

Staff to Student Sexual Misconduct: Lived Experiences of Female Undergraduate Victim-Survivors at a University in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore female undergraduate students' lived experiences of sexual misconduct perpetrated against them by male lecturers at one of the universities in Zimbabwe. The sociocultural and organizational theories of sexual misconduct informed a qualitative inquiry using an exploratory research design. To select two groups of respondents, purposive sampling was employed. One group comprised twenty female undergraduate victim-survivors. The other group comprised six university officials tasked with addressing sexual misconduct incidents. These were; a faculty dean, dean of students, two chairpersons of departments, a chaplain and deputy registrar. Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed thematically. Findings indicated that sexual misconduct experiences of victim-survivors took the forms of *quid pro quo* harassment; offensive sexual comments; touching or groping; stroking; unwanted sexual attention; and asking of intrusive questions. University officials interviewed corroborated victim-survivor accounts of sexual misconduct perpetrated by male lecturers. From the study findings, the following recommendations were proposed. There is a need for the university to establish a reporting centre where victim-survivors go to report without fear or hesitation. The university should have guidelines on research supervision and general consultations that state that these activities are to be carried out between a lecturer and a group of students. Alternatively, the activities could be done virtually. There should be mandatory training of the university community on sexual misconduct issues. Victim-survivors should be empowered to report when sexually abused. A lecturer who is proven beyond any measure of doubt to have sexually abused a student should have his appointment terminated. A sexual misconduct policy should have a clear implementation mechanism known to the university community. The university should have an environment that has zero tolerance for sexual misconduct.

Key terms: Sexual misconduct, staff–student sexual misconduct, victim-survivor, Fear, Power.

INTRODUCTION

Staff-to-student sexual misconduct is an endemic and serious public health issue globally including in universities. Many universities are not perceived as environment friendly to students especially to undergraduate girls. These institutions are characterized by sexual misconduct perpetrated on female students by male lecturers. Undergraduate female students who refuse sexual overtures of male lecturers may fail in their degree programmes; those who succumb are more likely to complete their programmes (Fedina, Holmes & Backes, 2018, Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2020). A survey conducted in Norway among university students confirms that a quarter of the students reported some form of sexual misconduct while a sixth of the students reported being subjected to sexual misconduct in one year. Female students reported more exposure to sexual misconduct than males in the survey (Silvertsen, Nielsen, Madsen, Knapstad & Hysing, 2018: 7

There is no consensus among scholars about what sexual misconduct is. This phenomenon is generally viewed as a term capturing all types of sexual violence inclusive of stalking, harassment and abuse. Silverstsen and

Nielsen (2019) view the phenomenon as unwanted sex-related behaviour viewed by victims as offensive and going beyond their ability to cope with at the same time threatening their day to day living. In the context of this study UUK (2022) gives a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon by characterizing it as behaviour of a physically or emotionally intimate or sexual nature perpetrated by a staff member. The behaviour is inappropriate or unacceptable. It is unwanted and tends to violate a student's dignity. The behaviour has a tendency to create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for a student. It is also an abuse of power over a student. Generally, the term acknowledges the harm experienced and the resilience needed to forge ahead.

Research on victim-survivor experiences of staff –to-student sexual misconduct indicates that power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim creates conditions for abusive behaviour (Bull &Page, 2021). The phenomenon is therefore understood in the context of a person who is usually male and in a position of power, harassing a person of lower status, who is usually female (Mawere & Seroto, 2022:194). Cross-cutting issues about sexual misconduct definitions as argued by Yzwrdiaga, Payne and Rabow (2016) are that the phenomenon is a result of a number of issues inclusive of surroundings, of action that is gendered, of invasion of one's privacy, of a hierarchical struggle for power, as well as a form of domination. The phenomenon takes visual, physical, verbal and non-verbal forms. Whilst most prevalent sexual misconduct is peer to peer, harassment of girls by lecturers who are male is also prevalent in universities (Adams, Mabusela & Dlamini, 2013). This phenomenon is offensive to victims, intimidates them, de-humanizes them and contributes to a hostile learning environment.

In universities, the majority of victim-survivors of sexual misconduct shun reporting these incidents to management. There is fear that reporting may result in them failing the programmes they are pursuing. They are also afraid of other negative effects like doubt, blame, and social stigmatization (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Tyson, 2019; Foster & Fullager, 2018). Although the phenomenon is rife in higher education institutions, it still remains an invisible problem given that it takes place between the perpetrator and the harassment victim.

