CONCEPTS AND REALITY IN GENDER BASED VIOLENCE: IS HEALING POSSIBLE?

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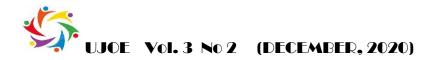

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, sexual violence is on the rise in universities and colleges each day regardless of awareness campaigns, adoption of Acts to protect the population or raising of jail terms for perpetrators. Studies reveal that female students voluntarily or involuntarily fall prey in order to obtain better grades, access accommodation at campus, financial resources and other favours in exchange for sex. Survivors could not feel the impact on their well- being, but later re-live the memories as painful experiences. This study sought to explore sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence and its bearing on the well-being of female students in four selected institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. The study was qualitative in nature utilising the narrative inquiry research tradition to investigate if healing is possible after painful experiences. Data were gathered using in-depth interviews backed with follow-up semi-structured questions. Findings revealed that the majority of female students in institutions under study fail to cope with the trauma and drop out of school. It was also established that some sexually harassed female students fail to establish meaningful sexual relationships with the opposite sex while some seem to come out unscathed. Following up on some survivors of sexual violence, it indicated that they relapse when they encounter similar situations as those that exposed them to sexual harassment in their past, hence raising the question on whether 'healing is possible? The study recommended setting up of policies on sexual harassment as well as counselling structures to ensure psychological wellness of survivors.

KEY WORDS: Gender-based violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, female students

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INTRODUCTION

The rise in cases of sexual violence, particularly sexual harassment of female students throughout the world, has been widely documented (McMahon, Wood, Cusano & Macri, 2019; Aguilar & Baek, 2020; Rodriguez-Rodriguez & Heras-González, 2020) and has become a cause for concern. Several research studies have indicated that, worldwide, cases of sexual harassment have been rising (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2009; Omonijo, Uche, Nwadiafor et al, 2013; Smit & du Plessis, 2011; Street, Stafford & Bruce, 2003; Morilly, 2012). Some incidences of sexual harassment generate in the home and cascade into High School, College/University (Smit & du Plessis, 2011) and even to workplaces where sexual harassment could be in form of sexual violence and/or sexual assault which may eventually result into rape cases. Researchers have observed that, female students are mostly vulnerable to sexual harassment which might impede their academic achievement or even lead to murder of the victim. A number of anti-sexual harassment campaigns and workshops have been conducted in institutions of higher learning in developing countries in general and in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning in particular (Zindi, 1994; Chireshe & Chireshe, 2009). Regardless of all these anti-sexual harassment advocacies by several organisations, state and non-state, female students have always been on the receiving side, with some having a history of sexual harassment experiences from childhood that cascaded into the institutions of higher learning. It is against this background that this study sought to find out if healing can be possible for female students after experiencing traumatic pangs of sexual harassment.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptualising sexual harassment

Abramsky, Watts, Garcia-Moreno, et. al (2011) in their WHO multi-country study reveal that sexual violence comprising child sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault/aggression and sexual harassment, frequently occur in institutions assumed to be 'safe', for instance, schools, homes and so on. In such environments, peers, family members and teachers are the perpetrators. The report further states that sexual harassment, for instance, is also widespread when women enter the workplace. In this section, researchers discuss sexual harassment and its effects on the well-being of female students in academic institutions of higher learning. The concept sexual harassment was originally formulated from a behaviour by males who used organisational power or cultural privilege to coerce favours from women (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). Differing socio-cultural backgrounds and social class stereotypes (Rahimia & Liston, 2011) determine what meaning the concept is given. Also, its effects cannot be generalised across the nations and among individuals. Most countries find it difficult to come up with a document that can be used to criminalise sexual harassment although its effects have been found to be detrimental to the wellbeing of the victims (Goldzweig et al., 2006; Buchanan & Fitzgerald,2008).The definitions can be partitioned into two categories – the psychological and the behavioural (Macmaster et al., 2002) whereby the psychological aspect enshrines the 'unwanted attention' part of it while the specific behaviours involved make up the behavioural aspect. The WHO definition that sexual violence encompasses ….;

'….any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work'. WHO, 2002 p149)

…indicates that sexual harassment is one of its components and as such can be detrimental to the well-being of female students in any institution of higher learning.

