education. Descriptive survey design, which helps to collect and analyze quantitative data from target respondents was adopted for this study. To establish a strong foundation, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. This review facilitated identifying and classifying key causal dimensions into five categories—individual, interpersonal, community, institutional, and societal. This structured classification is essential to examine the multi-layered dynamics that sustain VAWG within academic environments.

#### 3.2. Questionnaire Development and Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was designed to investigate the causal factors of VAWG, using the opinions of students in the Brazilian higher education. The survey instrument comprised three sections, namely (i) background information (gender, age, year of study, city where the institution is located, and course of study) of the respondents, (ii) forms of VAWG the respondents had experienced or witnessed, and (iii) underlying causes of VAWG in academic institutions. The forms of VAWG included in the second section of the survey are beating, forced sexual intercourse, other forms of sexual coercion, unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks, movement monitoring, and restricting access to education. The respondents were asked to indicate their personal experience or witness of the forms of violence in their institutions, using never, rarely, sometimes, often, or always. This approach is better than nominal question (Yes/No) asking whether respondents had experienced or witnessed VAWG in their institutions. Lastly, the questions of the underlying causes of VAWG, grounded in insights from the literature (see Appendix A), were asked using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The underlying causes of VAWG may stem from the environments being studied or from external contexts, both of which can shape how violence is perceived and how frequently it occurs within a specific setting. Therefore, the survey administered to the target respondents incorporates other factors, such as communal, institutional, and social aspects of the underlying causal factors. Distribution was facilitated via Google form, targeting both male and female victims, who have encountered violence or witnessed it within academic institutions.

#### 3.3. Sampling

To ensure methodological rigor, a robust sampling procedure was adopted. The target population included individuals within Brazilian higher education who have directly experienced or are knowledgeable about VAWG incidents. Using Yamane's formula with a 5% margin of error, a statistically representative sample size of 396 participants was determined [62]. Data was gathered via structured questionnaires administered between January and April 2025, resulting in 311 responses, out of which 247 were considered valid for data analysis. The valid data represents a 62.4% response rate.

#### 3.4. Methods of Data Analysis

To validate internal consistency of the data received, Cronbach's alpha was used to pretest reliability, and the mean score of the variables was computed, using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 27). The mean values of the variables were calculated and statistical significance between the opinions of the responders was determined using the Mann–Whitney U test. Subsequently, the FSE model was applied to interpret causal factors of VAWG. FSE, rooted in fuzzy set theory, is adept at handling vague, uncertain, and subjective human judgments, making it ideal for evaluating complex social issues

like VAWG [63]. The technique enables the translation of qualitative assessments into quantifiable outputs, ensuring a nuanced and objective prioritization of factors. The FSE process followed four stages: (1) constructing the evaluation index system, (2) estimating mean scores and weightings ( $W$ ) for each item, (3) deriving the membership functions (MF), and (4) calculating the agreement indices.

The evaluation index was formally defined as  $U = (u_1, u_2, u_3, u_4, u_5)$ , corresponding to the five causal domains. Sub-items within each domain were denoted as  $u_1 = (u_{11}, u_{12}, \dots, u_{1n})$ . The rating scale was  $V = (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)$ . The second step entails calculating the weighting ( $W$ ) of items from the mean ( $\mu$ ) and the component factors using Equation (1) and expressed in the order of the rating scale.

$$W_i = \frac{\mu_i}{\sum_{i=1}^5 \mu_i}, 0 \leq w_i \leq 1, \sum_{i=1}^5 w_i = 1 \quad (1)$$

The third phase of the FSE process focused on establishing the membership function (MF) for each variable associated with the identified causal factors. This was achieved by analyzing the ratings provided by respondents across a five-point Likert scale. Specifically, the membership function for each variable (denoted as  $m_x$ ) was computed using a defined equation that incorporated the proportion of respondents who selected each rating level (from 1 to 5). In this context,  $X_{bvm}$  refers to the percentage of responses that fell within a particular rating level for a given variable. At the same time, the expression  $X_{bm_x}/V_b$  illustrates the linkage between each response distribution and its corresponding scale grade. This step was critical in transforming survey responses into quantitative fuzzy values, enabling a more nuanced representation of each variable's relative importance.

$$MF_{m_x} = \frac{K_{1m_x}}{M_1} + \frac{K_{2m_x}}{M_2} + \frac{K_{3m_x}}{M_3} + \frac{K_{4m_x}}{M_4} + \frac{K_{5m_x}}{M_5} \quad (2)$$

To derive the comprehensive fuzzy value for each causal factor set, a fuzzy matrix (denoted as  $R_i$ ) was developed, encapsulating the individual membership functions across all items under that factor. This matrix was then combined with their respective weight indices to produce an overall fuzzy vector ( $D_i$ ), representing the aggregate significance of the factor. These calculations were performed using established fuzzy logic equations, ensuring internal consistency and comparability across factors.  $D_i$  and  $R_i$  can be calculated using Equations (4) and (5).

$$D_i = \begin{bmatrix} MF_{ix1} \\ MF_{ix2} \\ MF_{ix3} \\ \dots \\ MF_{ixn} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} K_{1ix1} & K_{2ix1} & \dots & K_{5ix1} \\ K_{1ix2} & K_{2ix2} & \dots & K_{5ix2} \\ K_{1ix3} & K_{2ix3} & \dots & K_{5ix3} \\ \dots & \dots & \dots & \dots \\ K_{1ix4} & K_{2ix4} & \dots & K_{5ix5} \end{bmatrix} \quad (3)$$

$$R_i = W_i \times D_i = (w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n) \times \begin{bmatrix} K_{1ix1} & K_{2ix1} & \dots & K_{5ix1} \\ K_{1ix2} & K_{2ix2} & \dots & K_{5ix2} \\ K_{1ix3} & K_{2ix3} & \dots & K_{5ix3} \\ \dots & \dots & \dots & \dots \\ K_{1ix4} & K_{2ix4} & \dots & K_{5ix5} \end{bmatrix} = (r_{i1}, r_{i2}, \dots, r_n) \quad (4)$$

