

# Speaking for Ourselves

Masculinities and Femininities Amongst  
Students at the University of Zimbabwe



Edited by Rudo B. Gaidzanwa

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

© University of Zimbabwe Affirmative Action Project  
Gender Studies Association  
Ford Foundation, 2001

Published in 2001 by  
University of Zimbabwe Affirmative Action Project  
Gender Studies Association  
Ford Foundation

ISBN 0-7974-2385-0

*The views expressed in these chapters reflect those of the authors. They do not reflect the views of the University of Zimbabwe or the Ford Foundation.*

Typeset by Dick Masala, University of Zimbabwe Publications

# Contents

List of Contributors .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
Masculinities and Femininities: An Introduction .....	1
<i>Rudo B. Gaidzanwa</i>	
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
Producing Men and Women: Gender Stereotyping in Secondary Schooling in Zimbabwe .....	10
<i>Nyasha Kajawu</i>	
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
Making Student Men at the University of Zimbabwe: Politics, Masculinity and Democracy .....	29
<i>Allen Gore</i>	
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
Masculinities and Resident Male Students at the University of Zimbabwe: Gender and Democracy Issues .....	48
<i>Tapiwa Chagonda</i>	
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
Femininities amongst Resident Female Students at the University of Zimbabwe .....	62
<i>Sitheni Ndlovu</i>	
<b>CHAPTER SIX</b>	
Female non-resident students: Femininities under stress .....	77
<i>Precious Somerai</i>	
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN</b>	
The Affirmative Action Policy in Student Admissions at the University of Zimbabwe .....	93
<i>Irvine Chivaura</i>	
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT</b>	
Masculinities and Femininities at the University of Zimbabwe: Student perspectives and Responses through the Affirmative Action Project .....	111
<i>Rudo Gaidzanwa</i>	

# List of contributors

**SITHENI NDLOVU** is a third year undergraduate student of linguistics at the University of Zimbabwe. She undertook the research for her chapter volume while she was in her second year of study.

# Acknowledgements

The Ford Foundation funded the research and publication of this volume. I would like to thank the Foundation for their faith in the Affirmative Action Project and the Gender Studies Association. This funding facilitated the research and publication and hosting of the regional conference on Gender Equity, Human Rights and Democracy in Harare in August, 2 000 and the National Conference on Human Rights and Democracy in Institutions of Higher Education in Zimbabwe in December, 2 000. Several gender workshops with different sections of the University of Zimbabwe staff and students were held with the aid of the Ford Grant. This grant has helped push forward the struggle for the rights of different sections of the university community under very difficult circumstances.

# Femininities Amongst Resident Female Students at the University of Zimbabwe

SITHENI V. NDLOVU

## Introduction

Institutions of higher education are described as places where there is pursuit of educational knowledge. A serene and open atmosphere that is conducive to the pursuit of knowledge is supposed to prevail in such institutions. Gender equity, respect for human rights and democracy are supposed to be cherished and universities, in the public imagination, conjure positive experiences that are part of student life. In universities, scholars are expected to exchange ideas freely in pursuit of the truth. Debate and exchange of ideas at universities are supposed to connect people of all classes in society and make life comprehensible for the inhabitants of these institutions.

This chapter is a result of research that was carried out at University of Zimbabwe, based on resident female students' responses to questions and discussions on gender equity, democracy and human rights. This research indicates that the institutions of higher learning are not always the places of tranquillity, rational debate and free exchange of ideas as portrayed by the gatekeepers of the images of these institutions. The University of Zimbabwe is complex as it embodies different kinds of discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion and class.

The voices and experiences of resident female students have been highlighted to analyse and explain their navigation of the university system and Zimbabwean society as a whole. The extent of gender equity, democracy and human rights at the University of Zimbabwe is discussed, largely based on female students' responses to questions and discussions with the writer of this chapter. Also highlighted is their understanding of the deteriorating economic environment in Zimbabwe, which, according to them, is the major reason for a lot of hardships that student women have had to deal with in their lives. They partly attribute the erosion of gender equity, democracy and human rights at the university to the troubled economic environment in Zimbabwe. The research largely dwells on issues of accommodation, student politics and other problems that are experienced by female students who have varying class, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The women's experiences are juxtaposed to those of their male counterparts.

Mixed feelings have been evoked about gender equality, democracy and human rights in societies inhabited by men and women. The struggles by women to attain equality with men in many societies have not always been well received by their

male counterparts. In many cultures, men have culturally marginalized women and women fight against their subordination and for the respect of their human rights. This chapter aims to discuss this issue with particular emphasis on the problems faced by resident female students at the University of Zimbabwe. The views of different scholars on gender highlighted as they examine and explain gender, democracy and human rights from the perspectives of men and women.