Sexual harassment, also termed sexual terrorism (Sheffield, 2007), involves unwelcome advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014), when the following conditions prevail:

1. When one submits as a condition of employment or educational opportunity,
2. If the victim submits or rejects such conduct and it is used as a basis for employment or academic decisions that would affect the victim
3. If the conduct has been for the purpose of short changing the employee or student by creating intimidating, hostile, or offensive working or learning environment

(Merkin, 2008, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980, Brunner & Dever, 2014,).
Lack of universality of how individuals define sexual harassment in their contexts makes it difficult to generalise if it can really be an aspect of sexual violence. The assertion by Bennett et al., (2000) that culturally men are condoned for touching women without their permission, for instance, through bottom patting, palm scratching and shoulder rubbing would be arguably refutable when it comes to some cultures where these can be regarded as non-event. Menon et al., (2014) describe the act as a form of social control by men to 'keep women in their places. Such reflects the bruised male ego that refutes female independence to compete in the work arena. For instance, the rise in unemployment in Egypt among males has exacerbated and normalised sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo (Peoples, 2008, Rizzo et al., 2012) where females are exposed to behaviours such as ogling and staring suggestively, obscene gestures and others.

In the views of Buchanan and Harrell cited in Bryant-Davis (2015), sexual harassment against women begins in the early years of high school. Female students, teachers as well are victims of sexual suggestive comments about their bodies, requests to perform sexual acts, being groped by the male counterpart, or a group of males. It is further argued by the authors (Bryant-Davis, 2015) that harassment perpetuates into college and university where instructors are the perpetrators apart from other male population within the institution. While acknowledging the notion of sexual harassment being motivated by the desire for sexual expression (Berdahl, 2007), in institutions of higher learning, this type of sexual violence appears to be attached to attainment of better grades. The workplace is not spared since such harassment can also filter into the workplace where it can be magnified to direct demand for sexual compliance (Bryant-Davis, 2015). This indicates that sexual harassment can be experienced in any context although most of the research on the issue has been done within the workplace (Goldzweig, et al., 2006; Peoples, 2008; Mclaughlin et al., 2012; Brunner & Dever, 2014). In most cases, this type of sexual violence has not been taken seriously in several nations rendering female victims powerless to end it.

Controversially, the dominant heterosexual patriarchal context defines masculinity by experience without any repercussions while the dichotomous placement of females' sexuality encounters the risk of being branded with adverse sexual labels (Tolman, et al., 2003), thus, marginalising the females (Fine & McClelland, 2006). In their research of sexual harassment in a certain university, Menon et al (2014) describe sexual harassment as a 'silent killer' of female students.
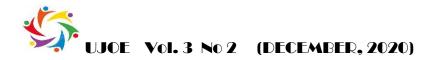
Research on the magnitude of sexual harassment globally, is a clear indication that it has become a societal ill that needs intervention. Studies on the Vietnam War and Gulf War era (Goldzweig, et al., 2006), also in Zimbabwe institutions of higher education (Zindi, 1994) multicultural organizations in Latin America (Merkin, 2008), the Ayoba university study (Adams et al., 2013) are enough evidence of the prevalence of sexual harassment across nations of the world.

Theoretical framework
To effectively explore the experiences of female students' survivors of sexual harassment in Zimbabwe's selected institutions of higher learning, the researchers used an integrative theory by Feminist Standpoint theory (Harding, 1993) and the Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller, Jordan, Stiver & Surrey, 1978) to gain a deeper understanding of the sexual harassment narratives by the students under study (Creswell, 2014). The Feminist standpoint theory helped the researchers to explore knowledge of female students' experiences through 'situated knowledge' that provides critical accounts of how dominant forms of knowing are constructed and deployed within knowledge spaces in the higher learning institutions, which might be perceived as male dominated space where power dynamics rule. The Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) assumes that culture and contexts of individuals determine success of intervention programmes. Situating sexually violated female students within the RCT would entail considering understanding their narratives within their cultural perspectives and the situations in which the incident occurred. For instance, listening to a participant's stories infested with self-blame would warranty establish if it was harassment from an acquaintance or a patriarchal environment in which unequal power reigns.

