Redefining the gender narrative: sexual harassment and intimate partner violence in selected institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe's tertiary institutions

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Abstract

This study explores discourse on sexual harassment and gender-based violence among leaders, organizations and higher institutions of learning in Zimbabwe. The study seeks to challenge, and understand how gender-based violence (GBV) survivors frame their understanding and experiences of sexual harassment and GBV in a tertiary institution. The Zimbabwean government approved a public sexual harassment policy and the Education Council for Higher Education should adopt the policy and monitor its implementation in tertiary institutions. The study examines intimate partner violence from an intersectional feminist perspective which views GBV as a result of patriarchy and other discriminatory and repressive practices. The paper explores the lived realities of students in tertiary institutions. A qualitative approach based on the premise that it enables the participants to share their lived experiences, and reflect on their interpretations and opinions of the phenomenon in context was adopted for the study. The methods adopted to generate data include focus group conversations and life history narratives with women and girls. The twenty participants who participated in the study were purposively selected. It was established, among other findings, that provocative conversations or dialogues between the survivors, victims, perpetrators, faculty, management and the rest of the student body, can help in the appreciation of GBV and sexual harassment. Several points of intervention to minimise gender-based violence and sexual harassment in tertiary institutions can contribute to improving the quality of higher education in Zimbabwe. The study recommends use of resources such as digital, physical security, consultations with victims and survivors to recount their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. There should also be scaling up on counselling and allow the survivors and victims to be part of the process of effecting changes among students and faculty.

KEYWORDS: intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, women and girls

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Introduction

The thrust of this study is to explore the prevalence and factors underlying gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment among students at public tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe. In addition, the study redefines, relooks and interrogates the mechanisms in which voices against GBV have been amplified. Findings emanating from the study maybe used by institutions of higher education to develop intervention programs and policies to tackle the phenomena among tertiary students. GBV manifests itself as physical, verbal, emotional and sexual, among others. It has no geographical boundaries, permeates culture, wealth, school, institution or workplace and it is a human rights violation which acts as constraint to gender equality and development (Gqola, 2015). In developing countries, GBV is prevalent (30% to 76%) and occur in varying circumstances (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016). In Southern Africa, the risk of experiencing GBV is a high, between 46% and 78% among adolescent girls (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016).

In the Zimbabwean parliament, the 35% women therein rarely raise concerns over sexual GBV (UN Women Africa, http://africa.unwomen.org). It follows that men who are in the majority in parliament, should actively be involved in tackling issues of SGBV. However, when males are viewed as perpetrators of violence against women but little is said about how culture expects men to protect women and girls, it means we would have failed to tap into the inclusion of men in redefining the gendered narratives of sex and GBV. This study challenges and questions how GBV survivors frame their understanding and experiences of GBV and sexual harassment. The studies (Gravellin et al., 2019; Grubb & Harrower, 2009) show that rape has always been a major form of sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) in institutions of higher learning. In most cases, the blame is attributed to survivors of rape rather than the perpetrators (Grubb & Harrower, 2009).

SGBV compromises the safety of female and male students and staff on campuses and residences. Victim-blaming and self-blame are common experiences for women who have been subjected to sexual violence (Gravellin et al., 2019).

Mukamana (2020) suggests the need to adopt an integrated policy approach to address the increase in physical and emotional violence against women in Zimbabwe. The media in Zimbabwe, and Africa in general, pays little attention

to issues of intimate partner violence (Mukamana, 2020). In other words, the media often projects intimate partner violence as a private issue that the victim must individually solve.

The dominant male perpetrator-female victim narrative, has created the impression that women and men cannot co-exist (Jaji, 2018). A number of studies posit how Zimbabwean cultures condone male violence against women but little is said about how the same cultures also expect men to protect women. When men are viewed as perpetrators of violence against women, they are affected as they are deemed to have failed culturally to protect their wives, sisters, and women in general from SGBV (Jaji, 2018). For example, a man who beats, insults or disrespects his mother is censured or asked to compensate her or her paternal family. There is, therefore, needs to harness patriarchy so that males partner in tackling SGBV rather than being viewed as adversaries.

It is imperative that narratives on SGBV should mainstream how males are also victims and voice their experiences and lived realities as well. The dominance of patriarchy in Zimbabwean society can be effectively channelled towards tackling SGBV. The single story of men perpetrating violence against women excludes other stories between the genders that portray love, care, mutual interest, care and shared objectives.