In institutions of higher learning, it is assumed that the students and staff are mature people who are capable of understanding and extending the concepts of gender equity, democracy and respect for human rights to serve the interests of both sexes. However, the research on which this chapter is based shows that there is instability in institutions of higher learning as males continue to safeguard their privileged position in the university community. Women, on the other hand, struggle, sometimes unsuccessfully for equal opportunities and access to facilities university facilities such as the cafeterias, the sports facilities, the library and other common services.

Gaidzanwa (1993) sheds light on student women's marginalization by men in institutions of higher learning:

Universities have traditionally been considered as safe places where men and women can further their pursuit for knowledge in an atmosphere of tolerance and tranquillity. However what is not widely understood is that universities have excluded women, minorities and non-conformists of different lines precisely because they are different and that the majorities and those who have been mainstreamed look down upon them in social systems.

This quotation explains that in institutions of higher learning, there is no automatic realization of gender equality, democracy and human rights. Realization of the gender equality, democracy and the observance of the human rights of all, presupposes the implementation of measures of fairness and principles of justice to supplement the law. (Cosgrove, 2000).

Cosgrove (2000) states that 'gender' is a social construction and that the focus of institutions should be to identify the complex and subtle ways in which gender is produced. She argues that gender discrimination and inequality has been made to seem natural and the practices that produce gender are rendered invisible, leaving people with the conviction that they have freely chosen who they are and that their choices express peoples' inner selves.

The struggles by men to maintain their dominant positions in Zimbabwe have been threatened by the prevailing macro-economic situation in Zimbabwe. Some men can no longer afford to fend for their families so they are no longer confident in their masculinity and they are forced by retrenchments to stay at home and help with domestic chores. The Musasa Project in Zimbabwe has found that in some cases, men in such positions perceive their masculinity to be threatened thus they resort to violence at home because of frustration. Women thus become victims of such unfortunate situations, where there is conflict as traditional femininities in

which women are supposed to be supported by men, erode, and masculinities in which men support women are no longer easy to reproduce.

The current economic situation in Zimbabwe has played a role in shaping the misery prevailing in many sections of Zimbabwean society. The implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991, resulted in many people in the working class being retrenched, thus making their living conditions poorer and straining relations between husbands, wives and children. Sachikonye (1996) argues that many families in Zimbabwe have become poorer with women and children being affected the most since they are culturally and economically dependent on men.

Cliff (1993) examining the effects of the restructuring of economies, particularly the relationships between husbands and wives, notes:

Feminist sociologists have rightly been sceptical of some of the grander claims by researchers, to have found increasing male involvement in the sphere of domestic work, arguing that often men take the elements which women find most satisfying such as childcare and the more interesting and prestigious aspects of cookery, leaving women still washing floors and cleaning lavatories.

This statement by Cliff suggests that men often choose the easier and more fulfilling work to perform, leaving women without much choice. Typical examples in institutions of higher education are the monopoly over politics by male students. Such social arrangements facilitate the harassment of females by the male students, forcing the women students to be silent about such abuses. Holland *et al* (1992), observe that such instances can result in pressures on young women to engage in sexual practices, which are risky, violent or not pleasurable. They state that women's control over sexual safety is undermined by the dominance of male sexuality. Women's empowerment in such situations is quite difficult to specify as divisions between of class, race, ethnicity, culture and religion amongst the women complicate it. Holland *et al* imply that equality between men and women in any given society could be thwarted by the fact that women are themselves divided.

An analysis of politics in many countries shows that women are generally held to participate less frequently, less forcefully and less readily than men, (Siltanen and Stanworth 1984). The political sphere is gender-biased. Men feel that women should be on the periphery of political engagement. Where women's participation in politics is acknowledged, it is commonly held to be less sophisticated and, in many cases, less authentically political, than the involvements of men.

Gaidzanwa (1985) and Coombe (1991) highlight their concerns on the issue of democracy in institutions of higher learning. Gaidzanwa points out that:

Women have generally been underrepresented in universities and society in general ... women have a major stake in encouraging and struggling for a more just order.

She further notes that in Zimbabwe, educated and urban women have a negative image in society and that this de-legitimises women's struggles for fundamental rights and freedoms such as the right to education, jobs, health and other services in society. Given such a context, Coombe (1991) notes that:

... students of African universities have for generations accepted a self-appointed mission to speak out on national issues or behalf of their parents and the suffering masses of their countries.

