

Oppression to Empowerment: Implications for Transformative Education

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Abstract This qualitative case research analyzed the gender-based violence (GBV) encountered by university students and their empowering actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilized online in-depth unstructured interviews among eight cases selected for their experience with violence. Using thematic analysis, emerging themes from the interview data included different forms of GBV; such as physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and online, while their empowering strategies were undertaken at the personal, relational, and social levels. This study showed the importance of being empowered to prevail over oppressive experiences. Lessons from the process provided input in applying the principles of transformative education. Expectedly, the findings will address issues on policy research on GBV and methodological challenges in transformative education.

Keywords: *empowerment, gender-based violence, transformative education*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many people to hurdle its multifaceted challenges, including the worldwide surge of gender-based violence (GBV). According to the United Nations [UN] Women (2020: p.1), “COVID-19 is creating additional economic and social pressures, such as loss of livelihood and food insecurity, which in turn is increasing the vulnerability of women and girls as those pressures potentially trigger violence.” In the Philippines, the Department of Justice and the Philippine National Police reported that an average of eight people a day were sexually assaulted during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). The gendered impacts of the health crisis are interrelated and multidimensional, experienced in various ways because of intersectional vulnerabilities (Castillo, 2021). While the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (2022) ranked the Philippines 19th out of 146 and leading in Asia in terms of gender parity, the country still faces the insidious consequences of COVID-19 such as the rising GBV (UN Women, 2020). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not exempted because students experience GBV as HEIs have adopted flexible learning.

The literature has focused on GBV but much leaves to be desired in terms of the students’ experiences with violence and their empowering actions during the global health crisis. Hence, this study. The research posits that the victims’ actions in overcoming their plight indicate elements of empowerment and that insights from the cases have implications in the discourse and practice of transformative education including critical pedagogy, which is important for Teacher Education Institutions.

The study’s findings contribute to the literature on the gender lens of COVID-19 pandemic, empowerment, and transformative education; and serve as basis for other

similar research. It may also inform educational leaders on how to proactively address the issue and empower GBV victims among its stakeholders.

On Gender-Based Violence

COVID-19 has caused an alarming global surge of GBV (Mittal & Singh, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Valdez et al., 2022). GBV is any form of violence inflicted against persons or groups due to their sex or gender (EIGE, n.d.; Oxfam, 2021; Sida, 2015; UNFPA, 2023). Various types of violence are (EIGE, n.d.; UNFPA, 2023): 1) physical violence - use of physical force resulting in physical or psychological harm; 2) sexual violence - sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances; 3) economic violence - act which causes economic harm to a person like restricting access to finances or education; and 4) psychological violence -an act which causes psychological harm such as degradation, humiliation, and verbal harassment. Oxfam (2021) also conveys that violence has moved from physical spaces into online spaces. GBV, thus, occurs in private, public, and online spaces.

Notable is that the manifestations of violence are not exclusive. A person who encounters physical abuse is likely to experience other forms of violence such as psychological violence. Indeed, violence is not only physical but also psychological (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020) and that the different types of violence are interrelated.

Studies also show that the pandemic has adversely impacted all genders. Prolonged lockdowns have trapped victims with abusive family members (UN Women, 2020; Valdez et al., 2022). The pandemic has also exacerbated economic hardships on both personal and societal levels (Sorbring et al., 2022), especially for women because of existing inequality (Castillo, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

Moreover, it has affected children and youth due to the shifts toward social and educational distancing (Sorbring et al., 2022).

Research also recognizes the harmful consequences of GBV for victims (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], (n.d.) and the World Health Organization (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023). Gender violence is common for those facing intersecting oppressions due to class, gender, and sexual orientation, such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) community who have to grapple with rising occurrences of discrimination amid the pandemic (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; UN Women, 2020). The health crisis has caused socio-economic instability, aggravation of anxiety, and created new barriers for all genders in accessing resources, negatively affecting their health, mental, and emotional well-being (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Sorbring et al., 2022).