The sexual misconduct experiences of victim-survivors should be investigated as the behaviour perpetrated by male lecturers not only violates female students' human rights, but also militates against the attainment of their educational goals. Several studies conducted so far have adopted a quantitative approach to sexual misconduct research in which surveys were conducted (Aycok, Hazari, Brew, Clancy, Hodapp & Goertzen, 2019). The quantitative studies on the phenomenon centered their studies on causes, prevalence and effects. The qualitative approach has also been used to study this phenomenon. In this study, the qualitative approach has been used to capture the voices of female undergraduate student victims as well as the views of staff to whom reports of these incidences were reported. The study explored the female undergraduate students' experiences of sexual misconduct perpetrated on them by male lecturers at a state university in Zimbabwe. The main research question for this study is: *What are the sexual misconduct experiences of undergraduate female students in a university in Zimbabwe?*

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT AT ZIMBABWEAN UNIVERSITIES

Studies on sexual misconduct have been conducted in universities in Zimbabwe. Ndawi (2006)'s study on the phenomenon confirmed that it was rife in universities. The study also revealed that these universities did not have specific ways of handling sexual misconduct but that they were deliberating on how to mitigate sexual misconduct and what structures and policies they were going to put in place to address the phenomenon. These were said to be at various levels of development. Jamela (2011) in his study on sexual misconduct in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning found that girls in universities in Zimbabwe were victims of sexual misconduct perpetrated by male lecturers. The study also revealed that the harassed were not reporting their harassment experiences to authorities as they felt that nothing would be done to the harassers in terms of disciplinary action. Dhlomo, Mugweni, Shoniwa, Maunganidze and Sodi (2012) concurred on the sexual exploitation of female students by male lecturers in Zimbabwean universities. The study also revealed that the phenomenon was tolerated as most victims took part in transactional sex with male lecturers as a way to mitigate economic challenges relating to their tuition fees as well as other financial necessities. Another study was conducted by, a non-governmental organization, Female Students Network. The study was on sexual misconduct in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that only four of the thirteen universities at the time had come up with sexual misconduct policies (Manhando, 2016). Of the respondents interviewed, ninety- eight percent of them had been

sexually harassed. Male lecturers were the major perpetrators. Widespread underreporting of sexual misconduct was noted. Whilst female students faced a plethora of challenges in these universities, the major challenge they encountered was sexual misconduct (Manhando, 2016). These studies did not engage victims of sexual misconduct perpetrated by lecturers to get their lived experiences of the phenomenon as victims. Furthermore, the studies above adopted a quantitative approach to sexual misconduct research in which surveys were conducted. These studies focused on what was causing sexual misconduct, how prevalent the phenomenon was as well as its effects. This study is therefore intended to fill this gap adopting a qualitative approach to eliciting the lived sexual misconduct experiences of undergraduate girls by their male lecturers.

The rationale for choosing this particular university was that it had a sexual misconduct policy and some universities had policies that were less than a year old and others did not have such a policy at all. Despite having such a policy in this particular university sexual misconduct incidences continued to be reported.

At the time of this study Zimbabwe did not have a national sexual misconduct policy on which institutions of higher learning could base on in responding to this harassment phenomenon. Few universities have policies that are enforceable and protective of victims of abuse and sexual harassment who are often traumatized for life (Mashininga, 2021). The availability of a sexual misconduct policy militates against incidences of the phenomenon, given the inherent power imbalance between the two and the impact of the phenomenon on the learning space. Even if policies do exist, proper implementation is essential to safeguard victims of sexual misconduct. Mashininga (2021) further points out that many sexual misconduct incidences are not reported because the victims are afraid they are also afraid of being stigmatized. They also are afraid of lack of confidentiality in the handling of such cases. Furthermore, they are skeptical of bureaucratic and unfriendly reporting and management procedures.