He states that this is however thwarted by the fact that students' views, particularly those of female students have been suppressed from time to time. Thus

".... it is not clear whether there is observance of democratic norms in such institutions of higher learning".

Osborne's (1995), writing on Canadian universities, supports the statement by Gaidzanwa (1985) that women in universities

"...have generally been underrepresented".

She states that in such environments,

"... violence is likely to be part of most women's experiences of university education and exists in various forms".

It is in the context of such climates that the students in tertiary institutions are undergoing education. The effects of the economic depression in Zimbabwe on them and the gender imbalances in institutions of higher learning are the major subjects of this chapter.

Responses by resident female students at the University of Zimbabwe have been explored as female students feel that the poor economic environment has generated difficulties for them and these difficulties and students' responses to them, prompt the society to paint them negatively. Their responses indicate some of the reasons why they resort to multiple dating and prostitution, to alleviate economic hardships.

## **Government fee policies and coping strategies of female resident students**

The government implemented the 50% fees policy in 1997, whereby the government and the student contribute equally towards the studies of the student at the university. There was also a 31% budgetary cut to the university from government, which resulted in the reduction in services subsidies and facilitated the privatisation of the catering services. To alleviate the effects of such harsh economic measures, some resident female students engage in diverse economic activities, to supplement their incomes. Close observations also showed that some resident female students have resorted to taking part time jobs, while some opt to sub-let their rooms in residences to desperate non-resident female students, particularly second year students whose priority in residence allocation is very low. These issues will be dealt with at length later in this chapter.

Some of the coping strategies by resident students have a negative impact on their academic performance and their health. Furthermore, female students residing on the campus have fallen victim to violence and harassment by their male counterparts. This is particularly noticeable in student politics and relationships between female students and male students. Sometimes the female students are

caught in a dilemma, where they have to consent to sexual relationships with lecturers in return for 'handsome' marks in class. This raises the question of psychological and social safety of female students in the teaching and learning environment, when the economic climate is also a threat. It also undermines gender equity, democracy and the human rights of female students in such institutions.

The research for this chapter was conducted between June and November 2000. The figures stated here are relevant for that period. The university calendar of 1999 was used to ascertain the figures relating to student accommodation and enrolment. According to the calendar, the University of Zimbabwe can accommodate 4041 students of the total enrolment of 9 575. The accommodation officer stated that of the total number of students in residence, 30% are female students while 70% are male students.

In carrying out this research, interviews, group discussions, observations and informal conversations were the most effective and useful methods of generating information. The use of questionnaires was abandoned primarily because the researcher received threats from other students, particularly male students, who felt that the research was out to betray the goings on the campus. As a result the questionnaires were never circulated for fear of victimisation. Interviews, group discussion, informal conversations and close observations were the most effective data collection methods because they involved direct dialogue with the sources of information.

A total of 56 students were interviewed. This figure includes those who were involved in group discussions such as peer educators' meetings and informal conversations. Seventy percent of those respondents were female students residing on campus, 15% were female students who were once in residence and are now off campus students in their second years of study. Ten percent were male students whose information was used to ascertain claims by their female counterparts about issues such as sexual harassment. The other 5% consists of male lecturers who were interviewed in connection with student-lecturer relationships.

Interviews with female students residing on campus were characterised by careful choice of respondents on the basis of ethnicity, religion, class and academic discipline. This was done to cover and accommodate all types of resident female students. However stratification of respondents on the basis of age was not necessary because evidence and close observation showed that problems faced by resident female students were common to all age groups within the institution.

Additional information was acquired from press articles involving University of Zimbabwe students. Published academic and scholarly views were used to theorise the interests and concerns of female students on campus.

## **Femininities of resident female students and their coping strategies**

A close observation of campus life reveals that there is economic desperation among students as a result of ESAP. Students have tried to address their economic problems by staging demonstrations to show their disapproval of national economic policy.

Instead of redressing the situation, demonstrations by students have done nothing but create a gap between them and the university authorities as the demonstrations are usually violent. Female students are forced by the male students to join in the demonstrations, usually against their will. Female students are afraid of falling victim to the merciless baton-sticks and teargas from the riot police and the aggression of the rowdy element amongst the male students. A typical case is that recorded in the May 1999 issue of Horizon magazine. In the article entitled 'A clash at the UZ', university students are reported to have gone on a food riot, a result of the government's refusal to increase students' loans and grants. This incensed the students who complained that they could not survive given the meagre payouts, the soaring cost of supplies and poor access to expensive food and related facilities. Students condemned the privatisation of the catering services, which resulted in food prices escalating. They demanded that there be an increase in payout to match the cost of living in Zimbabwe. In 2 001, again, male students went on the warpath, attacking male visitors on campus. They accused the males from outside, of consorting with female students, whom the male students considered their 'property'.