Studies further highlight that most GBV victims refuse or cannot seek assistance because of cultural sensitivity and sense of shame of being a victim (Nagashima-Hayashi et al., 2022); strict quarantine rules which restrict mobility and ability to seek help; and low level of trust in authorities (Nagashima-Hayashi et al., 2022; UN Women, 2020). Similarly, norms of gender inequality and routine violent behaviors occur in households during lockdowns (Nagashima-Hayashi et al., 2022).

The foregoing paints a picture of the impact of the pandemic and the incidence of GBV. Despite the prevalence of GBV, studies regarding students' experiences with GBV in the context of a global health crisis are wanting.

On Empowerment and Education

Studies emphasize the role of education and training in promoting gender equality (Leach, 2004), and increasing contribution to development (Engida, 2021; Shetty & Hans, 2015) including rural development (Sandhya, 2015). Other works involve helping women attain their aspirations and goals in life (Olakulein & Ojo, 2012), opening opportunities for employment and financial stability (Habib et al., 2019; Sekar et al., 2014), and aiding psychological empowerment (Gholipour et al., 2010). Research also reveals that the lack of education hinders women from participating in politics to uphold their rights (Ghosh et al., 2015), and improve their economic status (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015).

The literature features the link between women empowerment and education, and the prevalence of GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no study, however, on how student victims of GBV empower themselves. With the pervasiveness of gender violence as an outcome of the pandemic, there is a need to investigate young people's experiences with GBV and on how they empower themselves. The students' narratives on empowerment are important contributions in the discourse of transformative education and pedagogy.

On Transformative Pedagogy

Transformative education, through feminist pedagogy, focuses on helping emancipate women from oppression through self-reflection about their experiences in society, integrating concepts and theories in the curriculum, and achieving gender equality and women empowerment (GEWE). It also draws its assumption from the "emancipatory" or "liberatory" education of Freire (1997). The latter posits that the learners can achieve emancipation

from poverty or oppression through a liberatory form of education, viz., an education where learners are asked to reflect or investigate the sources of oppression in their social environment and formulate strategies to change the hegemonic societal structures.

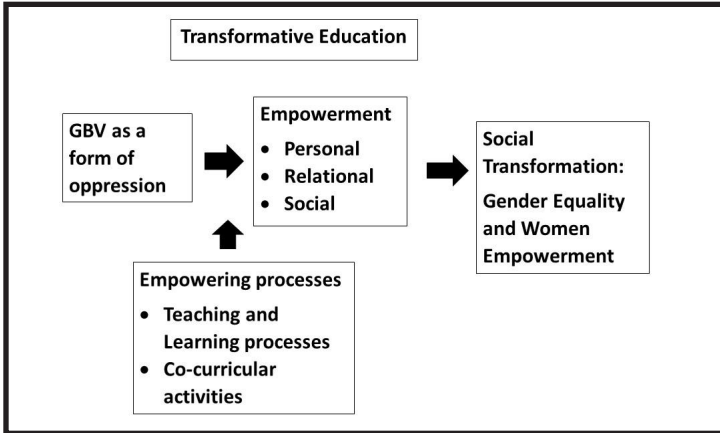
Studies on transformative education and gender focus on using feminist perspective in “sensing and thinking” about gender issues (Branlat et al., 2023); utilizing learning lifelong skills to empower students and training beneficiaries in the communities (Reyes & Valencia, 2018); and applying transformative learning in university staff development program (Christie et al., 2015). Other research emphasizes the application of transformative education in teaching women about reproductive health (Attom in Lopez & Olan, 2021); developing ethics of care in a women leadership program (Gaffney, 2020); and educating women in the Arab world for lifelong learning (Madsen & Cook, 2010). The foregoing shows a dearth of literature about GBV and transformative education. This study hopes to fill this gap.

Conceptual Framework

This study argues that there are issues attendant to GBV and flexible learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further asserts that GBV can be decreased or eliminated by drawing lessons on the strategies and process of empowerment from the students’ narratives. The strategies for empowerment contribute to the principles of transformative education (Figure 1). Using the lens of empowerment and critical feminism, this research investigates the process on how the students overcome their oppression arising from gender violence.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



GBV may be reduced through the application of transformative education principles both in the classrooms and co-curricular activities. Teaching and learning strategies as well as co-curricular activities that empower students will help achieve social transformation, and eventually, gender equality and women empowerment.