GBV may go unreported because of financial barriers, perceived impunity of perpetrators, lack of awareness of available services or access to financial services. Cultural beliefs and fear of getting the perpetrator into trouble (Matzopoulos et al., 2019) also significantly contribute to how GBV cases go unreported. Women fear retaliation, stigma, stereotypes, attitudes towards victim / survivor in courts and law enforcement settings, view violence as normal or not serious enough to report (De Klerk et al., 2007). However, it is imperative to condemn GBV to break the culture of silence where the survivors remain silent and the perpetrators continues unabated.

Worldwide, there are many reports of GBV in educational settings (Beyen et al., 2019). In Zimbabwe, more awareness of the phenomena of GBV in tertiary institutions is prevalent but the under reporting makes it difficult to determine the prevalence of the different forms of GBV in tertiary institutions. Studies indicate that incidents of GBV are under-reported (Swarz et al., 2017). Under-reporting GBV is complex. Some of the victims report that they do not know what to do because of trauma and lack of information on the reporting procedure. Universities as institutions of higher learning lack clarity on procedures, and

hence, the under reporting of GBV. The institutions do not tackle the problem as it may be viewed as not requiring concerted institutional response. This study is part of a concerted effort to tackle GBV, and sexual harassment, and is conducted among female and male students at selected public tertiary institutions.

Ahmed (2015) posits that survivors of GBV may know what to do but face insurmountable barriers which hinder them from reporting. Some of the barriers include the advice that reporting GBV can harm one's future career, or damage the perpetrator's career or ruin the institution's image. This leads to incidences of sexual harassment going unreported to protect the reputation of the institution (Rentschler, 2015). Similarly, Rentschler, (2015) and Ahmed (2015) advance the narrative that the perpetuation of GBV is fuelled by the failure to report as well as the unwillingness by the universities to offer appropriate GBV responses (Chauke et al., 2015).

As the result of the half-hearted responses to tackling the phenomenon, it is imperative to amplify the voices and support mechanisms to transform and create safe spaces for all students and staff in tertiary institutions. This study explores sexual harassment and tackles GBV, discourses on GBV and normative structures in universities which seem to normalise GBV.

Conceptual Framework

This study is underpinned by the critical theory and post-structural feminism. Critical theory informed the study as the researcher and participants are interactively linked as they interrogate GBV. The production of knowledge is enhanced through involving the critical voices of the participants so that they are heard and acknowledged (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Post-structural feminism is predicated by socially created realities that form linkages between oppression on the one hand, and individual and societal practices on the other (Lather, 1991). Similarly, St. Pierre (2000) posits that post-structural feminism is based on the notion that people can be active agents in creating their own realities instead of being passive victims of social reproduction. It becomes imperative to explore how GBV and sexual harassment are reproduced in personal spaces and individual experiences of the female and male students. To advance the argument further, Jackson (2001) opines that post-structural feminism is based on the lived reality of the individual experiences which are shaped through language, power, and social structures that can produce opposing ways of meaning-making.

Post-structural feminist theorists adopt radical deconstruction to disrupt normative discourses surrounding patriarchy and gender roles (Crawley & Broad, 2008; Osgood, 2012). Such discourses can create an environment that is both oppressive and emancipatory to the marginalised in their different lived realities or contexts, (Blaise, 2005; Foucault, 1980). However, feminist post-structural researchers posit that it is possible to move beyond what is documented, known, and understood about dominant discourses in a specific space, such as feminised gender-based violence and sexual harassment (Blaise, 2005; Osgood, 2012).

Feminism aims at increasing the possibilities and demystifies the modes of thinking which lead to positioning women as victims of GBV and sexual harassment, and projects men as perpetrators and perpetuators of the aforementioned phenomenon (Osgood, 2012). The adoption of feminist ideals could increase awareness on redefine the gendered discourse that surrounds gender-based violence and sexual harassment in tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe.

In this study, participants indicated how patriarchy can be harnessed to tackle GBV and sexual harassment in tertiary institutions. The participants also revealed how males are also victims of GBV and sexual harassment, and that, it is imperative that men's lived realities, and experiences of the phenomenon, be explored as well (Jaji, 2018). In the navigation of subjectivity, people often align with the dominant discourses in their lived realities (Mayeza, 2018). This may resonate with the participants in this study as colleges, universities and Polytechnic Colleges are generally governed by the patriarchal gender-order which regulates the societal constructions of femininity and masculinity.

Butler (1990) posits that performance of gender roles and people's subjectivity (re)produces certain discourses that normalise and regulate the gendered binaries of being female and male, albeit the assumption that domestic violence affects females more. A post-structural feminist perspective informs an understanding of the dynamics of gender socialisation which promotes a narrative viewing women as the victims of GBV and men as the perpetrators.

