

# Off-Campus Admission and Girls' Vulnerability: Spaces for Immorality and Sexual Oppression

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate how the off-campus mode of university admission makes the girl-child vulnerable and creates spaces for immorality and sexual oppression. The study was conducted using questionnaires and oral interviews, both done online due to Covid-19 preventive measures. Using Gayatri Spivak's idea of "The Female Subaltern", the paper argues that admitting students on off-campus mode with little or no financial support increases girls' vulnerability to such vices as prostitution and sexual abuse by 'rich' men, who take advantage of the girls' suffering. The paper observes that this has negative effects on the girls' education and lives as they may contract sexually transmitted infections, leaving them traumatized. This development also compromises the morality of university students, who are taken as role models in society. This immoral behaviour impacts negatively on the girls' studies. The study observes that while the intentions to introduce this mode was in good faith, to ensure increased access to tertiary education, the challenges faced therein (regarding girls' welfare) go a long way in defeating this rather good intention, and it becomes a gender issue considering the vulnerability of the girl-child, as men take advantage of the compromised welfare of these girls. With these girls losing their moral well-being, they cease from being reliable citizens after graduating from the university; not mentioning the fact that their life span is reduced should they contract deadly sexually transmitted infections.

**Keywords:** off-campus, subaltern, vulnerability, gender

## INTRODUCTION

Due to shortage of bed space in most public and private universities in Malawi, authorities have introduced off-campus mode of admitting students into these universities. This mode has helped to increase access to university education amidst the growing population. However, this, seemingly good initiative, has not gone without facing challenges. According to Msiska (2016), the Malawi National Education Sector Plan for 2008 to 2017, as a part of the increasing access to education policy, was aimed at doubling enrollment into public universities. This would be done by, among other means, enrolling students on off-campus mode so that the number of students enrolled in public universities should no longer be controlled by bed space but by classroom space. Over ten years down the line, enrollment into public, as well as private universities, has greatly increased. This has gone a long way in increasing access to higher education amidst the growing population and need for higher education.

However, as Fowler (2004) notes, proper planning is needed before any educational policy is implemented. Increased enrollment means need for more classrooms, teaching and learning resources as well as human resources. If these issues are not carefully looked into, the policy would be a failure. It is pleasing, however, to note that more classrooms have been built in various public universities such as the spacious lecture theatres at Chancellor College and Mzuzu University, even though most private universities are still

struggling with infrastructure development. This paper is a discussion of the challenges off-campus girls face in both public and private universities, as revealed by students from Nkhoma University, Mzuzu University and Chancellor College (University of Malawi).

### **Off-campus admission and girls' vulnerability**

According to UNISDR (2009), vulnerability refers to the inability of a person, a community or a social system to withstand the effects of a hostile environment. More specifically, vulnerability is defined as the characteristics and circumstances of a community, system or asset that make it susceptible to the damaging effects of a hazard. Patriarchy is believed to result in the vulnerability of girl children, older women and women with disabilities (UNISDR 2009). Having this understanding in mind the study was conducted among female students at the three universities to establish how their being enrolled on off-campus worsens their vulnerability to things that can jeopardize their studies. The three universities, Mzuzu University, Nkhoma University and University of Malawi, were selected using purposive sampling because the researcher has some connection with them all: he did his first degree at Mzuzu University, he did his Master's degree at University of Malawi, and he is currently working at Nkhoma University. It was, therefore, easy for the research to identify participants from these universities.

### **Challenges faced by female students enrolled on off-campus mode**

With five respondents in each of the three universities, it was found out that the girls face similar problems ranging from insecurity to poverty and sexual harassment and abuse. The respondents reported that they stay in houses which do not have security compared to the security provided to those who find accommodation on campus. They mentioned cases of their property being stolen by thieves as they have no one to look after it when they are on campus learning and studying. They also reported that it becomes difficult for them to travel back to their off-campus residences at night as they become susceptible to vandalism by thugs as they are not that strong to stand against such ill-minded people. This is in line with UNSDR's (2009) understanding of the vulnerable; someone who fails to withstand a hostile environment. Mostly believed to be 'weak' by the patriarchal society they live in, girls suffer such attacks from men who simply take advantage of the patriarchal belief. The respondents also reported that most of the houses they use for accommodation are dilapidated and the owners of these houses seem not willing to maintain them. They mentioned issues of poor communal pit latrines which are not even well taken care of, thereby compromising the sanitation and hygiene of these girls.

On poverty, the respondents reported that the off-campus mode favours those from well-to-do families as their parents and/or guardians provide them with all the necessities. The respondents from the public universities stated that the upkeep allowance they are given by the loans board (if they are offered the loan) is not enough to cater for all their needs away from their respective homes. They reported that lecturers and other community members are making business out of this very allowance as they have built houses in the vicinity where they charge exorbitant prices, ranging from fifteen thousand and twenty-five thousand kwacha per bed per month. Since accommodation is taken the most basic need, the respondents said they end up having nothing left for their upkeep, as long as they pay for accommodation. This sees them failing to find food or at least good quality food that they would eat if they were in their homes or if the university would provide it to them. They said 'Soya Pieces' happens to be their favourite relish as they cannot even afford 'usipa' (fish).