Gender-Based Violence

Gender violence is rooted in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination (Sida, 2015) and can be perpetrated against women, men, girls, boys and gender non-conforming people. Since most of the victims are women and girls, GBV and violence against women (VAW) somewhat overlap. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) defines VAW as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.” VAW is therefore viewed as a form of GBV and applies specifically to women.

Education and Empowerment

The students' GBV experiences and actions are framed by Engida's (2021) concept of empowerment. Engida (2021) views empowerment in three dimensions: personal empowerment (acquiring knowledge and skills); relational empowerment (relating with others and having negotiation and decision-making power); and social empowerment (development of self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-efficacy).

Education contributes to women empowerment as articulated by Upahadyay et al. (2014) citing that education enables women to elevate their status, increase their achievements and participation in the country resulting in gender equity. Similarly, Hazarika (2011) expands the definition of empowerment with the dimensions of self-reliance, positive esteem, economic independence, and participation in development activities. Empowerment also refers to economic decision making, household decision making and physical movement. Haque et al. (2011) highlights that women should be educated to attain such conditions.

Feminist Theory in Transformative Education

The research is anchored on the principles of transformative education which integrate critical feminist values and theories of changing society. This is to eliminate women's oppression due to sexism intersected with race, class, and other stratification systems (Shrewsbury, 1997 in Branlat, 2023). The integration of critical feminist theory with the ideas of transformative education contributes to the creation of teaching- learning strategies, As Amin et al. (2022, p. 427) notes, "By using critical feminist theory as a pedagogical framework, we (as educators) can work towards democratic or emancipatory education."

Using critical feminist theory, this study investigates the actions of GBV victims in overcoming their oppressive experiences that leads to empowerment and eventually to social transformation. These strategies are seen in the narratives of empowerment of GBV victims in the teaching and learning processes as well as in curricular activities in the university. The process of empowerment - personal, relational, and social - leads to the attainment of GEWE.

The Problem

This research aims to analyze the gender violence encountered by university students in the National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the students' narratives, it seeks to examine the following questions: First, what are the various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by the students while undertaking the flexible mode of learning amid the pandemic? Second, what are the manifestations of empowerment as indicated by the students' actions or recommendations? And third, what principles of transformative education can be drawn based on the students' stories of empowerment?

Methodology

In answering the study's problems, a qualitative case study research design (Flyvbjerg, 2011) was used. The study's participants were asked to share their experiences of violence and their empowering actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, there were 29 survey participants - first to third year university students with different genders – in NCR. From the survey, eight students were selected for the online interview based on their encounter with GBV. The interviewees are within the age range of 18-20, and 50% each are females and males. Some 50% identify themselves as cisgender women, 25% as queer, and another 25% prefer

not to talk about their gender. About 75% of the students live with their parents, while the rest have extended family structures and stay with their siblings, grandparents, piblings, or with a step parent.

This study developed and used the following instruments in gathering data: 1) survey questionnaire to ascertain the participants' profile and those who have encountered GBV during the pandemic; and 2) interview guide which was utilized to gather the participants' narratives about GBV. These instruments were critiqued and refined by gender experts of the sampled university. The instruments' validity was reached by consensus since all of them are faculty members and researchers of women and gender studies. Sample questions to elicit the full stories of the cases were: *What type of GBV have you experienced? How do you feel about the experience; What strategies have you done to conquer the trauma?; and How can the university help you to overcome the trauma?*

Data was collected through in-depth unstructured online interviews, which lasted 50 minutes to two hours for each participant. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed to determine the common themes which emerged from the participants' narratives. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explained, thematic analysis is a "method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns." Several steps were undertaken to construct the themes such as familiarizing with the interview data, generating codes, identifying, reviewing, and labeling the themes according to their contents. Appendix Table 1 shows that the categories were labeled as C1 (GBV) and C2 (empowerment), while the themes were marked as T1 to T5 (forms of GBV), and T6 to T8 (types of empowerment). Also, the participants were assigned as S1 to S8 representing

the eight cases. The themes were meticulously examined and agreed upon by the two researchers, and another gender researcher to reduce or eliminate researchers' bias, and were carefully weaved to present a thorough perspective of the students' experiences.