In the final stage of the methodology, the fuzzy synthetic evaluation approach was applied to calculate the agreement index on each group of causal factors contributing to VAWG within Brazilian higher education. This index reflects the combined impact of all variables within a factor. It is computed as the weighted sum of each grade level (1 to 5), multiplied by the values in the fuzzy evaluation matrix ( $R_i$ ). By quantifying these indices,

the study ranked the causal factors, offering a structured and empirical foundation for understanding the causal factors of VAWG in academic institutions. The agreement index is the product of the grading system ( $q = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$ ) and fuzzy evaluation matrix ( $R_i$ ) using Equation (5).

$$AI = \sum_{i=1}^5 (R_i \times Q_i) = 1 \leq AI \leq 5 \quad (5)$$

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Background Information of Respondents

The background information of the respondents is shown in Figure 1a–e. A majority of the respondents ( $N = 182$ ) are female, male respondents account for 96 of the total respondents, 3 respondents prefer not to indicate their gender, while only 1 responder is non-binary. The age distribution of the respondents includes, less than 20 years (18), 20–24 years (79 responders), 25–29 years (65 responders), 30–39 years (70 responders), while 49 respondents are 40 years and above. There is an equitable distribution of respondents in the undergraduate program ( $N = 149$ ) and postgraduate ( $N = 132$ ). The undergraduate students are in the first year ( $N = 35$ ), second year ( $N = 26$ ), third year ( $N = 30$ ), and fourth year ( $N = 58$ ). The background information indicates that respondents are academically qualified to achieve the aim of the study.

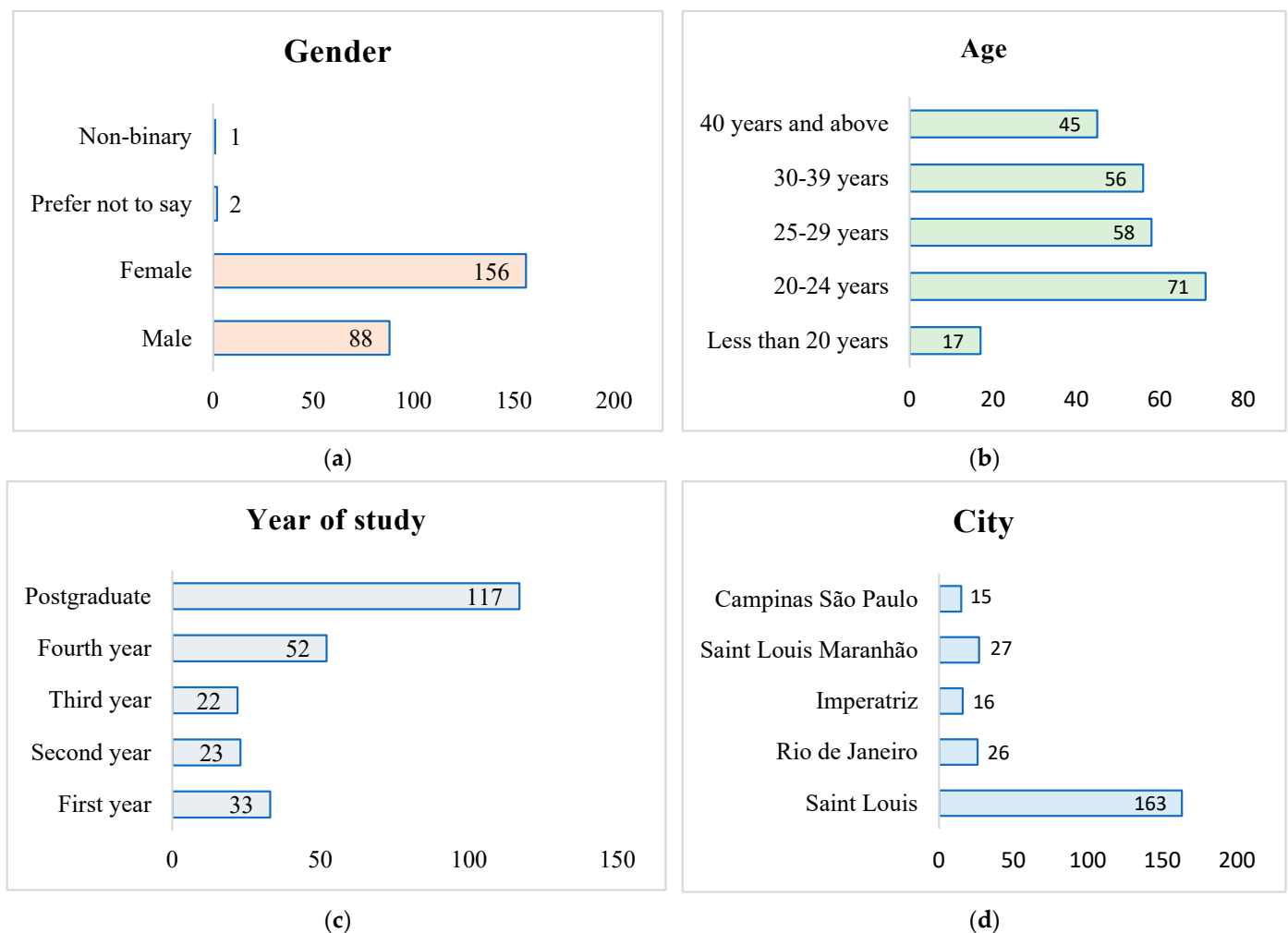
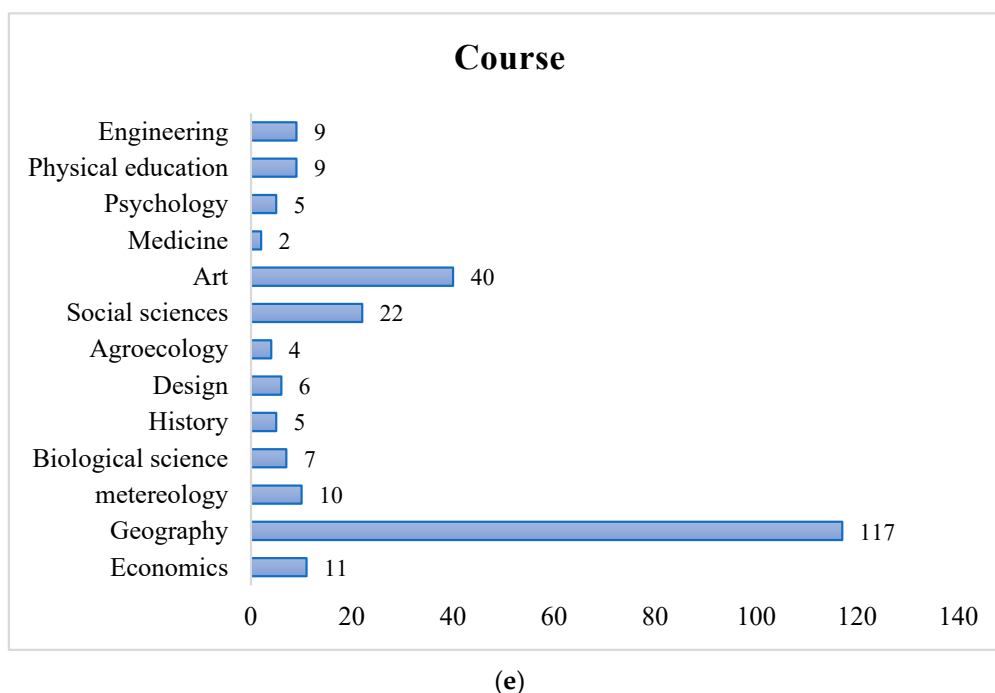


