

# Gender violence and governance in universities: The University of Zimbabwe

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## Introduction

Universities have traditionally been considered as safe places where men and women can further their pursuit for knowledge in an atmosphere of tolerance and safety. However, what is not widely understood is that universities have historically excluded women, minorities and non-conformists of different hues precisely because they are different, and *that they* are looked down upon by the majorities and those who have been mainstreamed in social systems. Many European universities were initially run by male religious orders that defined women as unacceptable and as a hindrance to men in their pursuit of the truth and of salvation. This partly explains why single celibate men were the ones who dominated the universities, particularly those in Britain. Thus, women are relatively recent entrants to universities and their entry and terms of acceptance *are problematic*, and problems continue in achievement and existence *once* they have been accepted.

Universities are also closely tied to the gender, racial and class ideologies of their stakeholders and supporters. Thus, universities have not escaped from the prejudices and bigotries of their social and economic times. In the Southern African context, universities have not historically escaped from the racism, sexism and class discrimination against blacks, women and poor people. Under racist regimes, Southern African universities have played an important role in devising and teaching racist curricula, discriminating against black, female and poor students and actively aiding and abetting racist regimes in inventing and perfecting technologies to be used in war against black populations.

In this respect, it is important to locate universities in their social contexts in order to debunk the myths that would have people believe in the neutrality of universities, or in their detachment from the dominant paradigms and ideologies of their societies. In this paper, the focus will be on gender violence and governance in universities and the University of Zimbabwe will be used by way of illustration since it is the university about which the author has more knowledge.

## The University of Zimbabwe and colonial society in historical perspective

The university started off as the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland under a Royal Charter in 1955. The dominant student body was white and male with some blacks and females included, partly to satisfy the requirements of non-racialism of some of the people who were to contribute to the financing of the university. After the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Smith regime in 1965, the university was renamed the University College of Rhodesia and later in 1971, it became the University of Rhodesia. It was only in

1980 that it became the University of Zimbabwe.

Given that colonial Zimbabwe was considered by the dominant whites as a frontier society, the dominant ideology was one of conquest and subjugation of the colonised and of those groups that were considered inferior. The gender politics of colonial Zimbabwe were characterised by a white *male-dominated* ethos which privileged white males over other groups and privileged white women over all black people. Therefore, white women were protected from the cruder aspects of male white dominance by their whiteness, but the subordination of white women to white men was evident in the university through the small numbers of white women enrolled in comparison to white men.

White women were considered the guardians of white morality and civilisation in the colonies and as such were expected to police the frontiers of the white nation by behaving properly and eschewing any behaviour that could constitute breaches of the frontiers of the race. The most pronounced prohibition on white women was that relating to sexual relations with black men, which was perceived as threatening the white nation. Fraternising with black men was one of the behaviours that was sure to stigmatise any white woman in colonial Zimbabwe. Thus, 'proper' white women concerned themselves with reproducing the nation socially and biologically and were not expected to overly concern themselves with activities that could jeopardise their domestic and maternal mission. The few women at the university were usually women from liberal, middle class backgrounds whose upbringing allowed them to go beyond the conventional contours of proper womanhood in colonial Zimbabwe. In the university, there were very few women on the academic staff. Most of the white women were secretaries, typists and service personnel in the halls of residence and library.

Black men and women on campus were predominantly cleaners and other categories of manual workers. They outnumbered the black male and female students during the early years of the university. In fact, so pronounced was the racial and class divide that the first black woman student, Sarah Chavunduka, was assigned to stay in a corridor in the women's residence on her own because the white women students would not agree to share a bathroom and other corridor facilities with her. This is the type of racial and gender violence that was visited on this black female student, in what Gelfand has characterised as a 'non-racial island of learning'. It would probably have been preferable to assign her to a male hall of residence where she could at least have had black males as co-residents!

Most of the female students were not at the forefront of university activities except amongst the white liberal groups which tolerated white female political involvement. Amongst the black women students, activism was not very pronounced. In general, it were the women from relatively privileged black families and a few bright black female students from missionary secondary schools who made it through sixth form into university. Their backgrounds were also quite conservative and given the emphasis on respectability and proper behaviour for black women, it was not surprising that most of the black women who came to university were relatively conservative. Shona and Ndebele cultures are patrilineal and women are considered as subordinate to men. The ideal Shona and Ndebele women are

self-effacing, restrained in their public behaviours, family-oriented and caring for their menfolk. Women are not expected to aspire to the same high professional and occupational statuses as men.

Amongst those families that did send their daughters to university, it was expected that the women's education would not make the black women aggressive, unruly and insubordinate to men. Thus, there are some common expectations which were placed on black and white female students by their respective communities. Black women, like their white counterparts, were expected to be the guardians of their nations' cultures. For the blacks, there was an additional incentive to push onto black women this custodian role, because as conquered and subjugated peoples, the frontiers of black culture and community had already been breached and the women were the last line of defence against conquest. Given that colonialism mobilised and moved men into towns, farms and households as wage labour more than it moved black women, the women were perceived as less contaminated by contact with white colonial culture. Therefore, the black men felt that they had to protect their women even if this protection was effected through the culturally accepted institutions of control over women. These institutions were the family, marriage and the community. At the university, the black women were subject to the behavioral restrictions placed on women generally although on campus, the black men and women students were not averse to bending the cultural and behavioral codes which subordinated both young men and women to elders in the black communities.