Prior to conducting the research, the approval of the University Research Ethics Committee was sought. The researchers also requested the participants to sign an Informed Consent Form. All information was treated with utmost confidentiality and data was stored in a safe location.

Findings

The study yielded the following findings:

Gender-Based Violence

Based on the interview data, the following themes or forms of violence experienced by the students during the pandemic included physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and online violence. These happened in private, public or online spaces, prior to the pandemic and became worse during the health crisis.

Physical Violence

Physical violence, such as hitting objects or slapping, was a conspicuous theme from the students' narratives. One student, whose father became unemployed due to the pandemic, had a short fuse and violently threw a hanger at her for not immediately responding to his command. Similarly, a student was constantly hit with hard objects by his brother and destroyed or stole his possessions. As he said, *Lagi kaming nagkakagalit, tsaka nya ako sasaktan, nami-pisikal. Napapadalas ng lockdown. Pagtyagaan na lang. Wala ako mapuntahan kahit gusto ko umalis. (I was always in conflict*

with my brother who ended up physically hurting me. This was common especially during the lockdown and I just have to live with him as I have nowhere to go [S4C1T1]). He once reported his brother's violation to the authorities but was told that, *Hindi mo puedeng kasuhan yong kapatid mo kasi kamag-anak mo sila, pamilya kayo. (You cannot file charges against your own brother because you are family [S4C1T1]).* Another student experienced during the pandemic of being slapped by his mother while trying to mediate a quarrel with a sibling. The students were distressed because the pain was not only physical but also psychological. One was even a gender equality advocate and felt bad for his failure in influencing his own family.

Sexual Violence

Another theme that became evident from the students' stories was being sexually abused by relatives and classmates, receiving unwanted sexual comments, and other forms of sexual harassment during the health crisis. A student was sexually abused, at least four (4) times, by her own younger brother in their own house during the lockdown, and by his cousin for almost three (3) years when she was in elementary school. She was aghast that, *Ang pamilya ko, pati ang Nanay ko .. na nagtatrabaho sa abroad.. ay sinisisi ako at baka raw ginusto ko ang mga nangyari kasi di raw po ako lumaban. (My own family, including my mother who was working abroad, blamed and accused me that I probably wanted the incidents to happen because I didn't fight back [S3C1T2]).* The student felt devastated and helpless. Also, there were students who noted cases of sexual harassment in the university which started before the pandemic and continued during the flexible learning modality. A student's former male classmate was notorious for forcing his female classmates to watch pornographic materials as well as a student who texted scandalous sexual messages in a class' group chat.

Two students also felt humiliated for being verbally abused in public spaces during the pandemic. They experienced being catcalled and got sexist remarks like, *Ang sarap ko hawakan. (I'm so nice to touch [S1C1T2])*; and *Iuwi na lang kita. (I'll just take you home [S2C1T2])*. While these students knew about their rights, they got scared, and immediately walked away.

Psychological Violence

The students' stories also revealed the prevalence of psychological violence such as being verbally and physically abused by their fathers, insulted, and discriminated against due to one's sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). Some students narrated their unfortunate experience of being regularly verbally abused by their own parents during stay at home directives at the height of the pandemic. A student was called "stupid" and "worthless" by her father, especially in a fit of rage. Another student and her siblings were constantly exposed to their father's vulgar language due to his suspicion of their mother having an affair. Their father would often hurl abusive words to her mother like, *lagi ka nakikipag sex at nakikita pa ang semilya ng lalaki sa ari mo. (You are always having sex with another man, and the semen can be seen in your secretions [S6C1T3])*. Those cases of violence were traumatic for the students with one of them even suffering from nightmares hitherto. The others coped by avoiding their perpetrators by locking inside their rooms since they could not leave due to the lockdowns.