Figure 1. Cont.





**Figure 1.** (a): Gender of respondents; (b): Age; (c): Year of study; (d): City where university is located; (e): Course of study.

#### 4.2. Cross-Tabulation of Genders and Form of VAWG in the Brazilian Higher Education

The cross-tabulation between the respondents' gender and various forms of VAWG was conducted (see Table 2). The cross-tabulation shows different forms of violence experienced by students in Brazilian higher education, and their gender. There are six types of violence discussed. In each case, female students are the most affected group. For beating, most female students indicated that it never happened, but 28 of them reported being beaten sometimes, often, or always. This shows that physical violence still exists in schools and must not be ignored.

In the case of forced sexual intercourse, about 36 female students reported it happening sometimes or more frequently. When it comes to other forms of sexual coercion, like pressure or threats for sexual acts, 38 females indicated that it happened to them regularly. This points to high levels of unwanted sexual attention and abuse. Many students, but especially females reported unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks. In fact, only 37 respondents had not experienced or witnessed unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks. The experience of respondents in other forms of violence such as movement monitoring and restricting access to education are presented in Table 2. A total of 78 female respondents indicated that their movement is being monitored sometimes or more frequently, indicating the need for safety measures on campus.

Additionally, 56 female students disclosed facing obstacles restricting their access to education. In all six forms of violence, female students were the most affected. The data shows that physical, sexual, emotional, and educational forms of violence are all present in Brazilian higher education. This proves that VAWG in universities is not rare or isolated, which call for urgent action. Therefore, universities must improve support systems, raise awareness, and create safer learning environments, especially women and girls.

**Table 2.** Cross-tabulation of genders and form of VAWG in the Brazilian higher education.

Gender	Forms of Violence					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
<i>Beating</i>						
Male	53	17	8	7	3	88
Female	99	29	11	7	10	156
Prefer not to say	0	0	1	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>247</b>
<i>Forced sexual intercourse</i>						
Male	49	20	9	5	5	88
Female	100	20	15	13	8	156
Prefer not to say	1	0	0	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>247</b>
<i>Other forms of sexual coercion</i>						
Male	41	19	14	9	5	88
Female	58	30	30	22	16	156
Prefer not to say	1	0	0	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>247</b>
<i>Unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks</i>						
Male	12	14	23	20	19	88
Female	25	13	48	35	35	156
Prefer not to say	0	0	1	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>247</b>
<i>Movement monitoring</i>						
Male	26	19	21	15	7	88
Female	52	26	39	23	16	156
Prefer not to say	0	0	1	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>247</b>
<i>Restricting access to education</i>						
Male	39	11	23	9	6	88
Female	76	24	30	13	13	156
Prefer not to say	1	0	0	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>247</b>

#### 4.3. Descriptive Scores of the Causal Factors

Table 3 shows the values of the Shapiro–Wilk test, mean score and standard deviation of the whole respondents (N = 247), the male responders (N = 88), and female responders (N = 156), and the Mann–Whitney U test values. The values of the Shapiro–Wilk test are statistically significant (0.000), hence the use of a non-parametric test (Mann–Whitney U test). The mean score of most of the variables across the five dimensions of causal factors of VAWG are above 3.0, suggesting that respondents regard most of the identified factors as relevant contributors to VAWG. In addition, the mean values of the female responders on majority of the variables are higher than that of the male respondents. Interestingly, the Mann–Whitney U test reveals statistical differences between the male and female responders in six variables, namely unequal gender dynamics (SUS2; sig. = 0.021), suppressed civil society (UUC2; sig. = 0.027), abuse of power by humanitarians (UUC3; sig. = 0.009), use of rape as a weapon of war (UUC4; sig. = 0.021) and forced enlistment/abduction of women and girls (UUC5; sig. = 0.037), and lack of attention to VAWG in peace agreements (UUC6; sig. = 0.011). These results indicate that female students consistently rated these societal and institutional variables as significantly more important compared to males. This suggests a deeper concern or stronger recognition among women regarding how institu-

tional gaps and social influences fuel violence in academic settings. The findings emphasize the need for universities to implement gender-responsive policies, promote awareness, and strengthen institutional accountability to effectively address these perceived root causes.

