

“I Am Helpless and Petrified”: Lived Experiences of Female Students on Gender-Based Violence At A Selected University in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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To Cite this Article

Ephraim Chifamba & E. F. Zvobgo (2024). “I Am Helpless and Petrified”: Lived Experiences of Female Students on Gender-Based Violence at a Selected University in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. *Indian Journal of Applied Social Science*, 1: 1-2, pp. 65-85.

Abstract: Zimbabwe has witnessed remarkable increase in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) purportedly committed within and around precincts of universities. The gender-based violence cases that appear in local and/or national news are a small fraction of all such incidents within and around university campuses as the majority are not reported. In spite of the massive national scale of gender-based violence within university campuses, little studies have unravelled the experience of female students and the impact of GBV on their welfare and academic achievements. Using feminist qualitative methodologies, the study explores the lived experiences of female students on GBV at a selected institution of higher learning in Masvingo province. Snowball sampling method was employed to collect data from thirty-two (32) female students who experienced GBV during their stay on campuses. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results reveal that a substantial number of female students are survivors of GBV at the selected university. Female students are exposed to sexual, physical, economic, psychological, material, coercive control, stalking, rape among many other forms of gender based violence. Female students’ experience of GBV is characterized by deep infamy, with often irrevocable effects on their plans and hopes for the future. The results reveal how female students experience feelings of helplessness and fear and how they are silenced by ignorance in university domiciliary space. However,

in some cases, GBV is ‘normalized’ as part of female students’ experience on campus. A comparison of their lived experiences on GBV against an ‘imaginary violence’ which they regarded as being more ‘real’ than their own, serves to trivialise their experiences. These results have significant implications for university administrators seeking to implement interventions that address gender based violence at the selected university and beyond.

Keywords: Gender based violence, prevalence, lived-experiences, female students, university

Introduction

Gender-based violence is a widespread and an insidious problem among universities throughout the globe. Gender-based violence is evidently related to gender inequity, misuse of power and the continuation of deleterious gender norms. Substantial global evidence shows a high incidence of gender-based violence within university campuses (Munro-Kramer et al., 2024; Okafor et al, 2022; Rothman et al.,2021) and female students experience the worst of it in terms of severity, prevalence and impact (Seidu et al., 2024). It is in this context that Malendez-Torres et al. (2024); McClain et al. (2021) and Lorenzo (2019) suggest that institutions of higher learning are ‘sites of violence’ against female students. Rothman et al. (2021) note that since the turn of the millennium, there has been increase in political and public awareness on the nature and impact of GBV on female students in institutions of higher learning. Despite the growing awareness, there has been remarkable increase in incidents of GBV (Tarzia, Henderson-Brooks, Baloch, & Hegarty, 2024; Karami, Spinel, White, Ford, & Swan, 2022; Rothman et al., 2021), reportedly committed within and around university campuses.

Gender based violence in university campuses remains a challenge in the United States of America. During their educational careers, 1 in 6 female university students in the United States are victims of either attempted or completed rape (McClain et al., 2021), but less than 5% of survivors report their harassment (Kiszel & Fitzsimons, 2022). A latest study of ten universities, with responses from over 350,000 participants, found out that since registering at the university, 17% of female students experienced GBV, involving incapacitation or physical harm (Spencer et al., 2024), and 32% had experienced sexual harassment (Longpré, Moreton & Snow, 2024). Also, studies in Mexico (Dadvand & Carhill, 2021), Brazil (Voth Schrag, 2002), Chile (McClain et al., 2021) and Venezuela (Lorenzo, 2019) also indicate comparable challenges in university campuses that is starting to be recognized and documented. Spencer et al (2024) note that there has been latest focus to GBV in

the wider university community, especially in the context of power and authority disparities between students and staff members, and university systems, which are reluctant to investigate and take responsibility for staff misuses of their authority in regard to GBV against learners. Over the past three decades, most institutions in the USA embraced a culture of impunity, and regular cover-ups and this practice exacted irrevocable harm to institutional reputations. However, in recent years, where universities have been sluggish to concede the existence of GBV within their campuses for fear of reputational harm, there is a shift towards a normative approach whereby not acting about GBV seems more detrimental than doing something about it.