Others endured being insulted like a student who was always degraded by comparing his achievements with his other cousins by his own paternal family. The student mentioned that, *Nakakaasar ba ... nakakababa ng self-esteem. (I am pissed off. It lowers my self-esteem [S2C1T3])*. Another student shared that he was traumatized by the scent of their family soap, *Dr. Wong*, because it evoked nasty

brawling and verbal aggression with his abusive brother. The student lamented that, *Kahit nanginginig ako sa amoy, wala ako choice kundi makitira sa pamilya dahil sa lockdown. (Even if that scent gave me chills, the lockdown left me no choice but to stay with my family [S4C1T3]).*

Some students were discriminated against by their families because of their SOGI. A student claimed that, *Lagi akong sinasabihan na walang kwenta..walang mangyayari sakin dahil bakla ako. (I was always called a worthless person and that nothing will happen because I am gay! [S7C1T3]).* One mother also constantly berated her son for his feminine actions and clothes; and another mother commented that, *Baka naguguluhan ka lang. (You might just be confused [S2C1T3]).* The students were distraught by their families' rejection of their gender which became more apparent because of prolonged pandemic isolation.

Economic Violence

Economic violence was also a visible theme from the students' stories. A student was denied economic support for his studies even if his father was gainfully employed; one had to scrimp because her school expenditures were strictly monitored. She shared that, *Lagi akong pinagbibintangan bumibili ng mga di kailangan sa online shops pero yung panggastos ko ay limitado lang sa online class ko. (I was often accused of buying unnecessary items from online shops even if my expenses were only for my online classes [S1C1T4]).* Another student was constantly threatened to be ousted from the house, cut off her internet connectivity or confiscate her gadgets so that she cannot attend her online classes. Noteworthy is that despite their families' threats that could disrupt the students' schooling, the latter persevered with her education.

Online Violence

Another noticeable theme from the students' narratives was online violence. One student was upset that during her asynchronous classes, she saw her social media sites littered with photos of nude males. Similarly, a student who was reviewing his lessons online during the pandemic was shocked at being stalked by foreigners on his social media account. As he said, *Nabigla ako sa alok ng mga dayuhan kung pwede akong makipagseks sa kanila. (I was so appalled that these foreigners asked me if I was available for sex [S4C1T5])*. Moreover, a student was browsing for her school assignment when she inadvertently clicked on a dating site and saw naked people. All the traumatized students instantly blocked off the perpetrators from their accounts.

Manifestations of Empowerment

Based on the students' narratives, their strategies to overcome their trauma due to their GBV experiences are manifestations of empowerment. These themes or empowering actions that emerged conform with Engina's (2021) concept of empowerment. The empowering strategies undertaken range from personal, relational and social.

Personal Empowerment

Personal empowerment was a common theme exhibited by the students. Majority developed ways of strengthening their knowledge, skills and values to prevail over their trauma and plan for their future. They argued that education will help them improve their lives and intend to undertake the following strategies: 1) acquiring skills to process and reflect on their experiences; 2) being aware of relevant laws and one's rights; and 3) thinking about one's emancipation by studying and finishing their degrees. As a GBV victim said, *kung maging guro na ako, tutulungan kong makapag-aral*

ang mga kapatid ko. Mag masterado din ako para makapagturo sa universidad. (Once I become a teacher, I will help my siblings to finish their studies. I will also pursue an advanced degree so I can teach in the university [S6C2T6]). Another student claimed that her knowledge of the law will equip her in responding to cases of violence.