There was a 100% increase in the food allowances in May 2 000. Students were given \$80 a day as food allowance. However, resident students still think that it does not make any difference as the food prices go up very regularly. In particular, female students resident on campus complained that their payout was inadequate and did not meet all their needs on campus. The general budget and expenditure of a resident student is laid out later in this chapter.

The sum of money the students receive as payout varies according to the degree programme a student is registered for. For example, a Bachelor of Arts (General) student receives a sum of \$12 800 per semester. The following is a general list of expenses incurred by a student. Other expenses outside the list vary depending on individual priorities.

#### Resident student

Expenditure	Expenses
(i) Food	Z\$8 400 for 15 weeks (given the allowance of Z\$80 a day)
(ii) Transport (to and from town)	Z\$600 for 15 weeks (for someone who goes shopping in town once a week)
(iii) Stationery	Approximately \$3000 (buying and photocopying of texts)
(iv) Everyday needs (toiletries and transport to and from home during holidays and semester breaks emergencies)	approximately Z\$2000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>Z\$14 000.00</b>

**NB:** The quoted figures are as of October 2000.

The above budget does not stretch to meet expenditures such as transport to and from home. Transport to Bulawayo costs \$1 600 by public transport and a student cannot afford to go home during breaks or public holidays. Many students whose homes are in rural areas or in outlying towns such as Victoria Falls pay even more than those who come from the major cities. Most female students who were interviewed pointed out that they came from poor families who can hardly afford to provide them with transport funds and extra cash for pocket money. A student who comes from a poor family thus has difficulties especially if they have to share their payout with parents and siblings. Some students' parents have died of AIDS and such students and their siblings have sometimes been neglected by their relatives. Such students have no option but to provide for their siblings alongside their own needs. Such unfortunate instances affect female students more than males because societal pressures force them to assist and take care of other family members when their parents die.

One resident female student in her first year of Business Studies, described how she has to budget about \$3 000 from her pay-out for bus fare to and from Victoria Falls, as her parents can hardly make ends meet. The total expenses of such students are larger than the students' payout. This problem is evident amongst all students, particularly those from poor backgrounds. Only students from financially stable families can afford to include luxuries in their budgets.

Commercialised sex among resident female students in such a context becomes another option for some students who believe that it is one of the easiest means of acquiring money, although the problem of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases cannot be ignored. Food prices in the dining halls are high, prompting some female students to skip meals or engage in commercial sex to make ends meet. A plate of sadza, the national staple, and stew costs \$50, so very few students can afford to eat more than one hot meal per day. As at June 1997, food prices such as those for sadza and stew, ranged from \$6.50 to \$7.50 a portion and a student could afford to have three meals a day. The catering services were not privatised then. Food subsidies have long since been discontinued or have been dramatically reduced, so that even a 'wise budget' by a student is not very helpful as very few students will still have money a month after receiving their pay-out.

"How is a student supposed to cope in this millennium?"

asked one resident female student in the third year of her BSc degree.

Observations and direct responses from students indicate that resident female students resort to prostitution, indoor vending, sharing their rooms with 'squatters', particularly desperate second year students, for a negotiable fee. These strategies are adopted to supplement the meagre payouts of the students. The coping strategies adopted by individual resident female students depend primarily on their religion and class, rarely on ethnicity.

Those female students who are from poor backgrounds usually take the option of selling little goodies like chocolates, sweets, *maputi* (popcorn) and other snacks, in

their rooms, at a profit. Such students may be too proud and/or unwilling to get involved in relationships with financially stable boyfriends who are usually 'sugar daddies' (older men of means). Such women's femininities lead them to eschew the inferiority and disempowerment inherent in a relationship where they have to be financially dependent on their partners. In some cases, some resident female students reported resorting to the strategy of vending because they felt they were too smart to be involved in a relationship with a man simply for money.

Some middle class female students who are involved in commercial sex do so, not because they are poor, but so that they can improve their access to luxuries, such as mobile phones, which their parents would not consider necessary to provide. Such students engage in multiple relationships so they can keep up images of expensive femininity based on conspicuous consumption, glamorous clothes, hairstyles and accessories. They usually establish relationships with 'sugar daddies' who provide them with funds for luxuries, groceries, stationery and other goods.