**Table 3.** Descriptive scores and Mann–Whitney values of the causal factors.

Code	Shapiro–Wilk	Overall (N = 247)		Male (N = 88)		Female (N = 156)		M-W (Sig.)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Individual causal factor								
IUC1	0.000 **	3.429	1.224	3.318	1.160	3.487	1.257	0.256
IUC2	0.000 **	3.263	1.306	3.295	1.252	3.224	1.342	0.760
IUC3	0.000 **	2.943	1.267	3.045	1.154	2.897	1.335	0.398
IUC4	0.000 **	3.324	1.193	3.182	1.109	3.397	1.232	0.143
IUC5	0.000 **	3.162	1.143	3.193	1.071	3.141	1.194	0.778
IUC6	0.000 **	2.960	1.242	2.966	1.217	2.962	1.259	0.883
IUC7	0.000 **	3.093	1.317	2.943	1.263	3.154	1.345	0.204
Interpersonal causal factor								
TUC1	0.000 **	3.247	1.203	3.205	1.224	3.269	1.199	0.749
TUC2	0.000 **	3.445	1.139	3.307	1.197	3.519	1.110	0.203
TUC3	0.000 **	3.457	1.238	3.511	1.203	3.423	1.260	0.648
TUC4	0.000 **	3.198	1.407	3.250	1.341	3.147	1.449	0.655
TUC5	0.000 **	3.506	1.233	3.364	1.215	3.564	1.240	0.184
TUC6	0.000 **	3.198	1.274	3.193	1.202	3.192	1.315	0.933
TUC7	0.000 **	3.130	1.256	3.159	1.173	3.103	1.301	0.761
Community causal factor								
CUC1	0.000 **	3.571	1.285	3.455	1.231	3.615	1.317	0.216
CUC2	0.000 **	3.275	1.416	3.227	1.302	3.276	1.479	0.576
CUC3	0.000 **	3.324	1.331	3.216	1.273	3.359	1.363	0.287
CUC4	0.000 **	2.850	1.271	2.841	1.231	2.833	1.284	0.999
CUC5	0.000 **	3.401	1.309	3.261	1.282	3.462	1.322	0.192
Societal causal factor								
SUC1	0.000 **	3.551	1.238	3.318	1.309	3.660	1.183	0.056
SUC2	0.000 **	3.462	1.205	3.205	1.252	3.596	1.152	0.021 **
SUC3	0.000 **	3.263	1.169	3.102	1.185	3.327	1.148	0.146
SUC4	0.000 **	3.231	1.288	3.057	1.263	3.301	1.292	0.134
SUC5	0.000 **	3.243	1.346	3.261	1.352	3.199	1.336	0.682
Institutional causal factor								
UUC1	0.000 **	3.709	1.248	3.602	1.209	3.744	1.269	0.252
UUC2	0.000 **	3.972	1.174	3.784	1.169	4.064	1.173	0.027 **
UUC3	0.000 **	3.984	1.093	3.773	1.090	4.090	1.086	0.009 **
UUC4	0.000 **	3.862	1.129	3.648	1.135	3.968	1.115	0.021 **
UUC5	0.000 **	3.765	1.116	3.557	1.143	3.865	1.090	0.037 **
UUC6	0.000 **	3.595	1.216	3.318	1.237	3.731	1.182	0.011 **

Note: SD = Standard deviation, M-W = Mann–Whitney U test, \*\* = significant at 0.05 (2-tailed).

#### 4.4. Mean Score, Weighting, Internal Consistency, and Membership Function of Causes of VAWG

A detailed analysis of the membership functions of the causes of VAWG in Brazilian higher education institutions, based on the five causal factors—individual, interpersonal, community, institutional and societal are illustrated in Table 4. For each factor, key statistical measures were calculated, including mean scores, weightings of each variable, weighting of the factors, internal consistency (measured using Cronbach’s alpha), total mean values, and MF (Levels 1 and 2). These metrics offer a clear picture of the importance of each cause, and the reliability of the variables within each group.

The individual causal factor (IUC) had a total mean score of 22.174. Among the variables in this group, IUC1 (socio-demographic) and IUC4 (experience of violence during childhood) had the highest mean scores, at 3.429 and 3.324, respectively, with IUC1 having the largest weighting of 0.155 (Table 4). The internal consistency for this group, with an alpha of 0.841, indicates high reliability in the responses. The findings imply

that strategies addressing personal-level causes, perhaps through counseling, behavior modification programs, or awareness campaigns, could help reduce instances of violence. Interpersonal causal factors (TUC) have the highest total mean value of 23.182 and an alpha of 0.888. The variables TUC5 (unequal power and controlling behaviors) and TUC3 (male dominance in the family) recorded high mean scores of 3.506 and 3.457, weighing 0.151 and 0.149, respectively.

**Table 4.** Mean score, internal consistency and membership function of causal factors for VAWG.

Code	Mean	W <sub>v</sub>	Total Mean	W	Alpha	MF for Level 2	MF for Level 1
Individual causal factor							
IUC1	3.429	0.155	22.174	0.212	0.841	(0.08, 0.17, 0.22, 0.31, 0.22)	(0.128, 0.152, 0.264, 0.281, 0.159)
IUC2	3.263	0.147				(0.13, 0.15, 0.22, 0.31, 0.19)	
IUC3	2.943	0.133				(0.17, 0.21, 0.26, 0.24, 0.12)	
IUC4	3.324	0.150				(0.09, 0.11, 0.27, 0.30, 0.18)	
IUC5	3.162	0.143				(0.10, 0.11, 0.34, 0.27, 0.13)	
IUC6	2.960	0.133				(0.17, 0.17, 0.30, 0.25, 0.11)	
IUC7	3.093	0.139				(0.17, 0.15, 0.25, 0.28, 0.15)	
Interpersonal causal factor							
TUC1	3.247	0.140	23.182	0.222	0.888	(0.09, 0.19, 0.26, 0.29, 0.17)	(0.113, 0.146, 0.247, 0.303, 0.198)
TUC2	3.445	0.149				(0.07, 0.14, 0.24, 0.38, 0.17)	
TUC3	3.457	0.149				(0.10, 0.11, 0.26, 0.30, 0.24)	
TUC4	3.198	0.138				(0.19, 0.11, 0.22, 0.27, 0.22)	
TUC5	3.506	0.151				(0.10, 0.11, 0.23, 0.34, 0.24)	
TUC6	3.198	0.138				(0.12, 0.19, 0.24, 0.27, 0.18)	
TUC7	3.130	0.135				(0.13, 0.18, 0.28, 0.26, 0.16)	
Community causal factor							
CUC1	3.571	0.217	16.421	0.157	0.894	(0.10, 0.11, 0.18, 0.32, 0.28)	(0.146, 0.135, 0.222, 0.275, 0.222)
CUC2	3.275	0.199				(0.19, 0.10, 0.20, 0.27, 0.23)	
CUC3	3.324	0.202				(0.15, 0.11, 0.24, 0.29, 0.22)	
CUC4	2.850	0.174				(0.18, 0.24, 0.27, 0.20, 0.12)	
CUC5	3.401	0.207				(0.12, 0.13, 0.23, 0.28, 0.24)	
Societal causal factor							
SUC1	3.551	0.212	16.749	0.160	0.916	(0.05, 0.07, 0.17, 0.27, 0.43)	(0.004, 0.097, 0.199, 0.294, 0.364)
SUC2	3.462	0.207				(0.04, 0.08, 0.14, 0.34, 0.40)	
SUC3	3.263	0.195				(0.03, 0.11, 0.19, 0.30, 0.37)	
SUC4	3.231	0.193				(0.03, 0.11, 0.24, 0.29, 0.32)	
SUC5	3.243	0.194				(0.07, 0.12, 0.26, 0.27, 0.29)	
Institutional causal factor							
UUC1	3.709	0.162	22.887	0.219	0.881	(0.08, 0.13, 0.22, 0.31, 0.27)	(0.110, 0.126, 0.238, 0.305, 0.220)
UUC2	3.972	0.174				(0.09, 0.13, 0.24, 0.33, 0.22)	
UUC3	3.984	0.174				(0.09, 0.15, 0.31, 0.29, 0.15)	
UUC4	3.862	0.169				(0.14, 0.14, 0.24, 0.30, 0.17)	
UUC5	3.765	0.165				(0.17, 0.11, 0.24, 0.28, 0.20)	
UUC6	3.595	0.157				(0.09, 0.09, 0.17, 0.32, 0.32)	