Researches by Thomas (2015); Spencer et al. (2017) and Prothero (2018) reveal that reasons attributed to failure to report incidences of sexual misconduct include: the belief that victim's experiences were not serious enough to warrant making a report; they did not know how or where to make a report; they thought it would be too hard to prove; they were afraid that nothing would be done or they feared being blamed by others. These are the barriers to making university environments conducive to learning for the victims of sexual misconduct. Given the reasons attributed to failure to report above, prevention of sexual misconduct becomes a mammoth task. However, Weiss and Lasky (2017) argue that if every stakeholder in the university becomes a critical player in the fight against this phenomenon, and each one of them plays their part, prevention of the occurrence of the phenomenon will be guaranteed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Sexual misconduct can be better understood from multiple perspectives. In view of that, this study was informed by socio-cultural and organizational theories.

The socio-cultural theory posits that sexual misconduct is a systemic issue grounded in the power dynamics of society, gender inequality, and cultural norms that normalize dominance. The theory examines how structural power and overlapping social disadvantage drive misconduct (Cortina & Areguin, 2021 ; Acker, 2006)). Harassment is used as a tool to maintain existing social hierarchies, especially patriarchy, where dominant groups like males exert control over less powerful females. This is often done through sexualized behaviour. The thrust of feminist socio-cultural theory is the examination of the social and political context in which the phenomenon originates and occurs. Focus of the theory is therefore on the culture and institutions that lead to sexual misconduct. The theory argues that male superiority in the form of patriarchy precipitates the occurrence of sexual misconduct. Socialization prepares the young to fit into a patriarchal society. Given this socialization, men ultimately believe that they are justified in handling women in the way they do. Conversely, women, as an inferior sex, when subjected to sexual misconduct, blame themselves for being victims (Pina, Gannon & Saunders, 2009). The theory highlights how institutional climates and socialization normalize this predatory behaviour.

Organizational theory also informs this study. The theory argues that sexual misconduct is not viewed as individual deviance but as a systemic issue driven by power imbalances, gendered structures and cultures of tolerance (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Acker, 2006). In other words, sexual misconduct is viewed as a product of

a system that is not functioning well due to the three factors pointed out above. The focus of the theory is on the inequalities that exist in institutions and organizations between men and women. Through patriarchal power, men abuse women sexually. In the context of a university, lecturers, who happen to be men, wield power over students, especially girls. The lecturer, as the student's research supervisor, can boost or deflate a female student's self-esteem through his interactions. The power that the lecturer has over the student could be abused if the lecturer, who is supposed to teach and assess the student's work, makes sexual overtures to the student.

The questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the sexual misconduct experiences of undergraduate female students perpetrated by male lecturers?
2. How have cases of sexual misconduct of undergraduate female students by male lecturers been reported to those who handle these issues?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach given that this approach is concerned with the role of interpretation focusing on the meaning of human experience. Qualitative researchers have an interest in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds as well as meaning attributed to people's experiences (Merriam, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This research approach is a way of learning about social reality (Mason, 2018). The ultimate goal of this study is to comprehend how undergraduate female students make sense of their lives and their experiences in an environment where sexual misconduct perpetrated by male lecturers occurs. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was seen to be best suited for the current study. Srivasta & Thomson (2009) point out that qualitative research has value in the sense that individuals under study's experiences can be captured despite their complexity, as long as what is studied is of interest to the researcher.

The case study was selected given its usefulness in probing feelings, context, viewpoints, and relationships in detail. The design was used to gain insight into thoughts and experiences of the participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). In this inquiry, this was first-hand information of individual undergraduate female students' experiences, feelings and perspectives of sexual misconduct corroborated by evidence from university officials on the sexual misconduct reports they received from female student victims. A qualitative research design was deemed to be appropriate in this study as it emphasized the importance of personal, subjective experiences, which can sometimes be difficult to ascertain from surveys or questionnaires alone.

Sampling

The study comprised two groups of participants. The first group had 20 undergraduate female students at a Zimbabwean state university. Their ages were between 21 and 23 years. They were in year two and year four of their undergraduate studies in a single faculty and had experienced sexual misconduct. Email invitations were sent to all female students in year two and year four in the faculty inviting them to participate in an interview if they had experienced sexual misconduct by male lecturers on campus. This purposive sampling method was preferred given that the study by its very nature was very sensitive. Furthermore, finding participants to voluntarily participate in this kind of study is not an easy task.

The second group of participants consisted of six university officials. These officials in a university environment are responsible for dealing with the issue of sexual misconduct. The participants comprise the Dean of the faculty (female) in which the female students were enrolled, two Chairpersons of Departments in this faculty (both male), the Dean of students (female), the chaplain (male) and the Deputy Registrar Human Resources (female). These officials were purposively sampled since students subjected to harassment are supposed to go to them when they are harassed.