One resident female student in her final year of Political Studies remarked that sometimes it is the economic situation that forces female students to engage in prostitution. Since many resident female students stay far away from home, there is no one to tell them how to run their lives. The different men they have relationships with usually drive flashy cars to pick up the student women and take them to hotels where they can have the privacy they desire. A spokesperson of Harare Lodges was quoted in the Sunday Mail of 17th September 2000, stating that their business booms when the university ladies are back from holidays because these ladies are taken to lodges by 'sugar daddies'. The interviews with students indicate that such students opt to be taken out of campus because their accommodation on the campus does not facilitate commercial sex. The rooms on campus are usually shared by at least two students in the older halls of residence. In the new residences, the room partitions do not go all the way to the ceiling so privacy is not assured for the purposes of sexual intercourse.

About 81% of the resident female students interviewed, said they would rather survive on the meagre payouts if they could not secure part time jobs. They said they were not willing to risk infection with HIV/AIDS if they indulged in commercial sex for money with their partners. Most of these were devout Christian students who even argued that it was immoral to establish relationships for money. Some of these students argued that it was about time women showed men that they are not sex objects but human beings who deserve recognition in society.

The issue of commercial sex cuts across sex lines. A surprising finding of the study was the existence of homosexual prostitution amongst male students. These relationships usually involve poor male students who sell sexual services to more affluent male students. Some poor male students who enjoy their alcohol are said to be party to such clandestine arrangements whereby they were supplied by more affluent male students and staff with bottled beer for sex. A male student who requested anonymity described one such case. This male prostitution was muted and not spoken about very freely because it threatens to 'feminise' those male students who are so poor that they also adopt the strategies for income generation, which have historically been associated with women.

Some of the female resident students tried to balance their budgets by cutting down on the number of meals they ate per day or resorting to what they term 'breadiosis' or 'bunsiosis' (living on bread or buns respectively!). This high starch diet obviously impinges on their health and degree of effective concentration and participation in lectures and tutorials. Most of the students who were interviewed underlined the point that staying on campus is not as pleasurable as off-campus students imagine. Students are forced to resort to basic, fast food and unbalanced meals to cut down on expenses because, according to the students' regulations, students are not allowed to cook in the halls of residence. The halls of residence were not designed for any food preparation and catering to take place within them.

The future for such students may be threatened by their lack of funds. Respondents indicated that some students had dropped out of the university because their parents are also struggling to make ends meet. The right to education is threatened when state funding for poor students' education dwindles. In addition, not every poor intelligent student has access to sponsorships or bursaries. A final year Linguistics Honours student pointed out that excessive photocopying of books is not legal, but most students have to do it because they cannot afford to buy the books. She referred to a textbook, which costs \$1300 but could be photocopied at a lower price. Sometime some female students buy second hand books from fellow students at negotiable prices because they cannot afford the current cost of textbooks from bookshops.

## **Accommodation**

Accommodation is one of the most important issues that determine the quality of a student's learning and campus experience. Securing a room in a hall of residence makes a female student's life more manageable. Problems may occur when a roommate decides to let in a 'squatter' thus violating or impinging on the right of space and privacy of the other student who is not a party to the arrangement. Letting in a 'squatter' is against university regulations but most cases go unreported as roommates try and understand and accommodate the needs of students without accommodation. Most female students let in 'squatters' for altruistic reasons, namely, to help out fellow students. Letting in a 'squatter' for a fee is common in males' halls of residence although in female halls of residence, 'squatters' may be accommodated without any fees being demanded by the legitimate room tenants.

Some resident female students opt to move out of their rooms and sub-let them to stranded off-campus students at extortionate prices. According to the findings of this study, students are currently sub-letting rooms for about \$6 500 a semester, when the university charges about \$1 300 a semester for the same room or bed. Sub-letting of rooms is common among female students who get pregnant and decide to stay off campus with their husbands or partners or to rent rooms off campus where they can stay with their babies. There are no residences with facilities for students with children at the University of Zimbabwe.

The problem of accommodation cuts across all classes of resident female students, because students entertain 'squatters' who are friends or relatives regardless of their

class. Observations have also revealed that some resident female students have homes in Harare and when they sub-let or rent out their rooms, they go and stay with parents at home so that they can pocket the money they make from sub-letting their rooms. Thus, female students value residence privileges at the university because university housing is relatively cheap, allows a student to have a sex life in which parents do not interfere and can also be converted into cash through sub-letting. Thus, while a student may have to move back home after sub-letting a room in residence, they will have a lot more discretionary money to spend on luxuries while benefiting from the services provided for them at home.