Some students resolved specific actions to avoid future abuses. These actions included: 1) designing one's future devoid of abuses; 2) avoiding people whose actions and language promote sexism; and 3) avoiding abusive family members. A student expressed, *kapag nakatapos ako sa aking kurso, bubuo ako ng ligtas na espasyo sa bahay at iiwasan ko ang tatay kong bayolente. (Once I finish my degree, I will create a safe space at home and avoid my violent father [S1C2T6]).*

Relational Empowerment

Another theme from the students' stories was relational empowerment, which involved the students doing the following strategies: 1) telling their story to classmates, family members and friends; 2) creating a peaceful environment with classmates and friends; and 3) reporting GBV incidents to the Student Affairs Office. One student claimed, *Payapa ang buhay ko kapag kasama ko ang mga kaklase ko. (I find peace with my classmates [S5C2T7]).* Another said, *Pakiramdam ko, may nagawa ako nang mag-report ako ng GBV case sa Student Affairs Office. (I feel I had accomplished something when I reported a GBV case to the Student Affairs Office [S8C2T7]).* Relating one's trauma with others indicated one's ability to reflect on the problem and resolve to prevent its recurrence. Similarly, reporting GBV incidents and collaborating with others to create a safe environment signified relational empowerment.

Social Empowerment

Social empowerment as indicated by possessing self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-efficacy to transform the society was another visible theme among the students. From the cases, social empowerment was shown in these responses: 1) becoming a GAD advocate; 2) joining advocacy groups or school organizations on gender equality and women empowerment; 3) awareness raising on sexual harassment and GBV; and 4) creating organizational programs and projects such as gender trainings, and establishing grievance desks, among others. Such dispositions signified that they had developed some degree of self-confidence and self-efficacy since they were determined to overcome their oppression. Statements such as, *Ako ay tagapagtaguyod ng gender and development. (I am a Gender and Development advocate [S8C2T8]);* and *Bumuo kami ng programa upang isulong ang gender equality sa samahan ng mag-aaral. (We have organized gender equality programs for a student organization [S5C2T8])*, revealed that the students developed skills providing them the confidence to advocate for gender equality.

Discussion

Gender-Based Violence

The numerous manifestations of gender violence encountered by students revealed their difficult situations during the pandemic. For some households, violence was a normal occurrence and often led to physical harm. Victims, however, could not report to authorities because they are considered as 'family'. The foregoing cases of physical violence affirmed the study of Nagashima-Hayashi et al. (2022) about the prevalence of norms of gender inequality and violent behaviors in households during the pandemic.

There is no option but to be trapped with abusive family members (UN Women, 2020; Valdez et al., 2022). The parents' abusive behavior may stem from anxiety and stress from being unemployed due to the crisis. Consequently, the socio-economic instability and aggravation of anxiety (Castillo, 2021; Madrigal-Borloz, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Sorbring et al., 2022), result in physical and psychological abuse. This further supports Madrigal-Borloz's (2020) claim that violence is not only physical but also psychological.

Similarly, those who experienced sexual violence in private and public spaces were psychologically affected. The effects of victim blaming and sexist remarks were both sexually and psychologically damaging for the victims. Those conditions exacerbated not only one form of gender violence but also other forms of violence.

Relatedly, cases of psychological violence were common among the students and these occurred in their own homes. Members of LGBTQ+ had to endure increased stigmatization. Other studies also stressed the condition that the LGBTQ+ had to deal with discrimination due to their SOGI (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Sorbring et al., 2022). In all cases, the students were distressed and traumatized when experiencing humiliating situations. It was even more painful for victims because the perpetrators were family members.

For those who experienced economic violence, they were affected due to the sustained shifts toward social and educational distancing (Sorbring et al., 2022). The students had no choice but to rely on their parents, albeit inconsiderate, as they could not get any support elsewhere because of the imposed lockdowns. Other studies also argued that the limited mobility due to the lockdowns caused people to suffer from socio-economic instability, hardships, increased anxiety (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Sorbring et

al., 2022), and merely tolerated living with abusive families (UN Women, 2020; Valdez et al., 2022).

Victims of online violence showed that GBV was not limited by physical space. As Oxfam (2021) noted, gender violence has transferred from physical spaces into online spaces. This implies that being visible online makes one an easy target for various forms of abuse, which can happen in online and offline modes. Interestingly, GBV victims channeled their frustration by excelling in their studies and endeavoring to become successful.