Data gathering and analysis

Data was gathered on campus. The venues for data collection were lecture rooms and offices. These venues were convenient and ensured privacy. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents. A

digital recorder was used to capture the voices of respondents who agreed to take part in the interviews with their written permission. The issue of anonymity was taken care of. Undergraduate female students and university officials were the participants. The interviews were each about 30 minutes long. After being interviewed, the interviewees were afforded an opportunity to listen to the recording to confirm whether what had been captured was correct.

Data analysis was done through the thematic approach. The approach is a process involving reading interview transcripts emerging from interviews, identifying issues sharing similar meanings where possible employing quotations of what interviewees would have said to buttress themes emerging (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2023). A narrative approach to data analysis was adopted. The researchers obtained a deeper understanding of the complexity of this human experience through the analysis of the harassed undergraduate female students' narratives corroborated by what the officials said. The approach, with its emphasis on use of concrete examples of real facts emphasized the importance of employing concrete examples of real facts, consequently building confidence in which the narrations became the vehicles for the creation of awareness of the concrete reality (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Elo, Karriainen, Kauste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014; Flick, 2014).

Credibility on sexual misconduct research shows high credibility when focused on capturing in-depth, nuanced experiences of victim survivors particularly in universities. Credibility of the study was achieved through collection of data from undergraduate female students who had experienced sexual misconduct perpetrated by male lecturers. This was corroborated by university officials to whom reports of the behaviour were reported to. In other words, verification of what undergraduate female students had shared with the researchers was done through interviewing the university officials on sexual misconduct experiences of these victim survivors without disclosing on who said what about their experiences.

Ethical compliance

Ethical compliance in sexual misconduct research requires the researcher to adhere to ethical guidelines in order to protect victim-survivors, at the same time ensuring the integrity of research. Ethics in this study had to ensure that the victim-survivors' s dignity and safety were maintained. The study complied with ethical issues relating to adhering to ethical conduct, practicing honesty and integrity, and upholding informed consent, confidentiality and privacy with permission to conduct the study being granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

Interviewed participants had their dignity and confidentiality protected through explaining to them about the aim of the study as well as how the research results were going to be released and used. This was done before commencement of the interviews as is required when doing research involving human subjects (Punch, 2013). In seeking participants' participation, interview questions were provided to them. Written permission was obtained from all participants before the start of the interviews. Participants were assured of protection from harm, the right of privacy, informed consent, the avoidance of deception and the right to participate freely (Merriam, 2009; McCormick, 2013).

Soon after interviewing each participant, they were allowed to listen to the audio recording. This was done for interviewees to comment and check whether their views had been captured accurately. This is referred to as member checking, which has to do with trustworthiness of results and is the basis of quality qualitative research. Member checking is also referred to as participant validation. Candela (2019) refers to it as a technique for exploring the credibility of results in which data is taken back to participants to check the extent to which the data is accurate and whether the data resonates with their experiences.

RESULTS

The study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of female students subjected to sexual harassment perpetrated on them by male lecturers at a university in Zimbabwe. Qualitative analysis of student experiences of sexual misconduct by staff in this study established that the power disparity between female students and male lecturers is a strong pointer to the fact that sexual misconduct takes place in lecturer's offices.

The forms of sexual misconduct that kept on coming as both categories of respondents were interviewed were *quid pro quo*; offensive sexual comments, touching or groping, stroking, unwanted sexual attention and asking of intrusive questions. These forms of harassment emerged as the sub-themes of the study.

Quid pro quo harassment

Quid-pro-quo harassment takes place when a lecturer uses his position of authority to trade academic rewards for sexual favours with students. It is viewed as a serious form of abuse of power. In this study, this form of harassment involved male lecturers who had more power requesting sexual favours from female students who had less power. Incidences of sexual misconduct highlighted in this section of the results show the existence of quid-pro-quo harassment involving male lecturers and undergraduate female students.

A chaplain of the university pointed out that some male lecturers sexually harassed potential female students looking for places to do undergraduate programmes. The students were told that if they wanted places they would have sexual intercourse with the lecturer prior to securing places. They had sex and were given places. Later on in the semester they came to report to the chaplain that they were sexually abused. A deputy registrar of the university corroborated this incident as she pointed out that the most extreme incident she recalled involved a male staff employee who had sexual intercourse with two prospective students indicating to them that he would assist them to get places to do undergraduate programmes. It should be noted that the lecturer interacted with these potential students as part of his role. However, he violated this role by sexually harassing them at the stage of applying for admission.