### **Femininity, gender and student politics on campus**

Involvement in campus politics has been observed to be a sphere of male students. For one to be involved in student politics, they have to be resident on campus. On campus, a student with political ambitions has access to a captive audience of resident students who live and study on campus round the clock. This explains why those second year students with political ambitions strive to secure rooms in campus residences. This group of students competes most intensively to be in the Student Executive Council (SEC). Some students involve themselves in politics because they know that there is room for looting funds once they are elected into the Students' Executive Council.

Female students' world is shaped by the understanding that they cannot realistically participate in politics beyond voting for male students. Their male counterparts believe that student politics should be left to males. A male student in the second year of the B.A General degree asked the researcher:

"Female students cannot make strong politicians so why should they stand for election in the first place?"

This statement indicates that female students are perceived to be weak and unable to run student affairs. Those female students who dare contest positions in the SEC (Student Executive Council) risk being harassed by their male counterparts. In the 2 000 SEC elections, one female student tried her luck in politics and got labelled as '*hure*' (whore).

"We do not want people who will turn the SEC into a brothel!"

shouted one male student during the run-up to the SEC number 1 position.

The female student who ran for the No 1 position in the SEC, had her posters defaced to read 'Sex Number 1' in place of 'SEC Number 1'. Most female students would either withdraw before further harassment and victimisation or would be assured of getting the lowest number of votes because their images would have been tarnished badly prior to elections. Thus, political activity is perceived to be decidedly unfeminine and any female who dares to run for political office risks humiliation and the erosion of her femininity as defined by the dominant masculinities amongst the male students. A woman who loses an election loses not only the chance to serve

in an office. She also loses her reputation as a feminine woman worthy of men's attention.

The SEC treasurer commented that while it might be true that most students who participate vigorously in student politics have money and other benefits in mind, it is not always the case as some of them are in there to push the interests of the majority of students. The problems of looting union funds have however been proven by the recent looting of about \$50 000 in August 2 000, by some SEC members, resulting in their expulsion from the SEC.

The female students are considered by their male counterparts less likely to initiate militant action to support their demands. Female students are therefore on the periphery of political engagement regardless of their class, religion and ethnicity. Where female students' participation in politics is acknowledged, it is commonly held to be less sophisticated and in many cases, less authentically political, than the involvement of male students.

Findings from the resident female students themselves reveal that they are aware of their marginalization by their male counterparts and said they could do very little to stop them from victimising student women in politics. As such, politics in the institution is considered men's business and any female student who is daring enough to contest any political position is punished and ridiculed.

The female students, in informal conversation, pointed out that in the history of the institution, no female student has ever dared to stand for the Presidential elections in the SEC because their male counterparts would not even take notice of them if they did. There is currently one female student in the SEC.

"She probably got in there because of the support she got from her fellow Christians,"

remarked one female student in her second year in Political Studies.

To that extent, student politics on campus are shaped by ethnic and religious affiliation. For instance, if a Ndebele student were to contest a political position, most of the Ndebele students would back him or her for the simple reason that he or she is one of them. When one belongs to a particular church group on campus and is in good standing in that group, then she or he is also likely to be backed by members of the church. Students from the faculty of medicine usually do not join in demonstrations or political activities partly because of their intensive curriculum, which leaves little room for social activities. It is also the feeling amongst many students that medical students consider themselves an elite group that does not stoop as low as involving themselves in common political activities, which lower their status. Politics is usually the province of the male students in the faculties of Arts and Law.

## **Gender violence and femininity**

Female students and lecturers interviewed in relation to the student-lecturer relationships were of the opinion that those female students who participate in such

relationships do so for fear of being victimised by the lecturer. Those female students, who refuse to participate in sexual relationships with lecturers, usually have their academic future threatened. The feeling amongst the students in the study was that sometimes these students are marked down and have to write a supplementary exam. They may also be awarded a poor course work mark or a repeat in the course if they are unfortunate enough to be taught by the perpetrator. One lecturer in the arts, with a reputation for threatening female students who turned down his proposals, is alleged to have said to one of his victims:

“Girl, your future depends entirely upon what I decide and you shall regret why you ever made the decision” (to turn down the lecturer’s sexual advances to the student).