In Europe, GBV within university campuses has been on the rise since mid-2000s (Dadvand & Cahill, 2021). In the United Kingdom, staff-on-student GBV came into sharp attention when Professor Sara Ahmed resigned in disapproval against Goldsmith University’s failure to investigate sexual violence on the campus (Ahmed, 2016). After Ahmed’s resignation, researches started to document high profile incidences of sexual gender-based violence on campus among young people in intimate relationships (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Altenberg et al., 2018.). The National Union of Students’ (NUS) survey of 2,000 students learning in Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland discovered that, while at university, one in eight female students had encountered sexual harassment, while 15% were sexually haunted (NUS, 2010). The same study also noted that 68% were victims of one or more kinds of GBV within university campuses, with 15% having encountered unsolicited kissing, denigration, ‘scientific sabotage’, exclusion, assault, problematizing special needs and unwarranted touching. In Belgium, 18.9% of females enrolled in universities reported an experience of sexual victimization while in India, 33% of adolescent school girls had experienced some form of sexual abuse. Spencer et al. (2024) suggest that in most of these documented cases, the offender was a male and well-known to the victim.

Gender-based violence is also a problem faced by female students in different university settings in Africa. A study in Sudan among female university students exposed that the general incidence of gender-based violence was 22.2% (Anierobi, et al., 2021), and 50.8% of young women experienced sexual, physical, and psychological violence (Ogunode & Ndayebom, 2022). In Gabon, the study result on sexual abuse at one of the universities showed that 15.8% of female students were

sexually abused in a university setting (Okafor et al, 2022). Furthermore, only scanty evidence exists on GBV among female students in Ethiopia. In a study among 1507 randomly sampled female university students in Addis Ababa, central Ethiopia, 46.9% of the respondents testified having experienced gender based violence (Birkie et al. 2020); 9% completed rape; and 14% attempted rape (Anierobi, et al., 2021). Kefale et al. (2021) further note that about 84.8% of the reported rape victims were below the age of 21 years of age. Another research piloted among university female students in Kenya, found an overall rate of violence of 54.8% (Kefale et al., 2021). The frequency of sexual violence was 29.8%; of psychological abuse 45.8%; of physical violence 22.7%; of attempted rape 10.9%, and of completed rape 4.5% (Birkie et al., 2020). Other studies conducted in four South African universities, including one rural-based university (Idowu, Ocholla & Onyancha, 2023), a south-east Nigerian university (Adebowale, 2018), and a university in Botswana (Finley & Levenson, 2018) showed that the burden of GBV was 37.8%, 31.3%, and 28% respectively.

The scourge of GBV is common among universities in Zimbabwe. The 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) report shows that 32.4% of female students aged between 18-35 experiences one form of GBV annually within university campuses. Among females aged 15-49 years, approximately 11.6% of female students experienced sexual violence during their stay within university premises (Mafa & Simango, 2021). Data compiled by Musasa Project in 2024 revealed a 37% increase in rape cases over the past five years (i.e.2019-2024), which works out to at least one female student exposed to GBV every 75 minutes (Hodzi, 2024). The frequency of forced first sexual intercourse within university campuses among adolescent girls and women aged between 16 and 24 years ranges from 17% to 38% (Musasa Project, 2023). Most of these cases are not reported to authorities and law enforcement agencies. Due to under-reporting and subsequently low percentage of publicly reported cases of sexual violence, universities perceive GBV as not a major problem at their institutions and therefore contend that it does not need a resolute institutional response. Most cases of GBV have not been reported due to what Chowdhury, Winder & Blagden (2021) refers to as the neoliberal model of universities which views higher education as business units competing for student enrolment and rankings. Universities thrive to manage possible undesirable publicity (Dengezela, Makocheke, & Moyo, 2024; Makore-Rukuni, 2017), deter possible plaintiffs (Tarrzia et al., 2024), reduce complaints-making (Malendez-Torres et al.,

2024; Lorenzo, 2019) and therefore protect the reputation of academics and their institutions. Furthermore, studies also show that institutional action and knowledge to address GBV is limited (Hodzi, 2024; Tarrzia et al., 2024; Chireshe, 2015), with most institution-led interventions adopting a reactive approach (Rothman et al, 2024) and, every so often, retributive approach (Mafa & Simango, 2021). The under-reporting of GBV cases help to propagate the poor understanding of what it entails, occurrence patterns, source and the circumstances that embolden it. It also restrains efforts towards institutionalisation of effective strategies of not only bringing it under control, but also stamping it out entirely and relegating it to the ‘wheelie bin’ of history.