In another quid-pro-quo harassment incident, a female student interviewed reported that she was asked out by a male lecturer who wanted to have a love affair with her. She refused to have such a relationship and failed the module the male lecturer was teaching. In the following semester she had to re-do the module. The male lecturer again proposed to have a love relationship with her. She said that she gave in to the demand. Victim-survivors she felt that was the only avenue to passing the module.

The dean of the faculty informed the interviewer that a female student came to her after the semester results were out. She said that her failing of examination in one of the modules was due to her refusal to be sexually abused by the lecturer who was teaching the module.

For male lecturers to propose love to female students and threaten to fail them if they refused their romantic overtures, is a clear abuse of power and office by male lecturers as pointed out by Acker (2006) and Cortina and Areguin (2021) when they point out that sexual misconduct is an abuse of power and control. Whether the failure of the module was real or imagined becomes very difficult to tell given that the female student refused the male lecturer's sex overtures. Repeating a module because a lecturer is holding them to ransom, who should be providing support and guidance, negatively affects the future career progression of female students. Moreover, this cruel sanction by a harassment predator borders on financial victimization as repeating a subject has cost implications on the part of the victimized female student.

A chairperson of a department in the faculty confirmed that sexual misconduct was taking place within the department, as he recalled an incident in which a male lecturer sexually abused a female student. The female student reported the incident to a female lecturer who proceeded to inform him. When he asked the female student to write a report on the issue, she declined and told him she was retracting the case. Fear of reporting sexual misconduct was evident in the incident above. This behaviour showed that the academic space failed to thrive in an environment of fear. Although the survivor-victim reported the sexual misconduct by a male lecturer, she ended up retracting the report.

A Dean of the faculty also told the interviewer that two female students came to his office at different times to report that they were asked to come to the male lecturers' office for research supervision between 5.30 pm and 6.30 pm. Both of them reported that they were sexually harassed. He pointed out that the office venue and the time scheduled for supervision created an atmosphere of isolation which was conducive for sexual misconduct by the male lecturer.

Sexual misconduct took place in the perpetrators' offices usually after official working hours. The implication of this is that some survivor-victims did not graduate at the scheduled time. To avert further delayed graduation, they yielded to the perpetrator's demands to visit their offices during unofficial hours to provide the services demanded of them. One-on-one research supervision in the lecturer's office provided a fertile ground for sexual misconduct by male lecturers. What emerges from these incidents of sexual misconduct is that *quid-pro-quo* harassment was rife at this institution.

Offensive sexual comments

Offensive sexual comments were another form of sexual misconduct female students experienced from their male lecturers. Offensive sexual comments are characterized by verbal harassment. The dean of the faculty was told by a female student that a male lecturer said that she looked sexy. In yet another incident, a male lecturer promised a female student a reward in the form of money in exchange for sexual relations.

In yet another incident of sexual misconduct perpetrated by a male lecturer within the realm of offensive sexual comments, a female student went to her research project supervisor to get feedback on a chapter she had submitted to him. She was told that he had no time to look at the chapter. If she wanted the chapter marked she had to come to his house, have sexual intercourse with him then her chapter would be marked.

Another female student interviewed approached a male lecturer about an assignment she felt was under-scored. The lecturer told her that the assignment could only be remarked if she went to bed with him. She refused to go to bed with him. However, she did not report the issue to higher authorities. She said she did not want to antagonize the lecturer further. She was also afraid of what would happen to her thereafter. In this instance, the male lecturer threatened to sexually abuse the female student.

The offensive sexual comments indicated above show that this behaviour is rife in the university. What should be pointed out here is that the comments do create a hostile, degrading and intimidating environment. This sexual misconduct behaviour violated student codes of conduct.

In Zimbabwean universities, undergraduate students are also expected to carry out research projects under the supervision of lecturers in order to fulfill degree programme requirements. The three instances referred to above show that male lecturers solicit sexual favours in exchange for good grades. This is sometimes referred to as 'sex for grades' or 'thigh for marks' (Mashininga, 2021). These incidents of sexual misconduct in the university happened in offices where help from third parties was not available. A clear abuse of power and office by male lecturers was evident in the above instances.