The community causal factor (CUC) recorded a total mean value of 16.421 and internal consistency with an alpha of 0.894. Notably, CUC1 (normalization of VAWG) emerged as a particularly strong variable with a mean score of 3.571 and the highest weighting in this group at 0.217. Despite the lower total mean, this result indicates that certain community-related factors, such as a weak community sanction against VAWG, remain highly influential and cannot be overlooked, hence community-based programs and neighborhood safety initiatives may be helpful. Societal causal factors (SUC) had the highest reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.916, indicating very strong internal consistency. Although this group had only four items, it achieved a total mean value of 16.749. SUC1 (culture of impunity) and SUC2 (unequal gender dynamics) had the highest individual mean scores of 3.551 and 3.462, respectively, in the construct. These findings underscore

the powerful role that societal influences, such as cultural norms, entrenched gender roles, and structural inequalities, play in perpetuating VAWG.

Institutional causal factors (UUC) also ranked high, with a total mean of 22.887 and a reliability score of 0.881. The high values point of the variables indicate the role of institutional shortcomings, (such as weak enforcement of policies, inadequate victim support systems, or poor reporting mechanisms), in the occurrence and persistence of VAWG. The implication is that strengthening institutional frameworks and holding educational authorities accountable will be key to reducing violence in academic spaces.

The membership functions (MFs) in the FSE range from 0 to 1 [64]. The intrinsic term of evaluating the construct of causal factor of VAWG using a 5-point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The MF (Level 1) of an item of causal factor was computed using Equation (2) for SUC (variable 3). Based on the respondents' rating, strongly disagree is 4%, disagree is 10%, neutral is 21%, agree is 29% and strongly agree was computed as 21%. Therefore, the MF of SUC3 is:

$$MF_{SUC_3} = \frac{0.03}{\text{Strongly disagree}} + \frac{0.11}{\text{Disagree}} + \frac{0.19}{\text{Neutral}} + \frac{0.30}{\text{Agree}} + \frac{0.37}{\text{Strongly agree}} = (0.03, 0.11, 0.19, 0.30, 0.37)$$

In the same vein, the MFs (Level 2) of the causal factors of VAWG were calculated using the respondents' rating.

The MFs (Level 1) were computed using Equation (4) by multiplying the MFs (Level 2) of each causal factor with the associated weighting derived from Equation (1). For example, the SUC (Level 1) is computed as follows:

$$R_{SUC} = (0.212, 0.207, 0.195, 0.193, 0.194) \times \begin{bmatrix} 0.05 & 0.07 & 0.17 & 0.27 & 0.43 \\ 0.04 & 0.08 & 0.14 & 0.34 & 0.40 \\ 0.03 & 0.11 & 0.19 & 0.30 & 0.37 \\ 0.03 & 0.11 & 0.24 & 0.29 & 0.32 \\ 0.07 & 0.12 & 0.26 & 0.27 & 0.29 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$R_{SUC} = (0.004, 0.097, 0.199, 0.294, 0.364)$$

#### 4.5. Agreement Index of Causal Factors of VAWG

Table 5 presents the agreement index of each causal factor by multiplying each MF value at Level 1 with its corresponding level rating (1 through 5) and summing the products. This final step ranks the five causal factors by overall perceived influence. Societal causal factors (SUC) ranked first with an agreement index of 3.791, reflecting the highest consensus about its impact. This was followed by institutional causal factors (UUC) with a score of 3.396, and interpersonal factors (TUC) at 3.348. Community causal factors (CUC) ranked fourth with 3.292, while individual factors (IUC) ranked lowest at 3.143.

**Table 5.** Agreement index of causal factors of VAWG.

Factors	MF (Level 1)	Agreement Index	Rank
IUC	$(0.128 \times 1 + 0.152 \times 2 + 0.264 \times 3 + 0.281 \times 4 + 0.159 \times 5)$	3.143	5
TUC	$(0.113 \times 1 + 0.146 \times 2 + 0.247 \times 3 + 0.303 \times 4 + 0.198 \times 5)$	3.348	3
CUC	$(0.146 \times 1 + 0.135 \times 2 + 0.222 \times 3 + 0.275 \times 4 + 0.222 \times 5)$	3.292	4
SUC	$(0.004 \times 1 + 0.097 \times 2 + 0.199 \times 3 + 0.294 \times 4 + 0.364 \times 5)$	3.791	1
UUC	$(0.110 \times 1 + 0.126 \times 2 + 0.238 \times 3 + 0.305 \times 4 + 0.220 \times 5)$	3.396	2

In conclusion, the fuzzy synthetic evaluation model validates the VAWG's complex and layered nature. While individual behaviors causal factor matters, the broader societal

and institutional environments are considered the most powerful contributors, which points to a need for systemic interventions, not just personal change, if sustainable solutions to violence are to be achieved.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Societal Causal Factors