This paper explores the lived experiences of female students on gender-based violence at a selected university in Masvingo province. It also offers a national viewpoint on female students’ experiences on GBV within university campuses with an overall intention of confirming that indeed it is a matter of national concern; whose form, occurrence and intensity patterns vary from one university to the other. The paper explores the lived experiences of female victims of GBV with the overall intent of guiding future research, prevention, policy and practice.

Literature Review

Understanding gender based violence

Gender-based violence is defined as attitudes or behaviour reinforced by unfair power relations that threaten, injure, or undermine a person because of his/her sexuality or gender (Swedish Research Council, 2018). Lorenzo (2019) defines GBV as violence targeting people based on gender, identity, biological sex, or social gender norms. This definition emphasises that GBV is influenced by and impacts gender relations and problematizes harassment and violence premised on hierarchical constructions of gender and sexuality (Munro-Kramer, 2024). Women and girls comprise the vast majority of victims of gender based violence, and men the majority of offenders. Gender-based violence comprises a range of attitudes and behaviours such as sexual violence, domestic violence, sexist harassment and expressions on social media which normalise sexual objectification and sexism.

Gender based violence has remained poorly understood; both in terms of what it entails (Karami et al., 2021; Okafor et al., 2022) as well as its frequency (Lorenzo,

2019; Dengezela et al., 2024). Examples of GBV include domestic violence, physical violence, economic violence, emotional violence, intimate partner violence and sexual violence (Tarzia et al., 2024). The leading understanding and narrative of GBV appears to be described within the context of male-on-female violence. Conversely, there are some less helpful inferences with such an analysis of gender based violence. For instance, one such inference is the implicit homogenisation of women as ‘*priori* GBV victims’ and it also views women as ‘powerless’ (Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012). This viewpoint assumes that just because they are women, they cannot be perpetrators of gender based violence (Makhene, 2022).

Gender-based violence among universities in Zimbabwe: An overview

The frequency and effect of GBV experienced by women and girls in Zimbabwean higher education contexts has continued as one of the neglected topics until very recently (Matavire et al., 2024; Chiuraya, 2022; Mashininga, 2021). Due to growing international and national attention focused on the subject of sexual violence and harassment in recent years, along with the development in student activism, there is increasing pressure on universities in Zimbabwe to respond to GBV and increasing scrutiny of the ways in which they are currently doing so (Makore-Rukuni, 2017).

The prevalence of GBV in Zimbabwe’s institutions of higher learning has been increasing to the extent of pushing various stakeholders such as Students and Youth Working on Reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT), to lobby the Zimbabwean government to promulgate a piece of legislation that criminalises gender-based violence (Chiuraya, 2022). The lobbying followed several reports that GBV by male lecturers on female students had reached inexcusable levels. Incidences of gender-based violence in Zimbabwe are prominent in the media on almost daily basis. Between December 2019 and April 2021, SAYWHAT conducted a longitudinal research (funded by the Unicef) whose results exposed that GBV was endemic among universities in Zimbabwe (Mashininga, 2021). The aforementioned study emphasized the often inconsistent and poor responses of universities, especially on matters surrounding reporting pathways (or absence thereof); contradictions in approaches when handling cases of gender based violence; and gaps in learners’ knowledge of amenities accessible on campus or outside the campus. Studies (Hodzi, 2024; Chiuraya, 2022; Mushininga, 2021) illustrate that the majority of cases or experiences of GBV are not reported, and the few cases that are reported involve

long-drawn-out and frequently stressful legal court proceedings (Makore-Rukuni, 2017). Thus, under-reporting of gender-based violence has remained a challenge among institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