With respect to sexuality, it is clear that most young men and women were irked by the prohibitions on premarital sex among white and black communities. In fact, in the sixties and early seventies, most of the young men and women who were at university enjoyed going away from home and staying in Harare in the university residences or in digs precisely because this gave them opportunities for sexual experimentation which were normally curtailed in many black and white homes. The popularisation of the pill as a contraceptive technology at the time when the hippy era was beginning also accelerated the recomposition of the content, forms and consequences of sexual experimentation on the campus.

Prior to the availability of reliable and safe contraception, any sexual activity that led to pregnancy compromised the heterosexual couple involved and they were compelled to get married or to procure an abortion for the woman. Given the fact that abortion was and is still criminalised in most circumstances except when there is a threat to life, it was a risky choice to make. However, the degree of risk differed by race, class and gender. Women of all races risked their lives in the process of procuring abortions, usually outside hospital environments. For the black women, there was the additional risk that they could not go to white doctors because the white doctors were likely to report a black woman trying to procure an abortion to the police. Black doctors were few in number and they also risked harsher punishment than white doctors if caught, because of the racism that pervaded the society in general and the

medical profession in particular. Thus, most of the black women needing abortions were likely to resort to herbal remedies and other crude and more dangerous forms of terminating unwanted pregnancies. White middle class women could procure abortions if they were able to pay the relatively high sums which some white doctors demanded for performing clandestine abortions. Thus, gender violence was experienced differently by the white and black women if unscheduled pregnancies occurred and abortions became necessary.

For the men, the risks that they took lay in being accessories to criminal acts and even then, most women protected their male partners by refusing to name them. In the worst scenarios for the men, they were compelled to get married to the pregnant women, sometimes against their intentions. In the event of the men refusing to marry the women, the women suffered further violation as rejected partners in a relatively small community. In the sixties and early seventies, it was only infrequently that the men refused to marry their pregnant partners. It was considered bad form to desert a pregnant partner. At worst, the marriage would take place and later deteriorate or disintegrate after both parties had left university. This way, the women would at least be spared the social humiliation that accompanied rejection while they were on campus until they had started earning a living and fending for themselves with family support outside the university. The women's families were also spared the stigma of having an unmarried, pregnant daughter since such daughters brought shame and dishonour on their families. Given the high financial and social investment that went into sending a daughter to university, usually against prevailing social and cultural opinion, an unmarried pregnant daughter humiliated and dishonoured her family. Thus, the absence of reliable contraception tended to discourage sexuality without responsibility for both men and women students on campus. Most couples knew that unscheduled marriage was a likely consequence of sexual activity which culminated in pregnancy. This, in turn, protected women from gender violence and possible death attendant on the process of procuring an illegal abortion or rejection by a partner in the event of pregnancy.

### **The seventies and the availability of relatively safe and reliable contraception for women**

The availability of relatively safe and reliable contraception in the seventies in Zimbabwe effectively altered the gender politics between men and women students on the campus. While in the past, an unscheduled pregnancy could be considered a calamity with social consequences for both men and women students, *this changed* after the pill became available. In the context of a patriarchal society where men tended to dominate campus life both as students and as lecturers and administrators, the individual woman who got pregnant, despite the availability of the pill through the student health service doctor, was increasingly perceived to be stupid, cunning or just plain irresponsible. Unscheduled pregnancy came to be viewed as an act of volition on the part of the woman who desired to 'snare' the man concerned into marriage. By the mid-seventies, it was possible to find couples on campus

who had broken up because the men had refused to accept responsibility for their roles in causing the pregnancies of their girlfriends.

Thus, while the pill reduced the risks related to sex outside marriage, it also made it difficult for the women to resist or refuse to have sex with men for fear of pregnancy. Both male and female students were emancipated from the anxieties related to sex outside marriage, and the women students were also able to enjoy more sex without the risks related to pregnancy. However, the women students were still not able to flaunt their emancipation and enjoyment because of the social expectations which demand that women be chaste before marriage. In the event of contraceptive failure, the women had less social sympathy and support within the male student community since men and women's conceptions of sex and marriage were being changed by the pill and its availability. Thus, unscheduled pregnancies increasingly became more of a problem for women than for men especially amongst the black students, where most women and their families resorted to suing for seduction damages which did not go a long way towards materially supporting the children born in these unions. Thus, efficient contraception altered the balance of power in student heterosexual relationships and increased the probability of pregnant women experiencing psychological violence and social humiliation when their boyfriends *abandoned* them.