Feminist standpoint Theory
The Feminist Standpoint theory, originates from theorist such as Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding. It can be understood that the theorists claimed that certain socio-political positions occupied by women (and by extension other groups who lack social and economic privilege) can become sites of epistemic privilege and thus productive starting points for enquiry into questions about not only those who are socially and politically marginalized, but also those who, by dint of social and political privilege, occupy the positions of oppressors. The theory is rooted in the individual's knowledge or their perspectives and the power that such authority exerts. Thus, the individual's own perspectives are shaped by his or her social and political experiences (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). Each sexual harassment survivor's narratives define their point of view through which they see and understand the world. Therefore, the depth of these perceptions determine if the survivor heals or not.

Relational-Cultural Theory

Evolving from the work of Jean Baker Miller (1976), Relational-Cultural theory views the human's ability to fully develop depending on interactions with others. Conceptualising sexual harassment within the lenses of RCT implies taking into consideration the individual's gender, culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and other various factors (Duffey & Somody, 2011). How an individual views good and painful experiences of their lives depends on these factors. As well, healing from sexual harassment painful experiences would be anchored on how the individual gives meaning which anchors on their culture. This theory gave lenses through which the researchers interpreted the participants' narratives.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative approach in soliciting and understanding in-depth information (Moriarty, 2011; Cresswell, 2014) from the purposively selected sample of female students who were in institutions of higher learning. There were 11(eleven) female students who volunteered to participate in the study. In collaboration with the Female Students' Network (an organisation that empowers girls in Universities and colleges), recruitment of participants was made possible since survivors of all forms of sexual violence usually hold conferences. Due to the sensitivity of the issue under study, confidentiality had to be observed. Engagement with initial voluntary participants led to snowballing as an additional sampling procedure since survivors knew each other through FSN. In order to have independent views of the phenomena, female students aged 18-25 were convenient for the study in that no guardians or complicated ethical considerations would be involved. These could consent to participation on their own accord. All ethical procedures were sought from the Zimbabwe Medical Research Council and backup counselling, in case some survivors would relapse was organised. Considering the nature of the study, the narrative inquiry best suited the solicitation and interpretation of real (Loh, 2013) feelings, perceptions and different views of their experiences of trauma from the participants. This was made possible in that the narrative inquiry concentrates on language; the use of words, sentences and topical cohesiveness using texts from narratives as cognitive structures (Bamberg, 2012). Social, cultural and historical contexts are considered in the narratives as they give meaning to whatever perceptions that participants attach to their experiences. Individual experiences of the participants were recorded and transcribed into themes that provided causal link among the ideas (Cresswell, 2014) when restored.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the eleven (11) participants interviewed, seven (7) had experienced sexual harassment to a greater extent. Researchers used pseudonyms for their participants in order to ensure anonymity. Chipo, aged 21 experienced harassment by her course lecturer. The course lecturer made several sexual advances which Chipo turned down and she was failed purposely three consecutive times in the same course. She remembers the lecturer saying after indicating that he would assist her with problem topics, '*And he said 'Oh ok, have you brought your notes? I brought out my notes and he asked me, 'Do you understand*

this question? Like asking me general questions which I answered and then he said, 'what am I getting for helping you? I can't just help you because as the situation stands, you are writing next week and might not be able to internalise everything in the shortest period and you need to reward me so that when I am marking the paper I will know that this student of mine is weak here and there. I know if I say pay me, you won't get the money'. The University Examination board gave her a 'discontinue', meaning that Chipo had to be laid out of the programme. The participant was distraught to the extent of resorting to alcohol abuse, all night partying with friends, picking up fights with parents, adopting negative emotions. She even admitted to being sexually careless, sleeping around without considering the consequences. The behaviour went on until the situation at home became serious. Chipo then managed to open up to her mother and a friend who was in the Students Representative Council. She got advice to seek counselling and she was empowered to fight for justice that would enable her to move on.