This growing body of work has also revealed that, all too often, universities lack a consistent, effective and systematic response strategy to incidents of gender-based violence (Chiuraya, 2022). Cases of sexual violence and harassment tend to be addressed within general and wider codes of conduct within the student affairs divisions. Without a precise sexual misconduct code, evidence shows that university learners are frequently ignorant of the accurate process to report cases or how universities manage cases of gender-based violence. According to Okafor et al. (2022) this situation poses a major challenge to pursuing justice. Moreover, how universities administer matters of sexual delinquency under internal codes of conduct has also been subject to reproach. One of the most contentious matters in relation to internal investigations is that cases of sexual assault and rape cannot be probed via internal disciplinary processes before the case is legitimately reported to the police. Among most universities, there seems to be an attempt to protect themselves from legal problems and reputational harm rather than safeguarding their duty to build an innocuous atmosphere for both staff and students. This remains an unresolved concern in the context ‘*universitization*’ of higher education and enhancing of institutional image within universities.

Within the broader Zimbabwe higher education landscape, there have been incredible technological, social and cultural developments since the outbreak of Covid 19, including the use of social media (in particular, WhatsApp platform). The increase in social media and on-line learning has also witnessed an increase in gender-related violence. Karami et al. (2021) posit that the majority of victims/survivors of GBV could expect no action by their universities if they fail to report to the police. The overall consequence of this trend is that survivors of GBV become accountable for managing any possible danger posed by the suspected offender. By failing to respond well universities are leaving students potentially at risk (Makore-Rukuni, 2017). Thus, Ogunode and Ndayebom (2022) state that statistics show that victims of GBV contemplate leaving and frequently withdraw from their studies. Matavire et al (2024) posit that approximately over 9% of the victims of GBV consider withdrawing from their studies. However, there is increasing acknowledgement that universities have a duty and obligation to safeguard the wellbeing and safety

of campuses, students, staff and the community. Universities in Zimbabwe, also have a role to play in challenging male chauvinist attitudes that reinforce GBV, as sexual abuse, harassment and violence on campuses are symptomatic of the broader societal views on gender and violence.

Methodology

The study was buttressed by a feminist post-structural epistemology where knowledge is assumed as partial, relational and co-constructed (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews facilitated the collection of rich data concerning their experiences on GBV on campus. Allen (2011) posits that qualitative interviews are a well-established method for use in challenging, personal and sensitive topic such as gender-based violence.

A case study design was used because it enabled the collection of deeper and comprehensive examination of participants' lived experiences with GBV issues at the institution. The main challenges encountered on utilising the case study design were issues around transferability and generalizability of the study results. Despite the fact that universities in Zimbabwe are not homogenous, the results of this study still contribute immensely in the area of GBV as some commonalities exist among institutions of higher learning.

Respondents were enlisted through an email call circulated to female students within the school of social sciences at the selected university. Students at various levels of education who were on campus at the time of carrying out the research were included. Thirty-two respondents primarily disclosed their interest to participate in the study. These students were then provided with a summary of the study, a consent form and a respondent data sheet to sign and submit if they desired to share their experiences. The respondents were aged between 18 and 35 years old, with 25 undergraduates and 7 post-graduate students. Discussions usually lasted not more than one hour. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. All interviewees were allocated *nom-de-plume* names.

A semi structured open-ended face-to-face interview and observation were the main methods used in the gathering of data for the research. The choices for these types of data collection methods were informed by the flexibility and freedom which they offered during data collection. The data collection methods permitted the respondents to present their responses freely and also allowed the researcher to

rearticulate the questions where it was felt the participant had not understood the question. The data collection methods allowed the researcher to explore participants’ perceptions, experiences and beliefs regarding GBV at the university.

Data analysis was done through Nvivo qualitative software. Interviews were analysed using qualitative analytic techniques. Evolving themes in the data were included, developed or deleted as the data analysis unfolded. The process of data analysis included the designing of analytical links between the data and relevant theoretical concepts and existing themes discussed in the literature review.