Manifestations of Empowerment

In spite of the students' oppressive condition, they had the resolve not to be mired in that plight, and realized the importance of education as a means to control and improve their condition. This supported other studies' contention that having an educational degree equips the students to decide for their lives and deal with oppression and improve their society (Gholipour et al., 2010; Haque et al., 2011; Habib et al., 2019). Also, education can empower women by leading them to respond to challenges and improve their lives and society (Sandhya, 2015).

From the data, different forms of empowerment emerged which included personal, relational, and social (Engida, 2021). Cases in this research showed that GBV is a form of oppression which can be eliminated through personal empowerment or knowledge in overcoming oppression. Additionally, Engida (2021) asserted that relational empowerment is shown when the victim of oppression is able to establish relationships with others, negotiate, and acquire decision making power.

The narratives demonstrated that the students had developed their personal agency through their classes and

were bolstered by joining programs and projects for their co-curricular activities. This process of developing the self to advocate for gender equality in the school and the family manifested signs of empowerment. The process affirmed the contention of Tandon (2016) about how one's personal standpoint on gender issues is extended to gender advocacy to change the institutions and the society. Hence, fulfillment of women's rights and attainment of gender justice were possible with an empowered personal agency.

Principles of Transformative Education

This study demonstrated that the students' strategies in overcoming their oppression were aligned with the different forms of empowerment. The process for achieving empowerment was learned when student's life experiences were analyzed in the classrooms and in the students' organizations which advocate for gender equality and women empowerment (GEWE). Evidently, when learners discerned the need to surmount the stigma of oppression or GBV, through empowering strategies in classrooms and in student organizations, the principles of transformative education were achieved.

From Oppression to Empowerment

The process of transforming the students' dispositions from being GBV victims to individuals who had prevailed over their negative experiences was a crucial process of liberating oneself from an oppressive situation. Students with classroom activities that processed their life stories had acquired the competency of reflecting about their experiences. From reflection, their position changed from being silent to being active in eliminating GBV. The change was firmed up when the students collaborated with others in defying oppression. This process affirmed Mezirow's (1997, p. 5) claim that "transformative learning involves transforming frames

of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it."

From Empowerment to Transformation

Change is not only for individuals who experienced GBV. Communicating and collaborating with others and joining advocacy groups on GEWE signified their intentions to eliminate GBV and ultimately change the patriarchal society. Equipped with the skills acquired in the classrooms, some students extended their advocacy for GEWE in the communities.

Using the gender perspective in problematizing the students' experiences on gender violence is an important contribution to the methodology of transformative education. Achieving GEWE necessitates an understanding of the women's situation from the individual to the societal level. In addition, the methodology offers a space for teachers and students to have a dialogue about gender and its intersections with race, ethnicity, class, age, and others within the context of power and hegemony (De Saxe, 2012).

Transformative education within the context of achieving GEWE entails several processes such as: a) engaging in reflective thinking activities for the learners to be aware of their situations, belief systems, existing power dynamics, and forms of gender and other inequalities; b) changing or building one's disposition, knowledge and skills; c) linking one's situation with others; and d) collaborating with others to achieve women empowerment and reframing a society with gender justice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global challenge that resulted in the heightened incidence of GBV that people, especially students, have to grapple with. This study examined the forms of GBV experienced by university students while undertaking the flexible mode of learning amid the pandemic and the manifestations of empowerment as indicated by their actions and recommendations. It also looked into the principles of transformative education that can be inferred based on the students' stories of empowerment. The study's findings filled the literature gap in analyzing the gender lens of the pandemic, processes of empowerment, and transformative education.

Results of the study revealed that students experienced the following themes or manifestations of GBV in private, public and online spaces, viz., physical, sexual, psychological, economic and online. This research also highlighted that despite the harsh situations of student victims of GBV, they exercised their agency and undertook empowering strategies at the personal, relational, and social levels; enabling them to overcome their oppression. The data generated had theoretical implications on the discourse and practice of transformative education, including critical pedagogy. That is, the processes for empowerment using gender perspectives could apply the theory of transformative education.

