

Speaking for Ourselves

Masculinities and Femininities Amongst
Students at the University of Zimbabwe



Edited by Rudo B. Gaidzanwa

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contributor

RUDO GAIDZANWA, the editor of this volume, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe. She is the Coordinator of the Affirmative Action Project of the University of Zimbabwe. She has published nationally and internationally on gender issues. Her works include *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature*. She has also edited a volume entitled *Policy-Making Issues in Southern Africa*.

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Gender Issues at the University of Zimbabwe: An Introduction

RUDO GAIDZANWA

Gender concerns at the University of Zimbabwe informed the production of this volume. This work is a result of sustained interest in the gender relationships prevailing at the University of Zimbabwe. In 1989, Gaidzanwa *et al* conducted a study on students and staff at the university, in an attempt to establish the factors affecting women's academic careers at the university. That work has been widely circulated and provided the basis of further studies in this area by Gaidzanwa. The research was part of a growing body of academic work, often by women, and on women and gender in different societies and institutions. The interest in issues relating to women tended to be dismissed as trivial then. In 1988, a male colleague dismissed this work as 'unacademic' and the whole question of gender as 'misconceived'.

These comments and the contempt towards what appeared to be a new field of inquiry, potentially dominated by women, hardened the resistance towards women's and gender studies at the university. All this happened against a backdrop of declining female hiring amongst academics. Female hiring peaked around 1979 when females comprised 21% of the academic staff, although most women were bunched in the junior, temporary slots such as teaching assistants and temporary lecturers and research fellows. Student enrolment by gender was skewed in favor of males who comprised 75% of the university's enrolment. The 1989 report by Gaidzanwa *et al*, was not heeded by the university authorities and hiring, committees, boards and chairs continued to be dominated by men. It was only in the middle of the nineteen nineties that a concerted push by a few women in the social sciences, resulted in the university administration accepting an affirmative action policy for female enrolment.

This policy was partly a result of the Association of African Universities' stance to promote gender equality in universities. It was also a result of individual men who were Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellor, whose interest in gender equality led to their push to adopt the policy. The growing violence by male students was a push factor, facilitating an often-unstated aim to dilute male enrolment and sanitize the image of the university as an institution dominated by violent hooligans who were beyond the control of the university administration. At the state level, the then Minister for Higher Education also supported gender initiatives, making it easier for the university authorities to push for an affirmative action policy in the university. All these factors coalesced to make the affirmative action policy a reality.

However, within the institution, resistance to it was not dealt with systematically. Some Chairpersons, Deans and other functionaries in some faculties resisted it covertly and overtly. There was also a reluctance to deal head-on with the problematic aspects of male student behavior, which is often violent, abusive and contemptuous towards women. Osborne (1995) described the same problems in universities in Canada and referred to the machine-gunning of women students by a male student reacting against feminism on a Montreal campus. The University of Zimbabwe authorities themselves practise gender discrimination, often against secretaries, women academics and administrators. Gaidzanwa describes these types of discrimination in her chapter. This makes it difficult for the administration to gain any legitimacy in disciplining male students directly and openly through the regulations of the university.

Nevertheless, the studies by and on women, created an appetite for better understandings of women's subordination and the conditions for their empowerment in different societies. The shift towards gender perspectives was developing because of a growing understanding of the relationship between the subordination of women in many societies and the privileging of many men in these societies. At the University of Zimbabwe, many departments started offering individual courses on women's and gender issues. While resistance and contempt for them continued within the university, outside the university, the forces that supported this growing discipline continued to gain strength. It became increasingly difficult to ignore women and gender studies as emerging disciplines, which had an impact of many of the disciplines taught at the university. The growing employment of university graduates in the non-governmental sector and in international organizations also strengthened the impetus to teach these courses and to encourage students to understand how these issues impinged on their lives after graduation. Eventually, a few men also began to get involved in the research and advocacy around gender and women's concerns on campus.

Many academic men felt marginalized in the growing gender debate and discipline, which incorporated gender perspectives. In some cases, they stated clearly that they did not know how to incorporate gender and women's perspectives in their courses, relying on the few women in the university to teach the little sections on women and gender which they inserted into their courses. However, the growing funding to gender research has forced some men to begin to engage this area of research and inquiry, making it easier for the issues of gender to be accepted as legitimate in the university.