Ethical Consideration

With sufficient knowledge of the research, participants were requested to sign the consent form by indicating on the left side of the survey if they desired to participate in the study. Owing to the sensitivity of GBV studies, precautions were considered to safeguard that respondents did not distress and suffer harm during the data collection period. Participants were given links in case they required psychotherapy services after participating in the research. The diverse types of GBV; sexual, physical, verbal/emotional and rape were adequately defined in the introductory section of the questionnaire. The respondents were informed that involvement in the research was voluntary and were free to withdraw from the research anytime without any penalties. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld.

Findings of the Study

Four distinct themes emerged from data analysis. The major themes that came out during interviews were ‘drenched in infamy’; ‘A thread entwined into everyday life; Stalked by the spectre of “real” violence; and mourning the “before self.” These themes are outlined below in detail, with references directly linked to comments from the participants.

Theme 1: ‘Drenched in infamy’

One of the key findings was the centrality of infamy in the lived experiences of female students at the institution who had experienced gender-based violence. Respondents connected the feelings of infamy with profound depth of intense demeaning transformations in self-image and undesirable affect. Shame was repeatedly felt in the aftermath of gender based violence. Infamy was coded interpretively through

a variety phrases and words which concentrated on respondents' opinions of themselves as being indignity in some way, thereby, developing negative identities and feelings. The three quotations below further exemplify the experiences of the participants after experiencing gender based violence.

When GBV happened to me, I told not even my close relative or my friend. I felt like a whore and mortified (Participant 13)

I felt desecrated. I felt like I had lost my womanhood. Like he had robbed me my identity, taken away who I am and as if I am a 'used woman'. I couldn't stare at myself in the mirror. . . I almost spend the whole day in the bathroom trying to clean the marks of his grubby hands. I am now helpless and petrified. (Participant 32)

I felt dirty and hated myself. I constantly smelt the stench of the man who abused me (Participant 2).

As these verbatim citations illustrate, the experiences of 'drenching in infamy' led the respondents to feel desecrated at the very core of their being, their personas altering into "whorish" and "dirtied" identities.

Central to these feelings of infamy was the respondents' judgment of their own liability and guilty. Several respondents narrated the circumstances where they considered themselves somewhat blameable for the gender-based violence they experienced. The participants 'vindicated' their companions' GBV by acknowledging that they denied their partners sex, engaged in irrational quarrels, declined to follow instructions, or nagged them too much. The acknowledgements reflected particular cultural contexts which are fuelling GBV within campuses.

Yes, I am a victim of gender based violence . . . If I was not drinking alcohol and if I didn't go off campus with him . . . then I'm definite I could not have been a victim of GBV. (Participant, 18)

Why did I accompany him? Why did I get into his room and sit on his bed? And, why did I take my undies off? (Participant, 12)

What kind of communication did I give the Doctor which caused him to think that this was acceptable? (Participant, 14)

Other undesirable feelings are often associated with infamy in respondents' narration of their experiences of gender-based violence. Indeed, one of the

conspicuous outcome of infamy as it was experienced by participants, as also hinted by Hirsch and Khan (2020) is that it is ensnared with emotional state such as distress and nervousness.

Despite the recurring theme on infamy in the respondents' narration of their experiences, some were able to release themselves from emotional state of infamy. Freeing victims from the feeling of infamy was linked to participants' ability to identify and accept alternative interpretations of GBV which removed the blame from them as survivors of gender based violence.

I read a lot of literature on GBV, sexual assault, feminist radicalism and decolonisation of feminism . . . I learnt that sexual violence is a tradition that we all live in, whether married or single. (Participant, 1)

The mere fact that I experienced GBV doesn't portray anything unethical about my personality. What I did should be commended and it gives me comfort. Although I could not succeed, I tried to get rid of a sex offender from our campus, and what I did was heroic. I didn't understand how influential and resilient I was until at a point resilience was the only option that remained (Participant 17).