However, student on student physical violence occurred most frequently in the context of racial encounters and drunken brawls in the students' union amongst male students. In the late seventies, male white students who had been called up to serve in the army were the ones who were more likely to be involved in confrontations with black male students in the halls of residence and the union building. However, there was some indirect violence that was generated by the white and black male students towards both black and white women students in the female hall of residence. This took the form of mocking, panty raids, mockery and commenting on the physical attributes of female students as they passed outside the biggest male hall of residence at teatime in the afternoons. Other activities which were calculated to humiliate female students especially during Rag and orientation time also tended to be sexist and sometimes, racist. This was the social situation within which physical and non-physical violence took place at the University of Zimbabwe.

In the academic area, there was a dominance of white males over all other social groups in the university. Black students felt uneasy because of the overt and covert racism in many departments. Thus, most of the black students tried not to cause undue hardship for themselves by keeping a low profile in class and refraining from antagonising known racist academic staff. To some extent, this bonded black students socially on the campus and helped to control the levels of gender violence of all sorts between black males and females. However, the university remained a very male-*dominated* institution in ways that alienated most white and black female students and staff since *women* were a distinct minority amongst all racial groups as far as staffing and student numbers were concerned.

**Social structure, gender and violence in the university after independence**

and how this power can be used and abused in the context of gender violence, which is sexualized and presented as acceptable or tolerable exercise of sexuality. Given the general asymmetry in the power relationships between men and women in Zimbabwe, this issue is thorny and it is not well received by male academics in discussion at the university.

Amongst students, the politics of sexuality and reproduction have also changed since the late seventies. A lot of women students suffer psychological violence as a result of their stay in the university where male student power is so overtly expressed, tolerated and acknowledged. In its sexualized form, this violence takes the form of forced sex, prohibition of contraception and infection with venereal disease. Mhiribidi (1992) has chronicled the plight of final year women students who get pregnant while at university. Some of these women students are abandoned by their partners and they have to fend for themselves and their babies amidst social condemnation by their parents and humiliation within the university community after they have been rejected.

Mhiribidi contends that making a girlfriend pregnant is sometimes a deliberate move by a male student if he wants to insure the fidelity of the girlfriend. Pregnancy 'brands' a woman within the university community so that other males desist from proposing to her since she will be viewed as the woman of a particular male student. Some male students who complete their studies before their girlfriends do may also choose to 'brand' their girlfriends through pregnancy as a way of ensuring that those girlfriends remain tied to them in their absence on the expectation of eventual marriage. It is also true that some women students 'gamble' by getting pregnant as a way of pushing men into marriage but if the men refuse to be coerced into marriage, the women may sometimes resort to unsafe and illegal abortions as a way of dealing with the problem. Thus, the women may be exposed to danger and possible death or infertility through the violence to their bodies that they are exposed to in the process of procuring illegal, and sometimes unsafe abortions in Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

The university still does not have a policy of affirmative action for women in any area in the university. This perpetuates the current situation whereby women as academics and high level administrators are conspicuous by their absence in the university. In the academic ranks, women comprised 2,2 % of the staff in the ranks of senior lecturer and above. Thus, in some departments, students never get taught by women at all and in those *departments where there are* women, the students see these women as teaching assistants and at best, lecturers in the lower grades.

This also creates a climate within which male students continue to feel that women do not belong in the university as students and staff. The male students therefore feel that they can treat the women disrespectfully without fear of any type of penalty. The women students also continue to feel disempowered and apologetic for their presence in the university because

the university policies covertly signal that the comfort of women on campus is not a priority.

A study by Gaidzanwa et al. (1989) demonstrated that about 64% of the male students, 55% of the female students, 46% of the male staff and 28% of the female academic staff thought that women's primary responsibility should be their work in their homes. To date, university policy and practice implicitly endorses this view. The stagnation of the proportion of women students at 24% of the student body for the last decade and the peaking of the proportion of female staff at about 21% of the staff has not been perceived as part of the problem which contributes to and sustains the gender violence that has existed on campus. Until there has been a radical change in this situation, very little will change in the levels and manifestations of gender violence in the university.

The activities of the women's groups such as the Women's Studies Association, the women's studies courses and the activism amongst a small core of women staff and students are commendable, given that they have been operated within a gender climate which is at best indifferent, and at worst hostile to the concerns of women on campus. It is therefore up to the women, particularly the students, to push the university community into recognising and dealing with gender violence in a more structured and thoroughgoing manner than has hitherto been the case. Given that Zimbabwe tends to be a male-dominated society, it is necessary to recognise that this type of society will continue to influence the gender relationships that prevail. However, the university has set itself up as a centre of excellence and a trendsetter for progressive change. It is therefore incumbent on the university to live up to its stated mission and to lead social change in the society so that healthier and more sustainable gender relations can evolve on and off the campus.

This is an updated version of a paper presented by Rudo B. Gaidzanwa, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe, at the Southern Africa Days, Utrecht University from 1st to 3rd December, 1993.

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