A disturbing issue is that a female undergraduate victim-survivor was adamant that a harassing lecturer should not be reported to management. This decision could be explained by the fact that the victim believed and knew that the harasser wielded the power to allow students either to graduate or not.

Touching or Groping

Touching or groping was another form of sexual misconduct perpetrated by a male lecturer on a female student as revealed by the interviewees. A female student felt uncomfortable when her male research supervisor stared at her chest. The supervisor went on to touch her waist. This made her to feel uncomfortable. This form of misconduct is about non-consensual sexual contact or physical sexual harassment. It encompasses unwelcome physical contact including unwanted hugging or kissing. It is a prohibited violation of student conduct. It is social infraction.

Another female student indicated that she went to the office of her male research supervisor to check on the outcome of her research proposal. She was informed that the proposal had passed. He congratulated and hugged her. When she tried to extricate herself from his hug he did not allow her to do so. He told her that she was very beautiful. He then kissed her. Such behaviour creates a hostile atmosphere as alluded to by Bull and Page (2021). Misconduct in this incident took place where there was an imbalance of power between the male lecturer and the student. The above behaviour showed how male lecturers viewed female students as objects in transactional sex. The lecturers used their power to request immoral things, knowing very well that a female student is not assertive

enough to report the issue. The other two students subjected to these forms of sexual misconduct did not report the incidents.

Stroking

Stroking is a form of sexual misconduct perpetrated by male lectures on female students as evidenced by what one female student shared with the interviewer. She visited her male lecturer to consult on the demands of an assignment she was researching on in his office. He sat close to her during the consultation. He stroked her hair. This was uncomfortable to her. One-on-one research supervision and assignment consultation between a male lecturer and a female student created an environment that was conducive to sexual misconduct as evident in the above incident.

Unwanted sexual attention

Unwanted sexual attention as behaviour perpetrated by male lecturers on female students in the university was experienced by female students in this institution. Unwanted sexual attention refers to unwelcome conduct which could be verbal, visual or physical and of a sexual nature (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Evidence of unwanted sexual attention was revealed by interviewees as follows. A male lecturer got a female student's number and started to send sexually suggestive WhatsApp messages to her even at odd times like midnight. She threatened to report him to higher authorities and he stopped the practice. It should be noted that the male lecturer sent sexualized messages electronically to a female student who was empowered to stand her ground and threatened to report the behaviour to higher authorities. This threat led to the lecturer to stop his sexual maneuvers.

Lecturers asking intrusive questions

Male lecturers also asked female students intrusive questions that were love-related in this institution. A female student indicated that a male lecturer asked her inappropriate questions about her sex life. This made her to feel uncomfortable. In the context of a university, asking intrusive questions about a student's private life and/or sexual history is broadly regarded as sexual misconduct.

The experience presented above portrays a male lecturer and harasser who typically is seen as having greater power and status than the female undergraduate student within the academic institution. Male lecturers occupy higher-ranking positions as opposed to victim-survivors' vulnerable positions. Male lecturers in this study have misused their legitimate power given that they can assign grades, provide mentorship, as well as influence career opportunities to demand sexual favours in the form of quid pro quo form of sexual misconduct.

Most of the harassed victim-survivors could not report the harassment to the authorities for fear of reprisal. This is in agreement with Page and Bull (2021) who indicate that staff-to-student sexual misconduct tends to have a high rate of non-disclosure as victim-survivors may be unsure if the behaviour is serious enough to report. Many of these incidents share a common thread of the experience of belittlement and marginalization by the harassers. If the victims report sexual misconduct experiences they are not knowledgeable about what happens to them. Reporting has to be done by victims as a way of reducing or ending perpetration of the phenomenon. However, victims can only report if they are assured of fair treatment when they do so (Cantalupo, 2011).

DISCUSSION

In this study, analysis of female students' experiences of sexual misconduct by male lecturers revealed that the power disparity between students and lecturers contributes significantly to sexual abuse. Interviewed university officials' data set corroborated victim-survivor accounts. The harassment mainly took place in lecturers' offices. Opportunities and situations precipitating sexual misconduct incidents included aspiring students desiring to procure university places, undergraduate female students in research supervision situations, and those seeking clarification on 'underscored' assignments. Male lecturers also proposed love to female students. Those refusing these overtures were either threatened with failure or were 'failed'. The survivor victims also felt nervous. Victims-survivors did not have the confidence to report the incidents of sexual misconduct they experienced. The survivor-victims felt impotent given that they knew there was nothing they could do to the harassing lecturers.