The second participant, Thoko was aged 25. She experienced sexual harassment from her lecturer who made unsuccessful advances which made it difficult for Thoko to submit her dissertation in time. The university administration sided with the lecturer since he was a 'gem' to them. In her narrative, Thoko relates, '*So the guy was highly educated, which is …he is the only doctor in the department….he was a gem to them and they shared him with another country…like overseas….like he worked that side and work here…….and he would work on that other side… so dying none or always cut the straws' a…nd the..y harassed me …it was like….you know like a big boys club with a DNA boys club because his lawyer fired my friend who was working for them for being friends with me…uh….another of his friends opened a fake Facebook account and started writing that I had slept with eleven (11) lecturers, that I am a lesbian, that my mother kicked me out of the house, we had no relationship, that I was a home wrecker, that I have many social media accounts because people are always on her line shouting at me for stealing their husbands they tagged all lecturers on that post on Facebook, that tagged me, they tagged the dean, they tagged e…..everybody who knew me and people who knew about the story and people screen shot it, copied and pasted it and people commented, it blew out of control ……and they threw my issues of previous abuse….*'.

The rumours spreading on social media affected her social and emotional wellness since no one wanted to relate with her. Thoko's situation subjected her to loneliness and psychological trauma. Thoko had to stay home to avoid emotional pain emanating from harassment by both the lecturer and fellow students who sided with the lecturer. This heavily impacted on her emotional wellness. She once attempted suicide due to disbelief by her own mother who considered her a nuisance. She managed to attain justice after a Female Students' organisation assisted to get a Human Rights lawyer who took her case. Unearthing of other cases of sexual harassment by the same lecturer got him dismissed and Thoko had to resume her studies. However, this nasty experiences negatively affected her academic wellness, emotional wellness as well as her social wellness.

Wendy was aged 22 and was sexually harassed by a lecturer and the dean of her faculty. After they failed to lure her, they blocked her way to negotiate for staggered fees resulting in delay in course completion. She recollects, '*….the HOD I told about my issue of straddling between work and school----in 2016 after attachment I was supposed to pay my debt. I had used the money I got from the teachers' union to get laptops*

for sale. So when I sold the laptop I went back to get some more and I raised $800 so from the debt of $1200 I had, I took the $800 cash and said, 'Sir, I have $800, I need to get back to school then he refused and said, 'If coming to school has failed, go and get married, such people like you will also pester us for nothing,' I was disturbed and said, 'We have already gone to the principal, we are telling you what the principal has said. There is nothing you can do.' Finally, she took courage to proceed to the higher office to present her case after getting advice from a female senior lecturer.

Another participant, Sarah was aged 22. She faced sexual harassment after being raped by a security guard (related to the dean of her faculty) in the institution. She faced stigmatisation after reporting the rape to the police and getting the culprit incarcerated. She suffered labelling and name calling by staff at accounts offices and other college environments. She recounts a clerk in the accounts office saying;

'Ah! Sarah, hello!' and she said, 'By the way that friend of yours was officially sacked off.' and I said, 'My friend?' and she said, 'Yes, that security guard, we heard that you were lovers!' All the people said, 'Haa!' and I just said, 'Ah that's what people do. Each person has their view and I can't control how people think.' And I let it be……………'.

Sarah nearly dropped out of college and lived-in fear of the perpetrator returning to attack although she was out of college on industrial attachment. For some time, she could not sustain relationships whether intimate or non-intimate. After several counselling sessions she finally completed her course and got married.

Shingi was another participant whose case of sexual harassment nearly discouraged her to continue with her career. She was sexually harassed by her boyfriend for not disclosing childhood rape. The boyfriend used to call her names and he verbally abused her after getting her pregnant while in university. He would taunt her saying;

'how did you lose your virginity? You mischievous ones usually get tested'.

When she gave birth to her baby boy, she continued to experience harassment from the boyfriend and his friends. She dropped out of university when she missed an examination due to disturbances from the boyfriend as evidenced by the following utterances:

'…It was my baby father who had stressed me. I couldn't write. I was down, could not read. Nothing would get into my head, I just couldn't.

Shingi indicated signs that she had not got over her boyfriend and still hoped he would take her back. She resumed her studies but failed to write her examination citing emotional instability caused by her relationship with her baby father. Her explanations indicated that she was confused on what decision to take.