In Gayatri Spivak's (1988) language, it can be argued that the female off-campus students in the three universities are subjected to this suffering because they are taken weak and voiceless: they are 'subalterns'. According to Carter (2006), Spivak uses the term 'subaltern' – which initially refers to those of a lower rank in military – to refer to all the lower levels of colonial and post-colonial society: the unemployed, the homeless, subsistence farmers and many other subjugated groups. Carter (2006) observes that Spivak is

especially concerned with the ‘female subaltern’ who is not allowed to express herself. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak (1988) argues that in the traditional Indian practice of burning widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands, neither the Indians nor the British colonizers allowed the women themselves to express their own views. It is against this background that this paper locates the off-campus girls in the ‘female subaltern’ group as they cannot speak for themselves; they do not have a voice and suffer in silence. They cannot speak because society does not accord them an opportunity to critique its decisions. They silently suffer in their closet. They are marginalized. Having university students eat food way below standard does not sound good. It is demeaning the status of a university students, who is the very role model of the primary and secondary school students. Since these off-campus students live in the very communities inhabited by secondary and primary school students, the suffering sends a wrong message to those aspiring for university enrollment, and at the very same time, tarnishing the overall image of university life. It is from this observation that this paper argues that while it has helped to increase access to higher education, the off-campus mode, if not well supported, is a recipe for innocent suffering on the part of the students, especially girls, who are already vulnerable.

Because of poverty, the respondents reported that some girls end up having ‘blessers’ (rich men who sleep with them in exchange of money) in order to survive. None of the respondents however confessed of indulging in such conduct but confidently said it happens with most of the off-campus girls so they can complement the meager resources they get from their guardians or from the upkeep allowance given by the Loans Board. Asked if this were a good solution to poverty, the respondents said it was not a good solution but the girls in question simply had no option other than this one. It was also reported that it was not that easy to resist the offers made by the ‘blessers’ bearing in my mind that they genuinely needed the money. However, the respondents were quick to mention that such behaviour may ruin their academic performance as well as their health. It is based on this understanding that this paper argues that while going a long way in increasing equity in access to higher education, the off-campus mode exposes the vulnerability of the girl-child by putting her in a difficult condition which forces her to accept rather autolytic solutions to their problems.

This paper observes that the seemingly good initiative puts girls at a disadvantage as they suffer double blow: being female puts them at a disadvantage in the patriarchal society, and their staying outside the university campus presents a second blow. This thinking is in line with Ogunyemi’s observation that the black woman[/girl] suffers double blow: being black and being a woman. Ogunyemi argues that by being black, one is already ‘othered’ and regarded second class and weak by the Eurocentric society, which takes everything African as inferior. As such, notes Ogunyemi, the black woman[/girl] does not only suffer from sexual inferiority but also from racial, cultural, national and economic issues for being black. In the same vein, the girl-child is already disadvantaged in the patriarchal society, and then she is exposed to more challenges through the off-campus mode: double blow. This paper argues that this is a gender issue as it increases the vulnerability of the female students, thereby compromising their potential of becoming responsible and reliable citizens. It should be noted that the effects of this exposure of girls to ‘lions’ in the communities surrounding our universities may not be seen in the short term per se but they surely have to come. This paper observes that if these girls contract some deadly sexually transmitted diseases, they may not effectively contribute to the development of the nation and their families; the very reason they are educated for.

## CONCLUSION

While it is common knowledge that access to tertiary education has been increased drastically over the past years, courtesy of the off-campus mode of admitting students, this paper has observed that the benefits of this mode may only be short-lived. This is so because the mode has exposed a number of challenges ranging from poverty to immorality. The paper observes that the girl-child is put in a tight spot of either being

morally loose of suffer with poverty. While many well-to-do people make huge sums of money from students who rent their apartments, girls suffer and die slowly in silence. The girls have revealed in this study that they are exposed to the vices of society and are left with no choice but accept the situation, while landing themselves into serious problems, which have a bearing on their precious future.

The paper observes that off-campus students lack study time as they are busy fending for themselves. They spend much of their time searching for and cooking food. Girls are the most vulnerable as ‘unreasonable’ men prey on them (girls) and expose them to such dangers as early and unwanted pregnancies as well as contraction of deadly sexually transmitted infections. The paper further observes that, while this has an effect on the girls’ future, it also stands to affect the nation largely since these girls are the future of the country’s development. The paper finds out that, while university students are role models of our kids, this role is jeopardized by their immorality, when actually, as a nation we might have contributed to this immorality. As in the words of Spivak, these students are Subalterns, they cannot speak, or perhaps their voice cannot be heard. Being Subalterns, the off-campus girls slowly suffer and die in silence.

While it is evident here that the off-campus mode has seen serious challenges that female students have landed themselves into, it should also be noted that the mode has benefits. Many Malawian youths have accessed tertiary education because enrolment is no longer limited to bed space. Having many boys and girls having access to tertiary education has a lot of benefits as education is an agent of change. Their being educated to university level means they are able to change their lives for the better. In the long run, this ensures national development. It is against this background that this paper recommends that the off-campus mode needs to be supported fully so that the challenges faced therein are minimized, while looking for a lasting solution. The paper suggests that the upkeep allowance that off-campus students are given should be adjusted upward to a reasonable amount so that the students should have no excuse to indulge in immoral practices to complement their meagre budgets. The paper further suggests that government and other stakeholders should consider building more hostels in both public and private higher learning institutions so as to address the insecurity challenge that this study has highlighted. It should be noted that the insecurity challenge knows no gender as boys also feel insecure in the structures they use as hostels when they are admitted as off-campus students.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Atanzio Ernest Kamwamba is an academic specialized in English Literature. He currently works as a lecturer in English Literature and Linguistics at Nkhoma University, Lilongwe – Malawi. He holds a Master of Arts in Literature from the University of Malawi and a Bachelor of Arts in Education from Mzuzu University. His research interests include gender studies, sexuality studies, cultural studies as well as ODeL (open, distance and e-learning).

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