Evidence of sexual misconduct was corroborated by both victim-survivors and officials to whom reports on this behaviour were made.

Barriers to reporting evident in this study include lack of faith in the institution to act as well as concerns regarding confidentiality after reporting. The reasons given for not reporting in this study are similar to those given by Foster & Fullager, 2018; Tyson, 2019; Bondestam & Lundqvist 2020). These include ignorance of where to report the behaviour; being afraid of the reaction of university management; and fear of how they would be treated after reporting. Hence, Sinozich & Langton (2014) remark that what militated against reporting was that victims were afraid of reprisals. Therefore, victims remained silent or suppressed their voices against harassment. The situation was made more difficult for them to report if there was a perception that university management would not take any action about the reports.

Sexual misconduct adversely affects victim-survivors in a number of ways including emotionally, socially, physically and academically. Furthermore, they suffer mental frustration. In an environment dogged by this phenomenon students' studying is hindered and fear of failure is a possibility. In such a hostile environment some of the students succumb to the demands and yield to the threats of the harassers. It is not surprising that Pina, Gannon and Saunders (2009) observe that women are looked down upon in both academia and society, hence they are vulnerable to sexual misconduct. The survivor-victims are aware that this phenomenon is detrimental to their career prospects and ultimately their life.

What victim-survivors experienced is in sync with the feminist socio-cultural theory which proffers that the socio-political environment in which sexual misconduct takes place depends on norms, values and institutions that lead to the occurrence of the phenomenon. The type of power male lecturers wield includes the ability either to release a pass mark or to withhold it. Sexual misconduct is therefore understood as a tool that subjects female students to the male lecturer's power. Female students are therefore harassed so as to maintain the status of the superiority of men over women, as pertains within any social system, inclusive of academia.

The organizational theory also explains the issue of power and status inequalities. Bulls and Page (2021) point out that sexual misconduct in organizations largely reflects power imbalances based on gender and is part of a spectrum of disrespect and inequality that females face in organizations and in everyday life. In this study it has been revealed that male lecturers do wield a lot of power over students they teach, especially female students. The power the lecturer wields adversely impact on the student victims in a big way given that in university campuses, the reality is that lecturers determine the outcome of the student's performance. As pointed out earlier in this study. The power differentials in the lecturer student relationship militates against student victims being seen as credible complainants and this affects their academic success as pointed out by Mothibi, Verushka, Meyersfeld & Omar (2013). The student cannot say no to the relationship, in view of this if she accepts to the sexual overtures, her consent is actually coerced compliance.

Ladebo (2003) observes that lecturers who indulge in sexual misconduct are exhibiting behaviour that is at cross-purposes with their job ethic. They are failing to inculcate academic and moral knowledge to their students and therefore are a disgrace. This is evident in a situation where an undergraduate victim denies the male lecturer perpetrator a sexual favour demanded and ultimately fails the subject taught by the lecturer. The violation of job ethics and lack of professionalism exhibited by the male lecturers creates a very hostile and inhospitable environment for the victims. Hence Leiter (2016) points out that sexual victimization of female students tarnishes the image of a university. The institution is and should be viewed as a place where students learn and become masters in the disciplines they undertake. A university should assess and evaluate students on the basis of their intellect and not their sexual acceptance.

Given that lecturer to student harassment is problematic, is the student at liberty to decline the invitation to have an affair with the lecturer without risking failure? Usually, in such a situation the educational mission of the victims is compromised as confirmed by Johnson, Widnall & Benya (2018) when they say that there is likelihood of disinterest to learn, lecture absence, changing degree programmes among other negative outcomes.