Petty aged 21 was sexually harassed after falling prey to date rape. Her boyfriend and his friends mocked her while in lessons for losing virginity, making it a 'trump card' for forced compliance to stay in the

relationship. When she would try to end the relationship he would taunt her saying, '*You don't think you will fall in love with me?' We are in love but we had taken a break, we are still in love, you are forgetting who I am? I am the first man who first slept with you'*. When discussions on sexuality would be discussed she recollected him saying, *'Do you know Petty? Is this the person you say has an innocent face? Eish, Petty are you innocent?'* She almost dropped out of school, paid less attention during lessons and her grades started dropping. She indicated that she even lost weight. When she got advice from friends to go for counselling she managed to participate in the study and when she narrated her story, she began to grow stronger. She then got industrial attachment in her university and there she was sexually harassed by the head of the department but she managed to stand her ground. She cited that the counselling she got after first sexual violence incidents and participating in the study were contributing factors to her strength.

Lulu was aged 25 when she participated in the study. She was an orphan when she fell prey to date rape and later managed to enrol at a university against all odds of abusive relationship. She painfully related:

'…. after 2 years in marriage things started changing and my husband started ill-treating me reminding me of what I didn't achieve my degree and always reminding me that I was an orphan.' In university, her bitterness made her engage in gender activism. In her narrative she said, '*I joined one of student activists union and was so vocal unfortunately I was suspended when I was in my final year. I had to stay at home for 2 years….*'.

Challenging perpetrators of gender-based violence led to her expulsion and nullification of her dissertation. She managed to fight her way back into the institution and started a new topic and finally graduated as an empowered woman who claims to be able to face any situation and ready to assist others who may fall into same predicament. Experiences by Lulu are true indicative that the individual's own perspectives are shaped by his or her social and political experiences (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017)

The seven cases indicate that a lot of sexual harassment occurs in tertiary institutions and sometimes victims suffer silently. The cases dealt with indicated that some participants resorted to drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity and failure to complete their programmes. For instance, in Shingi's case whereby she has not managed to write examinations that would determine her qualification for industrial attachment. The study shows that regardless of traumatic sexual harassment that could have been encountered by some of the participants, strength has been gathered to complete their programmes and also fight for others. Like in the case of Lulu who resorted into gender activism, advocating for female students who face similar problems in tertiary institutions.

Although some victims manage to pass the victimhood and become survivors, sexual harassment remains a traumatic experience to most individuals. Those who graduate into survivors could have managed to get help in form of counselling, advice or justice though the duration of transition into survivor hood depends on the inner strength of the individual (Southwick, Bonnano, Masten et al., (2014). It has been also noted that in some instances tertiary institutions fail to take sexual harassment seriously and lose female students through

dropping out of the programme (Gonzalez & Feder, 2016). Males in authority within tertiary institution make the situation worse when they are perpetrators themselves(Smit & du Plessis, 2011) resulting in female students finding their way to justice blocked since in most instances the students' financial background predisposes them to sexual violence. Most males would take advantage of their poverty that could hinder them to seek justice from the courts where they would need representation by lawyers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings in this study revealed that sexual harassment is prevalent in institutions of higher learning and this is perpetrated by lecturers as well as peers. Victims/survivors consequently suffer depression, stress, low self-esteem, loss of confidence, some may contemplate suicide or drop out of school. However, it was noted that those who have strong social support can be able to cope with the psychological effects of sexual harassment. The study also revealed that counselling is instrumental in alleviating the effects of sexual harassment. As indicated by the Relational-Cultural Theory, individuals yearn for connections. This is shown in Lulu's narrative indicating that reconnection with the family that had distanced itself from her made her feel good. Also, it is revealed in the narratives that there is lack of implementation of policies by authorities on sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning. The study therefore, recommends that authorities in institutions of higher learning should acknowledge the prevalence of sexual harassment as detrimental to the development of the female learner. There is need for continuous awareness campaigns both in community and education institutions to conscientise the population on what gender-based violence constitute. The study encourages anti-sexual harassment policies that are functional in institutions of higher learning.

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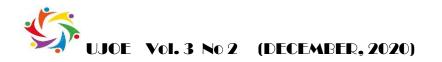
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