The crisis of funding for the whole education system was directly responsible for the university administration's acceptance of the existence of a problem relating to male students' violence at the university. As the assault by international funding institutions on higher and tertiary education in the Third World gained momentum, student violence increased and threatened the reputations and functioning of many institutions. An aggravating problem was the neglect of the young male students by older males in the institution. Older males who are lecturers, administrators and

service workers, did not address the distress of younger men who found themselves increasingly marginalized in the economy and polity in Zimbabwe.

The women's movement, the women's and gender courses provided some explanations and avenues for alternative thinking, action and behavior for younger women in the university. At least, younger women's concerns were being explained and addressed by the discourses of the women's movement, the academic activism and concern of the feminist and other women on campus. Young men had no alternative explanatory framework apart from that in the macro-politics outside the university. The macro-politics, at national level, however, were not linked by student politicians and their mentors at the campus, to the individual distress of the younger men, to what was happening to funding, and to their alienation resulting from unemployment and economic marginalisation.

Class issues loom very large at the university, with most of the distressed men belonging to the working and peasant classes. These are the same classes that are suffering economic hardship nationally. Many of these young men demonstrated continually against dwindling loans and grants to finance their studies but these demonstrations did not address their growing unemployment, underemployment and social marginalisation on and off campus. They did not seem to understand what was happening to them and on campus, the academic and administrative men who had security through their jobs, did not think it important to address these signals of class and gender distress by the young student men. The chapters by Gore, Chagonda, Ndlovu, Somerai and Chivaura, who were students, describe very vividly the manifestations of that distress.

The competitive nature of male dominated associational and academic life at the university, left little room for people to address the growing 'wildness' of male students. This hooliganism was simply considered criminal or youthful exuberance which could be cured by banning alcohol on campus and warning, fining and in a few incidents, suspending troublesome male students. However, the ethos of the whole system was never examined because it was assumed that everything else was fine with the system.

In 1998-1999, the Gender Studies Association commissioned a study on sexual harassment at the university. The study entitled "Breaking the Silence: Sexual harassment at the University of Zimbabwe" showed that sexual harassment is routinised, accepted and is an integral part of the functioning of the gender system of the university. The university authorities ignored this study and the highest officials responsible for student affairs dismissed it as unfounded and unimportant, staying away from meetings to discuss the report and generally demonizing the academic women responsible for publicizing the research. The only notice and reaction from the administration occurred after the press got hold of the report months after it had been launched. The coordinator for the Gender Studies Association was quizzed about how the press had got hold of the report despite the fact that the report was in the public academic and social domain. There was very little concern about the contents of the report, only about its effects on the image of the university in the

community. There has been little action taken to deal with routinised sexual harassment and the research for this volume on gender, masculinities and femininities took place in that context.

The research gathered male and female students in a team that went out amongst the students to research the gender issues described and analysed in the chapters. The research has also helped to break the silence regarding the distressed nature of student masculinities and femininities at the University of Zimbabwe. Given that the research is based on students' views and opinions, gathered by students, it is not easy to dismiss as sheer advocacy by crazed feminists in the university. The students' voices about their distress are very loud and they link their economic and personal distress in ways that are meaningful to them. While the university and the community at large may wish that some of the students' behaviors were not happening, the students themselves explain why they behave the way they do.

The book is presented in such a way that the voices of the students are not edited or drowned out through the use of conventional academic practices, often evident through editing. Each student presents their chapter and research findings directly, presenting their analysis and reasoning from their perspective. Their reasoning may be open to contestation on many fronts. That is the purpose of this volume, namely, to engage readers in a dialogue with students.

The first chapter is an introduction, which outlines the history and origins of the volume. The papers comprising the chapters of this book were written and presented, in Harare in August 2 000, at the regional conference of the Southern African Universities' Network which focuses on sexual harassment and many gender concerns in these universities. Chagonda, Kajawu and Gore's papers were refined and presented at the national conference on gender and democracy in Harare in December, 2 000. At the national conference, delegates from the universities of Zimbabwe and tertiary institutions were gathered to discuss gender issues in their institutions. Selected high school heads were also invited to present their experiences. Together, these institutions are involved in mapping the way forward in their quest to democratize universities and tertiary institutions, making them attractive and friendly to all people who have a right to use their services.