Because the whole university is talking about it in corridors, it's in the public domain. For me it's an incident that I can tell anybody without being feeling guilty. (Participant 5)

The more female students speak out against GBV on campus, it helps me to heal. Indeed I was raped, and I'm not ashamed... By speaking out against GBV, it releases the infamy which has become part of me for so long . . . an infamy that I should have not have owned in the first place (Participant, 14).

Some of coping measures cited by the respondents included seeing counsellors from student affairs division, getting validating rejoinders from female students, engaging in advocacy work through the SRC and participating in SAYWHAT support network.

Theme 2: Gender-based violence has been 'normalised' in daily university life

Participants also highlighted that GBV has become 'normalized and accepted' within the campus and it has entwined with the daily realities of student life on campus. The respondents described GBV as an "accepted and normal" part of their daily lived experiences as female learners on campus. They reiterated the ubiquity

and high incidence of gender-based violence. Participants stated that GBV occurred all the time, to every ‘Martha, Melody, and Mercy’, and everywhere on campus. Participant 12 stated that:

I have eight close female relatives and friends, and out of the eight, seven of them had experienced GBV whilst at university campus. Internalised misogyny, toxic masculinity and patriarchal norms have increases cases of sexual gender based violence in our university campus.

Not only did the participants describe GBV as normal part of university life, but they also understood it as a predictable and common part of their normal lives as female students. The respondents noted that being a female learner meant that they would inexorably come across GBV at some point in time, either in the context of a relationship with a male student or a male member of staff.

I was tired and he was horny (Participant, 7)

Like, every female student comes across GBV in her first year at the campus. I’m not special (Participant 9).

The university administration’s responses to GBV further aided to normalize violent behaviour against female students. Participants stated that on several occasions they were nonchalantly informed about a certain doctor’s inclination towards sexually harassing female students. Participant 9 stated that:

We were advised by a counsellor in the student affairs division that the Doctor had a reputation for inappropriate relationships with female students and that he often slips out of line . . . When he makes questionable advances just let him know that he is going out of bounds (Participant 29)

However, participants showed their displeasure when the university failed to react to cases of GBV or discharged the offender’s conduct. Numerous researches refer to the masculine nature of higher education institutions as sanctuaries for “lad culture” (Lorenzo, 2019; Rothman et al., 2021; Munro-Kramer, 2024) in which such conducts were accepted. Participant 13 stated that:

The Doctor harassed a number of female students and complaints were raised against his conduct, but nothing was ever done about it (Participant 19)

Participants’ experiences of being survivors of GBV and their campus experience were more deeply entwined. This was visible in their narration of how they traversed the physical space at the campus in the aftershock of gender-based violence. Participants revealed that they shunned certain areas, changed their routines or walked with friend who sympathise with their situation. Victims of GBV felt very insecure and uncomfortable on campus. Participant 21 stated that:

When I’m walking on the campus I don’t feel safe or comfortable around fellow male students. I always change my conduct . . . When I pass them, I always walk faster.

These finding demonstrate that female students’ life-worlds on university campus are punctuated with misery during and after suffering sexual gender-based violence. This intersection of GBV and the status of being a female student were principally noticeable in the narration of a female student who took a photo of the chair she sat during the hearing and transcribed it “two hours in hell,” showing her disdain on the university’s conduct during the inquiry against her assailant. Her usage of an object to express how the hearing processes became a site of symbolic, emblematic and secondary violence reveals the transformative power of sexual gender-based violence. Even simple wooden furniture can turn out to be an emblem suffering.

Theme 3: students’ perspectives on ‘imaginary’ versus ‘real’ gender-based violence

This theme explores how female students compared their lived experiences of SV against an imaginary violence which they viewed as being more valid or “real than the violence they experienced. Participants’ these articulations drew upon a restrictive set of ideas about where, when, and how SV happens, who it happens to, and who perpetrates it. Drawing upon these ideas, participants constructed a dark, shadowed outline of a version of events which represented “real” violence, and then stated their own GBV experiences as falling short of what they deemed violence. Previous researches termed this phenomenon as “rubric of violence” (Longpre et al, 2022; Seidu et al., 2024; Tarzia et al., 2024), “rape scripts” (Worke et al., 2021; Voth-Schrag, 2022 and Seidu et al., 2024), and “rape myths” (Dengezela et al., 2024). The ideas about “actual” violence are detrimental perceptions that undermine female students’ self-belief and their agency. Some participants had this to say:

It's not like he hit me nor did anything physical (Participant, 15)

I rape is much worse than what I experienced because he was not violent (Participant 13).