Sexual misconduct obtains in the state university. The need to mitigate incidences of the phenomenon cannot be over emphasized given that such a relationship is likely to bring about conflict and create a hostile learning

environment. Students have to be free of sexual misconduct perpetrated by lecturers. The institution needs to rid itself of this infringement of human rights. A university is not only a centre of academic freedom but also a centre of freedom and safety for both students and staff.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

An open call for participants to a study presents some limitations. The female student participants self-selected to participate in the interviews. Some survivor-victims who experienced sexual misconduct did not opt to participate given that many female students are unwilling to share these experiences. The members of staff were purposively selected for interviews. This means that both categories of participants' experiences were not representative of the whole university, let alone all universities in Zimbabwe. Evidence presented in this study only reflects the lived personal experiences of survivor-victims interviewed, corroborated by university officials tasked to handle sexual misconduct incidents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommendations are pointers in the right direction if universities are to dedicate themselves to fighting the scourge and mitigate the incidences of sexual misconduct on their campuses.

Given that a university is a place of intellectual stimulation, not sexual stimulation, the institution should have an environment that has zero tolerance to sexual misconduct. Female students should be empowered to report incidents of sexual misconduct without fear. In other words, mitigating incidences of sexual misconduct should be carried out at many levels within the university. This is in sync with Weiss and Lasky (2017) who argue that if every stakeholder in the university becomes a critical player in the fight against this phenomenon, and each one of them plays their part, prevention of the occurrence of the phenomenon will be guaranteed.

Lecturers' offices, as venues for one-on-one research supervision, are fertile grounds for perpetration of sexual misconduct. In view of this, there is a need for the university to institute guidelines on research supervision and general consultations that state that these activities ought to be carried out in groups. Alternatively, they could be carried out virtually.

Undergraduate female students should form support networks where they empower each other to overcome the fear of abuse and become bold and assertive. This is in agreement with Kania and Cale (2018) who indicated that overcoming gender violence like sexual misconduct requires a widespread change in social norms that goes beyond individual change, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and overcoming the tendency to get involved or intervene only in cases where the victim is a friend. In other words, overcoming gender violence requires active intervention in all cases of sexual misconduct. Furthermore, a hotline could be set up through which these students can report incidents of sexual misconduct they will have experienced.

Whilst a sexual misconduct policy was in place in the university studied it is no guarantee for mitigating sexual misconduct in the institution. Mechanisms for enforcement of such a policy should be clear and known by the whole university community. Bull and Page (2021) note that sexual misconduct cannot be addressed solely through having an appropriate policy and practice but also requires an organizational culture that will not condone or support it. The policy has to be enforced. It has to be reviewed to prescribe severe punishment for perpetrators.

Furthermore, making lecturers and students familiar with and aware of the sexual misconduct policy could mitigate harassment incidents in the university, thereby promoting healthier and safe environments for the whole university community. This is only possible if mandatory training of the university community on sexual misconduct is instituted.

Furthermore, the need for a robust survivor-centred supporting system where there is a clear student recruiting mechanism cannot be overemphasized in an institution where potential female students are sexually abused as a precondition for admission into university.

Male lecturers should maintain professional conduct as responsible professionals. When they fail to do so, stern measures should be taken to deal with them. This being done for female undergraduate students to gain trust and

confidence in services offered by the university. Any male lecturer who is proved, beyond any measure of doubt, to have sexually harassed a female student should have his appointment terminated. This will serve as a deterrent to other potential male harassers.

Given that students are subjected to harassment by lecturers and are afraid of victimization if they report, there is need for the university to establish a reporting centre where victims could go without fear or hesitation to report. Establishing such a centre would militate against the threat of victimization.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that female undergraduate students in the university do experience different forms of sexual misconduct, the main perpetrators being male lecturers. Victim-survivors' experiences were corroborated by interviewed officials. Victims evident in this study, develop fear, characterized with feelings of embarrassment and intimidation. This tends to affect their success in academia and could make them fear competition, withdraw from degree programmes and fail to utilize available facilities and opportunities. This then puts female students in a more disadvantaged position if and when male student counterparts are not experiencing the same behaviour. Given that sexual misconduct takes place at a university is anathema. Subjecting female students to this form of abuse at the prime of their learning life has far reaching and negative implications for them. Furthermore, harassment of female students in a university is a gross violation of the fundamental human rights of female students as well as their dignity. To address sexual misconduct occurring in the university, it is imperative to institute mechanisms that will disrupt the imbalances in power obtaining between lecturers and students. This study contributes to knowledge on sexual misconduct, which falls under the body of knowledge under gender-based violence. The study is a contribution to research on this type of male chauvinism, and it is hoped that the findings as well as recommendations given will elicit appropriate action at universities and in other affected environments where sexual misconduct prevails.

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