SUC factors stood out as the most significant contributors to VAWG in the Brazilian higher education, with the highest agreement index of 3.791 (Table 5). Respondents viewed societal endorsement of hyper-masculinity, systemic inequality, and legal failings as the foundational bedrock upon which other causal factors rest. Essentially, universities were seen not as isolated spaces but as microcosms of the broader society, mirroring and reproducing its gender-based hierarchies and moral blind spots [49]. The findings reflect the pervasiveness of societal structures, patriarchy, cultural gender biases, and systemic inequality that extend their influence into university spaces. The broader societal framework often sets the stage for what is permissible within institutions, creating environments where misogyny and GBV are tolerated or even justified [39,47]. Alam et al. [65] observed that merely attaining higher education does not equate to gender equality if societal norms remain unchanged. Cross-national comparison deepens our understanding of this systemic entrenchment. In Nigeria, for instance, the culture of impunity and weak legal enforcement has emboldened perpetrators of VAWG, while silencing survivors [2]. In Afghanistan, societal patriarchy is deeply institutionalized, creating barriers to female education and public participation that indirectly sustain VAWG [7].

Meanwhile, Argentina has made significant strides in confronting societal norms through public campaigns and legislation yet still battles with deeply embedded machismo culture [58]. These contrasts suggest that while societal structures differ in their expressions, their role in sustaining violence remains alarmingly consistent, reinforcing the Brazilian findings and calling for globally coordinated societal reform. Thus, achieving meaningful change within academia necessitates parallel shifts in societal values, legal frameworks, and public discourse surrounding gender and violence.

### 5.2. Institutional Causal Factors

Institutional causal factors were ranked second most influential in the Brazilian higher institutions' context, with an agreement index of 3.396. The variables grouped into this factor (see Table 1) reflect institutional weakness that may perpetuate the ongoing prevalence of VAWG in academic institutions and other environments. This explains the critical role of institutions in either mitigating or exacerbating VAWG. Lapses, such as the lack of female representation in security systems, abuse of power by humanitarian actors, and insufficient civil society engagement, were highlighted [38]. The use of rape as a weapon of war, forced enlistment, and the absence of attention to VAWG in peacebuilding or post-conflict agreements further compound institutional negligence [52,57]. While abuse of humanitarians (UUC3), forced abduction of women and girls (UUC5), and lack of attention to VAWG in peace agreements (UUC6) may not occur directly within some university campuses, the awareness of these institutional failings by VAWG perpetrators emboldens their actions. In fact, documented cases of secondary school girls being abducted from within their school grounds in Nigeria [66] suggest that similar incidents could potentially occur in university settings. Such forced enlistment/abduction (UUC5) could culminate into rape of innocent girls and women, which is confirmed in South Africa [67]. The findings further stressed that without robust institutional safeguards, survivors could remain unsupported and perpetrators unchallenged, effectively reinforcing a cycle of impunity.



Looking outward, institutional failures exhibit both universal and context-specific traits. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, universities have struggled with impunity stemming from the legacy of rape used during armed conflict, illustrating the long-term impact of institutional silence [56]. In India, bureaucratic red tape and institutional apathy often discourage students from reporting sexual misconduct, even when policies exist on paper [68,69]. Conversely, Norway has implemented gender equity frameworks and crisis response systems that have reduced institutional blind spots, although challenges in rural campuses persist [34]. These international comparisons demonstrate that institutional inertia, especially in response to VAWG, is a global problem, albeit with differing levels of reform and resistance. Thus, these findings affirm the need for universities worldwide to adopt survivor-centered policies, ensure transparency in complaint handling, and embed gender-sensitive practices [70].

### 5.3. Interpersonal Causal Factors

TUC factors emerged as the third most influential dimension, with an agreement index of 3.348. The clustering of IUC variables indicates a strong respondent consensus among respondents on the relational impact of VAWG. These factors encompass stress and economic hardship, male dominance within family structures, and relationship conflicts, unequal power distributions, and child/early marriage (Table 1), that contribute to coercive control and normalized inequality [33,52]. This was echoed by Awang et al. [42], who identified distorted perceptions of masculinity and cultural misinterpretations as drivers of violent behavior. Consequently, interventions should focus on reshaping peer group norms, cultivating respect in interpersonal relationships, and integrating gender-sensitivity training into university life [43]. Cross-national evidence illustrates varied interpersonal landscapes. In Zimbabwe, changing gender roles due to displacement have destabilized family structures, giving rise to aggressive attempts to reclaim traditional male authority [46]. Bangladesh, on the other hand, still contends with early and/or forced marriages, which often initiate lifelong cycles of partner-based abuse [65]. Sweden's academic communities show that while economic stress is less pronounced, issues of coercive control and relationship dissatisfaction persist subtly within emotionally manipulative dynamics [51]. Together, these comparisons suggest that while the interpersonal realm is a universal stage for VAWG, the scripts enacted vary significantly by region.

### 5.4. Community Causal Factors

CUC factors ranked fourth, with an agreement index of 3.292, highlighting concern over how collective behaviors and shared values within the university environment contribute to VAWG. These causal factors identified the normalization of violence, weak community sanctions, and opportunistic rape as key features (Table 1), enabling abuse to persist with minimal accountability [47]. Additionally, community violence targeting women and culturally embedded practices such as wife inheritance were seen as reflective of deeper social conditioning [52]. These findings indicate that the problem transcends individual or relational behavior pointing instead to environments that foster silence, complicity, or even justification of abuse. Fear of backlash and dependency on abusers deter victims from seeking help, allowing abuse to go unreported [54]. Cultural normalization of violence and reluctance to challenge abusive behaviors further entrench VAWG in campus communities (Table 1). Comparative insights from other countries offer a nuanced perspective. In South Africa, normalization of violence and weak community responses are cited as major enablers of campus sexual harassment [53], echoing Brazilian experiences.

In contrast, studies in Pakistan presents a more restrained picture, where tight-knit university communities discourage overt violence but may still suppress reporting due to

reputational concerns [71]. These examples illustrate that community complicity whether through silence, cultural endorsement, or institutional passivity, remains a potent driver of VAWG. These insights suggest that transforming community norms through sustained education, advocacy, and bystander empowerment programs is essential to foster accountability and collective resistance to violence [55].