Using the post-structural feminist lens, therefore, it is imperative to explore how men are also victims of GBV and this calls for changes in the way the messages on the phenomena are communicated. The messaging on tackling gender-based violence should seek to counter the normative acceptance of gender-based violence and challenge status quo by using language which sends

messages which disrupt, expose, speak out, blow whistle, engage, interrogate and dialogue.

Methodology

This paper is based on a large qualitative study conducted in public tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach, based on the premise that it enables the participants to share their lived experiences, and reflect on their interpretations and opinions of the phenomenon in context (de Vos et al, 2014) was adopted for the study. The qualitative feminist research approach which was adopted whose aim was to privilege the participants' voices in the identification of issues and measures to address them rather than the usual experts (Moletsane, Mitchell, De Lange, Stuart, Buthelezi, & Taylor, 2009) who give voice to the lived experiences of the victims of GBV. The methods to generate data which were adopted include focus group conversations and life history narratives with women and girls.

In this article, the emphasis is on focus group discussions (FGD) with female students. The twenty participants who participated in the study were purposively selected. Focus group conversations reduced the voice of the researcher as the participant was encouraged to tell her story uninterrupted and undisturbed. The lived realities of the twenty participants were explored to understand how they construct GBV as well as the mechanisms which can be adopted to tackle the phenomena in the context of a tertiary institution. The researcher explained to the women the objective and nature of the research so that they could decide whether to take part or withdraw from the research (Fisher & Anushiko, 2004). The purpose and structure of the FGDs began with an opening question which invited the participants to tell their story as a woman student who lives in an environment of gender-based violence.

During the focus group conversations women were asked about their understanding and experiences of gender-based violence. A further dimension that was explored was the steps that could be taken to tackle gender-based violence and sexual harassment. In narrative inquiry, stories emerge as the participants' dialogue with the researcher. The FGDs emphasised women's experiences of sexual harassment, the misperceptions surrounding the phenomena and ways of tackling the issue. The focus group interview was conducted on site. The participants responded to the following question regarding their lived experiences of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in a college or university space.

Ethical considerations observed included confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were adopted and used to represent participants during reporting. The researcher removed identifiers so that participants' identities were protected during reporting of the findings. The participants also voluntarily agreed to allow the researcher to use their narratives that are a result of their participation in the study. All data was transcribed and patterns and themes were derived inductively (Creswell, 2014). The transcribed data was taken back to the participants to verify and clarify particular issues raised.

Two themes were identified as representative of the narratives on and around GBV and sexual harassment from the women's lived experiences. During the inductive analysis, the data was organised, encoded and categorised thematically. The themes were consistent with the research questions.

Participants signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate. Counselling and other services were provided in case participants needed them. The contact details of Midlands State University Research and Innovation Office were provided in case students had questions regarding the study. Midlands State University provided ethical clearance, and letters on study protocols were availed to the three institutions' gatekeepers. FGDs and interviews were conducted during May to July 2022.

Themes are generated from the data and coded for meaning (Patton, 2002). In this study, themes were generated from data provided by the female participants on their lived experiences. Thematic analysis is an important tool to access meanings and real-world experiences of the participants. The women's experiences are discussed with the following themes; misperceptions about gender-based violence and victim blaming.

Findings

The women I interacted with in this study are social actors constructing their lives and the stories they tell of their lives from a number of different discursive resources. These accounts are situated within socially constructed and gender power relations (Giroux, 1992). The experiences and understanding of women of gender-based violence are critical in sustainable development as well as understanding the power nexus and tackling gender-based violence and sexual harassment. The narratives on the women's lived realities of GBV are discussed below. To elicit narratives from the women, the researcher employed

life story interview techniques as suggested by Guerrero and Brenner (2013: 443) who used open-ended questions and 'photo-elicitation strategies' to allow participants to tell their own stories.

Victim blaming

Victims of GBV find the use of the term 'victim' to be problematic in the sense that it makes the woman be in a position of vulnerability. In addition, the women lame themselves when they have been subjected to sexual violence (Gravelin, Biernat & Bucher, 2019). In most cases, the blame is attributed to the person who endured the SGBV. For example, in a rape case, the victim rather than the perpetrator (Grubb & Harrower, 2009) is blamed for having enticed the perpetrator. The participants revealed that there is need to bring the perpetrator into the picture and not solely focus on the woman victim. Oline (pseudonym) said:

> After I made a report at the One Stop Centre at college, I was asked to seek counselling. There were options for legal and health services as well but I did not hear anything about how the perpetrator I had identified –my now ex –boyfriend, whether he too would also go for counselling. I think he needs counselling as he has a sick mind.