The female student who preferred to keep her identity anonymous explained that such victims have had to withdraw from active participation in lectures as a measure of self-preservation. Active participation in class by some female students is thwarted by such victimisation. This was confirmed by Kajawu’s study, in this volume, in her study in a secondary school in peri-urban Harare. Kajawu’s female students who were harassed by male teachers told her that they survived the classroom by withdrawing from active participation in classroom activities. Earning marks in bed or ‘a thigh for a mark’ has polluted the teaching and learning environment. Women students’ femininity may be used against them when their looks, demeanours or comportment attracts the attention of a harassing lecturer. One of the male students interviewed in the study, a BSc General student in his third year, scoffed:

“We have seen female students being used sexually by some lecturers in return for generous marks, so why would I believe that someone who scores 90% for a course work mark does not receive such favours from the lecturer in exchange for sex?”

An analysis of such findings on female students’ victimization highlights that such institutional practices produce the conditions and forces that simultaneously silence, intimidate and degrade women students while maintaining and perpetuating male domination and privilege.

The researcher discovered that the male lecturers are aware of what is going on around and among them, but they say there are virtually no lecturers who have been brought to book for sexual harassment. One male teaching assistant argued that the blame should not be thrust on them only because some female students have also contributed to their own harassment. He mentioned that sometimes both the student and the lecturer would have agreed to establish the relationship with a genuine intention of marriage.

“Those who go into such affairs do not even regret it,”

he argued.

He cited situations where he said male lecturers felt trapped by those female students who claimed to be victimised by lecturers. He described the instances where

female students pleaded for private assistance outside the lecture theatres thus creating room for privacy and intimacy in the academic setting. He also argued that the way women students dress and their encouraging smiles, make the lecturers feel attracted to their victims. The question of volition on the man's part, his structural power to determine the direction of the interaction, did not feature in his analysis.

From a discussion with five female students who preferred anonymity, and one of whom is such a victim, the suggestion was that student advisors and faculty Deans or Chairpersons and other people in a position to help, be made use of. They stated that the environment should allow for openness and fair treatment of both victim and the perpetrator. The Deputy Dean of students (Campus Affairs) and janitors from female halls of residence, namely, Swinton, Carr-Saunders, New Complex 4, have confirmed that only a few cases of sexual harassment have been reported, with only 7 cases having gone as far as the Dean's office during the February-September 2 000 period. This validates the point that female students who are victims of sexual harassment prefer to remain silent about their experiences with male perpetrators. This, on closer analysis, could be due to various factors which might include feelings of shame associated with reporting any sexual harassment, fear of being told that they attracted or caused the male perpetrators to attack them because of the way they dress or talk to them.

In addition, some female students feel that the cases they present to the concerned authorities are not dealt with to their satisfaction. In some cases cited by students in interviews, some of the people who were assumed to be 'lifelines' for female students were notorious perpetrators of sexual harassment in their faculties and departments.

One female student who preferred to remain anonymous, disclosed that she was once a victim of assault by a male student whom she had caught trying to steal room keys from her bag. She explained that her efforts to pursue the matter when the student had called her *hure* (whore) were thwarted by a janitor and a female warden who argued that such a case should be resolved by an apology from the perpetrator. She confided that she still felt aggrieved by the way the case had been dealt with and that the university functionaries had effectively defended and protected the perpetrator and helped him to escape disciplinary action. An apology did not help clear her name or her reputation that he had impugned by calling her a whore. His attempt to steal her room keys so that he could burgle her room were not even considered deviant or worthy of investigation or punishment. It is not surprising that female students perceive the formal university system to be collaborating with the dominant student masculinities, in violating the rights of the women students on campus.

Democracy is hard to foster under these conditions. The resident female students believe that male students and university authorities and services providers undermine their femininity and human rights. In analysing student life on campus, many resident female students stated that they wished they were staying at home with parents who would listen to their problems more sympathetically. Some female students stated that this was the reason why silence is the option preferred by most victims of the university system since they feel that their problems are not dealt with fairly in the university system.

This creates a chilly climate for women students in an institution where there should be fair treatment of both sexes. The challenge that remains is how to tackle these problems of female students on campus and change the chilly climate into a hospitable, caring and supportive one. Female students have contributed little to thawing the chilly climate because they worsen the situation by not speaking out about their problems. They organise minimally to defend their interests. Instead, some of them take part in practices that undermine their own security and interests and do not co-operate to confront the university system, the masculinities amongst the male students and the social pressures that subordinate them to men.