In their conceptualisation of GBV, the student emphasised on “physically violence” and “sexual assault” and “victim resistance.” Participant 12 indicated that GBV is usually characterised by “fighting back” accompanied by loud shouts for assistance. Participants concurred that without this, there is need to reframe the experience as “unwanted sex,” or “bad sex” rather than “sexual assault” or “rape”: one of the participants indicated that:

I don't want to call it rape because I did not push him away too hard during penetration. I didn't really put up a big fight. He wouldn't have done it if I had put up a big fight. (Participant, 17)

Among most victims of GBV, the feelings that their experiences did not constitute “real rape” stopped them from seeking access to resources, such as health amenities, legal remedy and academic support:

Theme 4: Gender-based violence disrupt the life-world of a student

Participants gave various accounts of the impact of GBV on their personas. The researcher posed question on the impact of GBV on the person they were before the violence, and the individual they became later. Most respondents lamented the loss of their zeal to succeed in their education and their mistrust of male students and lecturers. Dropping in course grades, failing to attend lectures, and in extreme cases, withdrawing out of university were some of wide-ranging effects of GBV raised during the interviews. Although several respondents had managed to cope and heal with GBV over time, they framed the process of psychological and physical repair as creating the best out of an evil situation which they did not expect in their lives. Some of the comments stated by participants were:

I had academic challenges after the GBV incident . . . I started withdrawing from lectures . . . and now I am in the process of deferring my studies (Participant, 9).

Participants felt let down, disillusioned, frustrated and dispirited after facing gender based violence. They were compelled to opt for less ambitious life plans than what they initially wanted. Participant 3 stated that:

I lost my confidence..., I am now thinking about quitting my program. My academic career has hit a brick wall. It's heart breaking when I think about it...

All the respondents felt that something important was stolen from them and that their uniqueness and character had been irrevocably shuttered after experiencing gender-based violence. Participants recounted having a lot of challenges with trusting a male counterpart or intimacy. For one participant, even kissing affected her emotions and well-being.

Discussion

Four distinct themes discussed above elucidate more on the lived experience of female students in the aftermath of gender-based violence. The results illustrate that GBV results in deep feelings of self-blame and ignominy among the victims/survivors. Although healing and overcoming GBV is possible, it requires a supportive and compassionate environment. It also takes vast commitment towards recovery on the part of the survivor/victim. The results show that GBV pervades the female student life-world on campus and is considered to be part of experience for female students in universities and colleges. Gender-based violence can alter the university campus space as essentially insecure and nauseating.

This study shows that infamy was a dominant facet of the lived experiences of the survivors/victim at the university. Although the feeling of infamy after GBV is documented among numerous studies on GBV (Ananya, 2020; Bialistok and Wright, 2019; Benson and Thomson, 1982), this study irradiate the kind of ignominy that victims of GBV experience at various university campuses in their own words. Respondents narrated their loss of self-worth and the crippling in of a sense of “whorish” after experiencing GBV. Surprisingly, while other studies (Seidu et al., 2024; Anierobi et al., 2021; Matavire-Rukini, 2017) concentrate on victim/survivor blaming or external negative judgement as major causes of infamy, respondents in this study generally narrated their sense of infamy as self-inflicted.

Notwithstanding past epochs of research and feminist advocacy and activism, female students continue to depend upon incorrect suppositions about GBV. They unconsciously rely on false myths on GBV in order to offer a meaning-making framework around their experiences (Tarzia et al., 2024). The imageries provided by female students in this study also match those documented in other studies (Seidu et al., 2024; Rothman et al., 2021; Bondestaum and Lundqvist, 2020) where

respondents associated GBV with “unfamiliar persons, night, dark, and scuffle”. Many female students define GBV in terms of the presence/absence of violence, physical injury, fight, or even death. Even though latest studies suggest that “GBV myth acceptance” among female university students may be declining (Dengezela et al., 2024; Longpre et al., 2022; Dadvand and Cahill, 2021), it is apparent that these false beliefs remain noticeable among respondents when narrating their experiences. If most of the GBV cases are committed by an individual they know or a courting male partner, then it is probable that several female student’s experiences do not involve physical harm.