Deidre (pseudonym) added by saying:

> the way I dress is not an excuse to violate me sexually or otherwise. As a public space I should not be afraid to use public spaces because some male psycho with high doses of testosterone will think I am not fully covered in my dressing. Do these men look at how some men dress? Do we have incidents where a man is stripped naked or has his clothes ripped off by a hormone raging female? NO! But it is okay to grope me in the kombi or to whistle suggestively because he thinks my clothing attracts men.

The myths surrounding the way women dress attracting rape are perpetuated by males and are in the public discourse as well. Reports on rape of females may often focus on the way they dress and take the attention away from the perpetrator who has abused his role as a male counterpart. Rape should not be normalised nor should it be excused but dissuaded (Gravelin et al, 2019). The way girls and women dress, how they use public spaces such as tertiary institutions and how they interact in these spaces is impacted greatly by the premise that they are often to blame if there is SGBV perpetrated against them. In order to tackle GBV, there is need to make male perpetrators be accountable for their behavior and attitudes. Men should speak out against GBV, they should act and be the centre in tackling GBV. Marvellous (pseudonym) indicated that:

…a man should take responsibility for his actions. If he speaks out against GBV he can help others who perpetrate GBV or have lived through GBV. We had an older female student who was sexually abusing a much younger male student. Reports indicate she coerced him into a sexual relationship which he enjoyed at first but has out grown it and finding it difficult to end it, (so he tells his friends).

The excerpt above brings attention to male victims of SGBV who are often on the periphery in reporting. The social norm is that the male is the one who initiates the relationship or the sexual encounter. The excerpt above indicates how males are victims who should also speak out against GBV in order to minimise it and bring attention on how males are victims too. Charlene (pseudonym) said:

'So I raped you'. This taunt was on a male student's Facebook page, not here in Zimbabwe though. The guy was taunting the female student he had raped and who had not reported the violation. What if this was my young sister? Or me? I am glad that the guy's abrasive taunt led to him being hauled before the police to answer to the charge of rape and the girl in question got assistance and healing justice.

Joy (pseudonym) added:

yeah, the media is a minefield of hurt and disappointment. We had an incident where the guy recorded a sexual act with a certain girl and shared the video clip on the class WhatsApp group. Imagine the shame and humiliation on that girl. Sexuality is not personal or private if a person's rights are violated (Oparinde & Matsha, 2021) as happened in the two incidences alluded to in the above excerpts.

This study explores how survivors of GBV frame their understanding of the phenomena but the also challenges how others reflect on the incidences of GBV which come to their attention or within their realm of experience. Continuing the argument, it is suggested that the social media posts content that be used to challenge the portrayal of GBV by highlighting how such practices can be disrupted as people interrogate the impact on survivors of GBV. This resonates with the drive to involve male students' voices against GBV and sexual harassment through social media platforms. Mukamana, Machakanja and Adjei (2020) established that the media in Zimbabwe and Africa pay little attention to issues of intimate partner violence. However, the media is encouraged to use the guidelines for Media Reporting Sexual and Gender-based Violence launched by UNICEF Zimbabwe in 2020. It is possible to bring perpetrators to book through gender responsive reporting and investigation of media posts as shown in the student who was caught after posting a damning taunt 'so I raped you'.

Misperceptions about gender-based violence

The messaging on tackling GBV should seek to counter the normative acceptance of GBV and challenge the *status quo* by using language which sends messages which disrupt, speak out, blow whistle, engage, interrogate, expose, dialogue, converse and redefine power relations (Gravelin, 2019). Policies intended to promote gender equality have not fully explored policy alternatives which channel patriarchy into efforts to tackle SGBV in Zimbabwe (Jaji, 2018). Efforts to tackle GBV are more likely to succeed if men are partners rather than adversaries (Jaji, 2018). Patience (pseudonym) indicated that:

> I think males must be part of the narrative in interrogating SGBV. It is not enough to present them as perpetrators always. What about the incidences of violence against men which are emerging in our society?

Taku (pseudonym) added:

> men are socialised to suffer in silence. Patriarchy dictates he should be brave, strong and do not cry.

Shamiso (pseudonym) stated:

> males are victims too. Remember, the male student who was bashed by his girlfriend after she caught him red handed with his side chick. That was intense. That girl is violent.