## **Class and gender issues on campus**

On campus, female students from rural backgrounds are undermined and looked down upon by those who are from towns. These are termed 'SRB' (strong rural background) and 'nose brigades' respectively as there is distinction in their accents, with the latter's accents taking after European pronunciations of words.

Those students, who are religious, particularly in the Pentecostal churches, are termed 'church fanatics' by those female students who have nothing to do with commitment to religion. The 'church fanatics' are taken to be lunatics without direction and their femininities are mocked and disapproved.

In dating, there is very little evidence that female students organise themselves according to the class groups. Dating is an issue that pre-occupies the majority of female students, particularly those residing on campus. They sometimes succumb to abuse by some of the male students they date. The latter may demand that their 'wives' do their laundry and other chores. Male violence escalates as women on campus fail to come together or to speak out about their experiences in the university. Those student women, who voluntarily consent to perform domestic chores for their boyfriends, do these chores in exchange for favours such as having their safety guaranteed on campus. Some of them risk being 'dumped' for better 'wives' if they refuse to entertain the demands of their boyfriends.

There has been little evidence of women students coming up with possibilities of empowering themselves in sexual relationships. However, it is difficult to specify what is meant by empowerment in sexual relations when women are generally subordinate to men. Probably empowerment is complicated by the divisions between women such as those of class, ethnicity, culture, religion and race. However women's accounts of their experiences remain a primary source of understanding how these contradictions are dealt with in practice.

## **Conclusion**

The institutions of higher learning are not necessarily the places of safety that they are assumed to be. There is little regard for gender-equity, democracy and human rights at the University of Zimbabwe. Gender biased activities are very prevalent at the University of Zimbabwe and thus gender discrimination is made by many male

students and staff to seem natural. The research proved that one's sense of self at any institution is inevitably gendered. Experiencing oneself as a female student caught in unfortunate situations bred by the hardships within and outside the university is an inescapable aspect of one's life, although it is certainly true that the salience of gender will vary depending on context. Issues of student politics, accommodation problems and sexual harassment are gendered as proven by the research. Men and women therefore structure their masculinities and femininities according to their contexts, their class, and age, ethnic and religious backgrounds. At the University of Zimbabwe, residence on campus presents opportunities and limitations to the exercise of femininities and masculinities according to one's class, age, ethnicity and religion. Women students on campus attempt to juggle all these factors in securing accommodation, incomes and meeting their academic and social goals. Thus, these gender considerations shape the teaching and learning experiences of these students, foreclosing some possibilities and opening up new ones regardless of whether student women's methods and means of meeting personal goals are socially approved or not.

## References

- Cliff, D. R. "Under the wife's feet: Renegotiating gender divisions in early retirement." *The Sociological Review*, Volume 41, February 1993.
- Coombe, T. "A consultation on higher education in Africa". Institute of Education, University of London. 1991.
- Cosgrove, L. "Crying Out Loud: Understanding Women's Emotional Distress as Both Lived Experience and Social Construction", *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol.10, Number 2, May 2000.
- Gaidzanwa, R.B. *Images of women in Zimbabwean Literature*, College Press: Harare. 1985.
- Gaidzanwa, R.B. "Politics of the Body and Politics of Control: An Analysis of Gender, Class and Cultural Issues in Student Politics. at the University of Zimbabwe", *ZAMBEZIA: Journal of the UZ*. Volume 20. 1993.
- Holland, J et. al "Pleasure, pressure and power: Some contradictions of gendered sexuality" *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 40, November 1992.
- Horizon*, 'Clash at the UZ', May, 1999.
- Kajawu, N. "Producing men and women: Gender Stereotyping in the education system of Zimbabwe". Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Gender Equity, Human Rights and Democracy organised by the AAP/GSA. Harare Holiday Inn, 27-30th August, 2000.
- Osborne, R.L. "The continuum of violence against women in Canadian universities: Towards a new understanding of the chilly campus climate", *Women's Studies International*, 1995.
- Sachikonye, L.M. "Structural Adjustment and the working poor in Zimbabwe" in Gibbon, P. (ed) *Structural Adjustment and the Poor in Zimbabwe*. Nordic African Institute: Uppsala. 1995.
- Siltanen, J and Stanworth, M. 'The politics of private woman and public man', *Theory and Society: Renewal and Critique in Social Theory*, Vol. 13 Number 1. January 1984.
- Sunday Mail*, 17 September 2000.
- Varsity Times*, September 2000 'Funds looted from the SEC' and 'Education only for the rich': University of Zimbabwe, Harare.



This work is licensed under a  
Creative Commons  
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs  
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>