Several contemporary researches (Munro-Kramer, 2024; Okafor et al., 2022) narrate “trifling” cases of GBV that are committed on university campuses, with very few of which cause physical injury or harm. For most female students on campus, the challenge is not ineludibly that they do not see that their rights have been violated, but they always link their GBV encounters to an imaginary benchmark and find their cases mild. After experiencing GBV, most female victims/survivors accept that their experiences are “immoral,” “wicked” and “unwarranted” but they still assure themselves that they are not “bad enough,” and therefore, choose not to seek assistance or report the abuse to relevant authorities.

The results presented in this study are indicative of the long-term effects of GBV on students’ academic life. Participants revealed severe academic challenges after the GBV episodes. Although a number of studies (Malendes-Torres et al., 2024; Okafor et al., 2022; Chuma and Chazovachii, 2012) document the short-term negative effects of GBV on academic performance of female students, there is limited literature that addresses the impact of GBV on academic performance and future life goals of female students in the long-term. As illustrated in this study, female students reframe and at times demote their professional ambitions because they were disillusioned with the aftermath of GBV. Therefore, although these results are constant with the limited qualitative research on the academic and professional effect of GBV on female students, the study further magnify the knowledge base on the long term impacts of GBV on female students.

Implications of the research on theory policy and practice

The results presented in this study have implications for universities, especially in terms the programming of GBV campaigns and service provision on campus. It is

imperative that engagement work addresses the effect of self-blame and infamy and also increases responsiveness about the potential harm and unacceptability of GBV. The amplification of female students’ voices should create an enabling environment that promotes supportive conversations and openness about gender based violence. This may help to decrease cases of GBV, encourage help-seeking and promote awareness.

These results have a bearing on the university’s allocation of critical resources and funds to activities and advocacy programs that work towards amplifying the voices of female students on campus. Furthermore, based on these results, the university should take a leading role in addressing perceptions that view GBV as preordained and expected part of female students’ experience on campus. This has to be proved by implementing key actions when GBV is reported and guaranteeing that survivors are supported.

In terms of future studies, there are a number of knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. There is need for, qualitative studies with more groups of students in order to appreciate their lived experiences. Internationalisation of higher education has also witnessed student migrating from Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Namibia among many other countries. Thus, international students may be exposed to GBV more than local learners since they are away from their normal support systems. They also encounter cultural and language barriers which deter them from disclosing cases of gender-based violence. For literature review carried out for this study, no studies have included the perspectives of international students on gender-based violence in institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

The growing prevalence of gender based violence on the selected university campuses is an issue of concern to all law-abiding people in Masvingo province. It is sardonic that a substantial percentage of reported GBV incidences take place at an institution of higher learning that is expected to instil human rights values, intellectual discourses, and amicable solving of misunderstandings through civil procedures. The existence of GBV is clear symptomatic of some underlying gaps in the curricula, management and governance and institutional cultures of the university.

Effort should not be diverted towards condemning the tuition offered at the university, but rather work towards transforming curriculum so that it emphasises

the upholding of human rights and social justice. The university should act as the vanguard towards de-normalise GBV, curbing human rights violations and social injustices, and readdress social biases and stereotypes. The university spaces should be free from acts of gender based violence. Stakeholders and students at the institution should be initiated, assisted, mediated into didactic spaces and programs, which interrogates the entrenched social values and gender disparities, that on the one hand, sustain masculinity, and on the other hand, emboldens and tolerates harassment against those who are considered to be feeble. The student Affairs division should re-examine its policies in order to guarantee that all policies endeavour to reduce gender based violence. Furthermore, the security personnel on campuses should be trained to support survivors/victims in getting GBV cases reported and the offenders brought to book.

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