Looking at the students' narratives, GBV can be decreased or eliminated based on their empowering actions of overcoming their oppression. Such strategies can be acquired or enhanced in the classroom as well as in co-curricular activities. The schools, thus, have crucial roles to play in liberating GBV student victims from their onerous situation. Lessons drawn from the process of emancipation

as an important phase in transformative education could be used in the classrooms as well as in co-curricular and civic engagement activities of universities. Hopefully, educational institutions will use the findings as a basis for extending assistance and empowering GBV victims among their stakeholders.

The study was limited to an educational institution in a highly urbanized center. Similar studies may be undertaken in other educational institutions from different locations. This will allow comparison of GBV experiences of students in various localities during the pandemic, and thus provides a broader scope of study.

This research only examined the narratives of students' encounter with GBV. Future research directions may be explored through 1) policy research on GBV; 2) context of disability and social inclusion issues; 3) intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and other stratification dimensions; and 4) methodological challenges in transformative education.



Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to extend their appreciation to the Heads of the Gender Units and the Technical staff of the sampled university as well as the participants for their generous input and time for the completion of this study.



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Appendix

Table 1
Analysis of Participants' Responses

Sample verbatim responses and codes	Categories	Themes	Description of Theme
Lagi kaming nagkakagalit, tsaka nya ako sasaktan, nami-pisikal. Napapadalas ng lockdown. Pagtyagaan na lang. Wala ako mapuntahan kahit gusto ko umalis. (I was always in conflict with my brother who ended up physically hurting me. This was common especially during the lockdown and I just have to live with him as I have nowhere to go [S4C1T1]).	Gender-Based Violence (C1)	T1 Physical Violence	The statement indicates physical violence since it involves inflicting physical harm on the participant.
Ang pamilya ko, pati ang Nanay ko .. na nagtatrabaho sa abroad.. ay sinisipi ako at baka raw ginusto ko ang mga nangyari kasi di raw po ako lumaban. (My own family, including my mother who was working abroad, blamed and accused me that I probably wanted the incidents to happen because I didn't fight back [S3C1T2]).	GBV (C1)	T2 Sexual Violence	Sexual violence refers to unwanted sexual advances to the participant.
Nakakaasar ba ... nakakababa ng self-esteem. (I am pissed off. It lowers my self-esteem [S2C1T3]).	GBV (C1)	T3 Psychological Violence	Psychological violence pertains to an act which causes psychological harm such as degradation and humiliation.

Lagi akong pinagbibintangan bumibili ng mga di kailangan sa online shops pero yung pangastos ko ay limitado lang sa online class ko. (I was often accused of buying unnecessary items from online shops even if my expenses were only for my online classes [S1C1T4]).	GBV (C1)	T4 Economic Violence	Economic violence causes economic harm to the participant like restricting access to finances or education.
Nabigla ako sa alok ng mga dayuhan kung pwede akong makipagseks sa kanila. (I was so appalled that these foreigners asked me if I was available for sex [S4C1T5]).	GBV (C1)	T5 Online Violence	Online violence, facilitated by technology or social media, results in the participant's exploitation or suffering.
Kung maging guro na ako, tutulungan kong makapag-aral ang mga kapatid ko. Mag masterado din ako para makapag-turo sa universidad. (Once I become a teacher, I will help my siblings to finish their studies. I will also pursue an advanced degree so I can teach in the university [S6C2T6]).	Empowerment (C2)	T6 Personal	The participant's statement indicates personal empowerment since it makes use of knowledge and skills for emancipation.
Pakiramdam ko, may nagawa ako nang mag-report ako ng GBV case sa Student Affairs Office. (I feel I had accomplished something when I reported a GBV case to the Student Affairs Office [S8C2T7]).	Empowerment (C2)	T7 Relational	Relational empowerment refers to how the participant has decided for a specific stand, in this case, reduce or eliminate gender violence.
Bumuo kami ng programa upang isulong ang gender equality sa samahan ng mag-aaral. (We have organized gender equality programs for a student organization [S5C2T8])	Empowerment (C2)	T8 Social	Social empowerment is manifested in the participant's disposition and confidence in advocating social transformation on GEWE.