### 5.5. Individual Causal Factors

The findings from the FSE ranked individual causal factors as the least influential in the perpetration of VAWG within Brazilian higher education settings, with an agreement index of 3.143. Despite the presence of critical variables such as socio-demographic challenges, low education, substance abuse, and exposure to violence during childhood (Table 1), the respondents generally viewed these as secondary triggers in comparison to broader relational or systemic issues [3]. Displacement, separation from families, and experiences of growing up in female-headed households were also identified but did not resonate strongly as primary causes [42]. Notably, psychological factors like mental health conditions (IUC5) and witnessing maternal abuse (UC7) were acknowledged yet seen as underlying rather than dominant contributors (Table 3). This implies that while individual histories shape vulnerability and behavioral tendencies, they are less likely to be the sole trigger of violence within structured environments like universities [4]. These findings collectively imply that focusing solely on individual behavioral change may be insufficient. A comparative lens reveals both convergence and divergence across global contexts. In Ethiopia, for instance, displacement and early trauma, including exposure to maternal abuse, significantly heighten vulnerability to VAWG among university students [41].

In contrast, a study in Canada highlighted substance uses and poor communication patterns in relationships as more prominent among perpetrators within academic communities [27]. Meanwhile, findings from the Philippines emphasized the combined effect of poverty and lack of education as accelerating factors, especially in marginalized rural areas [72]. Furthermore, according to a study by Ngoc et al. [4] which examined how college students in the US, Japan, India, Vietnam, and China perceived VAW. These international comparisons suggest that while Brazil sees these factors as relatively less potent within academia, in other contexts they carry greater weight, often shaped by the surrounding economic, cultural, or social instability.

In summary, the findings of this study demonstrate that VAWG in Brazilian higher education is predominantly driven by societal and institutional causal factors, while individual attributes play a comparatively minor role. The FSE provided a nuanced understanding of the degrees of influence across different domains, affirming that VAWG is deeply embedded in societal systems. Although interpersonal and community factors contribute to sustaining violence, they often operate as reinforcers of broader societal and institutional failings. Therefore, interventions must go beyond personal reform and target systemic change, addressing gender norms, power structures, institutional accountability, and societal tolerance for violence [73]. Brazilian higher education institutions must assume a proactive role by integrating survivor-centered policies, promoting gender equity, and fostering inclusive and safe academic environments [22]. The FSE approach applied in this study proves valuable for dissecting complex social issues and can guide targeted policy reforms and institutional strategies aimed at eradicating GBV in universities.

## 6. Recommendations, Practical Implications, Strengths and Limitations

### 6.1. Recommendations

This study investigated the causal factors of VAWG in the Brazilian higher education and has shown that violence is driven by several interrelated causes. The five causal

factors—individual, interpersonal, community, societal, and institutional, each contribute to the persistence of VAWG. Therefore, some practical recommendations are deduced from the study's findings to reduce and prevent VAWG across Brazilian universities.

Societal influence, which was identified as the most critical in this study, is a clear indication that broader cultural norms should be challenged within academic spaces. Therefore, universities should not only educate their own communities but also collaborate with government agencies, non-government organizations, law enforcement agencies, and media platforms to push for positive cultural change. Curriculum updates that include civic and gender education can ensure students gain a deeper understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Faculty-led research and policy contributions should also serve to reshape national attitudes and bring academic voices into public conversations around gender justice. The UUC is also indicated as a high causal factor of VAWG in higher education institutions. Thus, universities need to establish or revise clear GBV frameworks, ensuring that they are not just policy documents but are also enforced. Creating a dedicated GBV response unit will ensure that cases are handled with professionalism, urgency, and transparency. In addition, regular training for academic and non-academic staff on gender sensitivity, accountability mechanisms, and survivor-centered responses will improve institutional readiness. Partnerships with local legal and reputable organizations with professionalism and expertise in VAWG could also provide external support when needed.

Based on the findings on TUC, which ranked third among the causal factors, it becomes important to strengthen the quality of personal interactions within the campus environment. Universities can achieve this by offering relationship education and mentorship programs that guide students in forming safe and respectful bonds. Conflict management and consent education should be embedded in campus life activities. Establishing communication and secure reporting channels is also crucial, allowing students to report any abusive behavior involving peers, partners, or even staff members. Furthermore, training faculty, resident assistants, and administrative personnel to recognize and respond to interpersonal abuse will further improve campus safety. The result of the analysis indicated that a deeper look into CUC was needed, suggesting that the surrounding social climate either enables or discourages acts of violence. Universities should therefore take deliberate steps to build a more inclusive and protective campus culture. Strengthening student leadership groups, empowering clubs to advocate respect and equality, and engaging students in community-building efforts will help cultivate a shared sense of responsibility. Regular campus events, campaigns, and discussions centered around gender equity could foster stronger bonds and make silence around abuse less acceptable.

The least causal factor responsible for VAWG in the Brazilian higher education in this study is IUC. Addressing the IUC requires educational institutions to focus on transforming individuals' harmful beliefs and attitudes. Universities should invest in continuous awareness campaigns, peer education programs, and personal development workshops that challenge gender stereotypes and normalize respect and empathy. Students and staff should have easy access to professional counseling services, where they can receive confidential support. In addition, integrating emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and respectful communication into non-academic workshops could help individuals develop healthier behaviors and attitudes toward others.

## 6.2. Theoretical Contribution

This study may have provided further theoretical insights by applying the FSE method to examine the complex causal factors of VAWG within Brazilian higher education. Theoretically, this study extends existing frameworks on GBV by demonstrating how fuzzy logic offers a new way for synthesizing respondents' opinions and lived experiences into

measurable patterns that reflect real-life complexity. The classification of individual, interpersonal, community, societal, and institutional, enables a multi-level understanding that aligns with systems thinking in social science. Furthermore, the study attempts to provide a replicable approach for evaluating gender-related issues across other contexts and disciplines. It encourages scholars to re-express abstract social challenges using structured decision-making tools. This research contributes to interdisciplinary dialog on VAWG, education policy, and applied social research.