The above excerpts demonstrate how perceptions towards GBV against males should be interrogated as males are victims too. The participants also question the normative which attributes violent actions to men and trivialise violence against men. Male sociocultural dominance can be harnessed towards fighting SGBV in Zimbabwe (Jaji, 2018). Tindo (pseudonym) said:

> our culture condones male violence against women. My brother is socialized to look after my sisters and me. If he hits any one of us, is he not a deviant, I mean he should be protecting us. Most males are socialised to play a protective role.

Ayanda (pseudonym) indicated that:

> We should change the narrative on perceived gender roles which leads to SGBV. A male child is socialized to take charge, aggressive and he does that in relationships with the opposite sex. We can co-exist, we   do that at home, I get along with my brothers at home but why does my brother become violent in college for example?

One of the participants also made reference to how silences of GBV against males are a cause for concern. The thrust is to bring the phenomena into the public domain and explore the causes, how it can be minimized and curbed. Fadzai (pseudonym) said:

> Why do males remain silent if they experience GBV? Who says they cannot report to authorities if they are sexually harassed for example? Is it because they lack gender empowerment or is it that they just don't want to be perceived as weak?

Tatenda (pseudonym) noted that:

> Harmonious relations can be created, let us work and live together peacefully.

Domestic violence against men should not be trivialised in reporting but men should also be in a position to seek protection, and refuge, as provisioned under the Domestic Violence Act (2007). There may be underreporting of GBV against men as the current policies to tackle GBV are erroneously viewed by men as a form of disempowering and dislodging them from their privileged patriarchal position. The strategies to tackle GBV and sexual harassment must include males for more sustainable behavior change.

Implications for tackling gender-based violence in tertiary institutions

GBV is still prevalent in teaching and learning spaces in various institutions of higher learning. There is need to support those who have experienced GBV in one form or another through periodic checks. The checks could be conducted at the beginning and or end of a semester to establish how many female and male students experienced GBV. This would help to determine the likelihood of GBV and the spaces in which it takes place.

The different types of SGBV which affect students are gendered in nature and informed by gender inequalities. It follows that an approach which seeks to tackle GBV should address gender inequalities and make students aware on how to minimise these effects. The perpetrators of GBV as emanating from this study, include college friends, strangers, boyfriends, husbands, girlfriends, kitchen staff, lecturers and security personnel. However, it may be pertinent to group the perpetrators as being on and off campus. The programs introduced to tackle GBV may therefore be guided by the context which will inform the content to be shared with the victims.

The underlying factors which contribute to GBV must be explored in any strategies adopted to tackle the phenomena. These strategies must also focus on addressing the root cause of gender oppression, patriarchy and gender discrimination. Critical thinking should be promoted in conversations and dialogues about tackling GBV among female and male students to foster behavior change.

In addressing GBV in tertiary institutions, there is need to implement a policy framework that tackles GBV. Several policy attempts have been made by the Government of Zimbabwe, the Gender Commission, and the Constitution and Domestic Violence Act (2007). The GoZ has also approved a public sexual harassment policy and the education council for higher education should adopt the policy and monitor its implementation in tertiary institutions.

Some of the study sites have made positive developments in tackling GBV as they have adopted one-stop-centres where students are provided with social resources offering counselling and reporting. Gender rights and gender justice are also part of the content and syllabuses students' study. These efforts are complemented by Civic Society Organisations (CSOs) who conduct gender awareness and gender training but their participation must be scaled up for sustainability as some students indicated their presence at institutions is once a semester/term.

In tackling GBV, there is need to involve the community, traditional and religious leaders in the formulation and implementation of activities to minimize the incidences of GBV. There is also need to disrupt and promote disruptive thinking by provoking people, and institutions to challenge their comfort zones, co-exist peacefully and create transgenerational solutions through paradigm shift and transformative actions.

Conclusion

Tackling GBV in tertiary institutions is not the prerogative of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation Science and Technology Development but includes the community, civil society organisations, the families, female and male students and the media to escalate the actions, programs and activities. The awareness programs and one stop centres set up to address SGBV should target the victims and perpetrators, both female and male.

It is imperative that consultations are done with the victims, survivors and perpetrators to recount experiences in a safe and supportive environment and counselling services offered.

It is the students who live in these spaces who understand the context and are able to move most rapidly and more quickly to tackle GBV and sexual harassment and effect changes. Sexual harassment and gender-based violence is an extensive problem marked by high levels of repeat victimization and under reporting. The goal is to inform potential victims and perpetrators using targeted social media messages and web-based engagement.

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