### *6.3. Managerial Implications*

This study offers other implications for university administrators, policymakers, and institutional leaders committed to reducing VAWG within Brazilian higher education. By employing FSE, the research attempts to uncover the causal factors, ranging from societal factors to individual behaviors that drive the persistence of GBV in academic environments. One major managerial implication is the need for institutions to adopt a more proactive and coordinated management approach. The analysis highlights how institutional silence, lack of clear procedures, and ineffective reporting systems weaken students' trust and deter them from seeking help. Universities should invest in transparent, well-communicated support frameworks that empower victims and ensure accountability. Additionally, understanding that interpersonal and community of VAWG points to the value of targeted training for peer groups, student organizations, and campus security staff. Managers should move beyond policy formulation to prioritizing the practical implementation of preventive measures.

### *6.4. Strengths and Limitations of the Study*

This study offers some notable strengths in investigating the underlying causal factors of VAWG. Gathering insights from respondents with direct experience in VAWG lends credibility to the study's findings. The cross-tabulation results (Table 2) provide information on the forms of VAWG that could inform mitigating strategies in academic environments. Conducting FSE on the data collected across five dimensions of VAWG causation provides comprehensive insights on how each factor influences the occurrence and persistence of violence. This analytical approach offers clarity to the complex interplay among social, cultural, institutional, interpersonal and individual causes of VAWG. The recommendations and practical implications of the findings also provide unique mitigating measures to address each underlying causes of VAWG, which can be implemented by stakeholders such as universities, staff, government organizations, and students.

Although this study contributes to the body of knowledge on VAWG, it also highlights certain limitations that can guide future studies. The opinions of university staff with direct experience in VAWG were not considered in this study. Therefore, future research could obtain their opinions and compare them with the findings of this study. Data for this study were gathered from universities situated in five Brazilian cities. While the number of data collected is justifiable, gathering data from universities in other cities could offer additional insights into the discourse on VAWG. Future studies could explore how the five underlying causal factors of VAWG impact outcomes such as academic performance, emotional well-being, and institutional climate for individuals who have experienced violence.

## **7. Conclusions**

VAWG remains a deeply rooted and pressing concern in many developing countries, including Brazil, where systemic failures, cultural barriers, and institutional gaps continue to enable harmful behaviors and silence victims. Despite the growing attention to GBV, many higher institutions, where future leaders are trained, have become a haven to per-

petuate VAWG. In fact, some universities still lack coordinated strategies to tackle the underlying causes of VAWG effectively. This troubling reality undermines the transformative role of educational institutions to foster equality and empowerment instead of fear, prejudice and silence for victims of VAWG. Therefore, to proffer practical recommendations to the menace, this study set out to evaluate the complex causal factors of VAWG within Brazilian higher education using a structured survey and the FSE method. The FSE approach was particularly valuable in handling the subjective and uncertain nature of data, allowing for a nuanced assessment of the weighted influence of different causal factors. The hierarchical prioritization of FSE also offers valuable insights to understand effective strategies for addressing VAWG, beginning with the most critical causal factors. Interestingly, the key findings reveal that societal and institutional factors are the most significant contributors to VAWG in Brazilian higher education, with interpersonal and community factors also playing a substantial role. Individual factors were found to have the least impact in comparison, highlighting the need to move beyond personal blame and towards addressing broader structural and cultural conditions that perpetuate violence.

The study has put forward a range of practical recommendations to mitigate these issues, calling for institutional reforms, awareness campaigns, improved reporting systems, and inclusive policies. Specific policy implications include the need for higher education authorities to implement enforceable frameworks that promote gender equality, institutional transparency, and legal accountability across campuses. Looking ahead, future research should explore the longitudinal impact of institutional reforms on reducing VAWG and examine how intersectional identities (such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation) further influence vulnerability within academic settings. Expanding the FSE method to multiple institutions and regions in Brazil, or comparing results with other countries, would also provide a broader understanding of contextual and cultural dynamics affecting VAWG. Ultimately, this study reinforces that addressing VAWG in higher education requires a comprehensive, multi-level strategy grounded in societal transformation, institutional responsibility, and community-driven support.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the University of Built Environment (protocol code SafeEduBrazil, 21 November 2024).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data used and/or analyzed during the study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

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## Appendix A

### Part A: Background Information (Please tick the appropriate answer)

1. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say ☐
2. Age: Less than 20 years ☐ 20–24 years ☐ 25–29 years ☐ 30–39 years ☐ 40 years and above ☐
3. Year of study: First year ☐ Second year ☐ Third year ☐ Fourth year ☐ Postgraduate (Master/PhD) ☐
4. What is the course you are studying? **Kindly specify** Type here
5. Which city is your university located? **Kindly specify** Type here

### Part B: Forms of Violence

6. Please rate your experience (personal or have witnessed) of the following forms of violence against women and girls at a university setting using a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Often*, and 5 = *Always*.

Forms of Violence	1	2	3	4	5
1. Beating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Forced sexual intercourse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Other forms of sexual coercion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Movement monitoring					
6. Restricting access to education					

### Causal Factors of Violence against Women and Girls

7. Based on your experience (personal or have witnessed) in a university setting, kindly rate your level of agreement with the following underlying causes of violence against women and girls (VAWG) using a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly agree*.

Underlying Cause	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Individual</i>					
1. Socio-demographic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Alcohol and drug abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Low education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Experience of violence during childhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Mental health and disabilities; personality disorder	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Displacement, separation from family, and female headed households	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Witnessing mother being beaten	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Interpersonal</i>					
8. Stress and poverty/Economic stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Conflict or dissatisfaction in relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Male dominance in the family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Underlying Cause	1	2	3	4	5
11. Child, early and forced marriage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Unequal power and controlling behaviors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Changing gender roles due to conflict and displacement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Disparity in education attainment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Community</b>					
15. Normalization of violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Opportunistic rape	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Community violence targeting women	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Wife inheritance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Weak community sanction against violence against women and girls (VAWG)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Institutional</b>					
20. Lack of female representation in the security sector	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Suppressed civil society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Abuse of power by humanitarians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Use of rape as a weapon of war	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Forced enlistment/abduction of women and girls	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Lack of attention to violence against women and girls (VAWG) in peace agreements and state-building	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Societal</b>					
26. Culture of impunity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. Unequal gender dynamics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Patriarchal norms and practices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Lack of rule of law	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. Emphasis on hyper masculinities as facet of warfare.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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