The second chapter by Nyasha Kajawu, is based on research conducted in a peri-urban school near Harare. Kajawu outlines the processes by which male and female pupils are perceived and treated by the secondary school system, comprising teachers, heads of schools, the administrators of the school and education system and pupils themselves. She compares and contrasts the treatment of boys and girls by the teachers in the school, pointing out that teacher ideologies that privilege boys are not restricted to male teachers only. Kajawu describes the organization of subjects and channeling of students into specific subjects by gender. Her chapter raises an important point, which is related to the question that was asked by Acker (1994) about why teachers succeed or fail to challenge the hegemony of the school system's gender regimes. In Kajawu's research, the teachers failed to challenge the sexual harassment of girls in the school because they too, particularly the female teachers,

had to live and operate within the system that tolerated the abuse of girls in schools. Those teachers who blew the whistle on harassing teachers were themselves likely to be punished or marginalized.

Kajawu points out that teachers, male and female, also hold gendered attitudes towards boys and girls, resulting in their collaboration in reinforcing the hegemonic gender regime of the school, which privileged boys. The school's location in a very poor neighborhood also contributed to the teachers' poor expectations of the pupils in the school. Thus, the teachers' responses to the children's economic circumstances which were inferior to the teachers, resulted in teachers expecting underachievement by the pupils, particularly the girls. The question of adolescence and its manifestation and effects in boys and girls of the poorer classes was not dealt with sensitively in the school. Kajawu found that the teachers blamed the girls for their attention to their looks, neglecting the issues pertaining to the handling of adolescence by class, gender and ethnicity. The troublesome aspects of adolescence to boys and girls were raised and Kajawu noted that girls finding adolescence a problem as well as a source of confidence. Girls' blossoming bodies attracted boys' and male teachers' attention, focusing attention, sometimes unwelcome, on the girls. The girls' self-protective behavior, manifested by the desire to and practice of melting into the background in classrooms, is misunderstood and misinterpreted by teachers who do not recognise it as a non-confrontational strategy by girls at risk of sexual harassment by teachers. Instead, teachers choose to interpret it as a sign of preoccupation with other thoughts and issues, which are not related to the students' studies. As argued by Acker (1994), there is a need to examine this type of teacher behavior, not least because teachers themselves are sometimes removed from the class experiences of their students but also because teachers may be too pre-occupied with the formal curriculum to bother about gender issues that threaten to add on to their overloaded timetables.

Some of the students taught by and researched by Kajawu, eventually get to the university. Their backgrounds and experiences influence the ways in which they express their masculinities and femininities at the university. The study by Kajawu is useful in that it allows the reader to understand what kinds of issues, behaviours and experiences some poor students, such as those born and raised in peri-urban areas, may bring to the university.

Gore explores the masculinities of the male students and their participation in student politics on campus. He describes the different manifestations of masculinities by the same male students and their motivations for contesting offices in student government. Gore explores the the different masculinities involved in campus politics, indicating the dominance of the 'wilder' male working class and rural students' masculinities on campus. He alludes to the curtailment of these 'wilder' masculinities when male students stay at home with parents and relatives or as lodgers in the private homes of families in the city of Harare. Gore focuses on the troubled aspects of these masculinities, which are defined by alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, the harassment of women and the pursuit of political fame. Gore indicates that not all masculinities are violent, disruptive or wild, pointing to

Christian males and student males with disabilities, as 'new men' whose masculinities are subordinated, muted and dormant.

While alluding to the diversity of male students' masculinities, Gore argues that these masculinities tend to be overshadowed by the hegemonic masculinities of the wilder undergraduate males. The major challenge to the working class and peasant men's masculinities are posed by the economic climate which reduces the 'wild' student men's opportunities for alcohol drinking, clubbing and carousing around the city. Gore concludes that the problematic aspects of these young student males' masculinities cannot be ignored but need to be dealt with institutionally so that the university can be democratized for the benefit of women, men with disabilities and the older or less dominant men whose masculinities are muted and subordinated on campus.

Chagonda explores similar themes to Gore's while focusing on the masculinities of the student men who reside in the campus residences. Chagonda describes the class structure of the different masculinities on campus, pointing to the problems posed by the unruly nature of the hegemonic masculinities of the undergraduate men. Chagonda argues that staying on campus provides students with freedom of the type that students would not access when staying at home. Unlike Gore's men whose masculinities tend to be eroded or feminised by the demands of domestic work in lodgings, Chagonda's men harden their masculinities because of their dominance over campus politics, religion, recreation and academic pursuits. Resident men have minimal domestic chores and can shift even these to girlfriends on and off campus. Resident men face challenges to their masculinities because of the salaried and waged men from town, who can afford to provide material goods to young undergraduate women whom the resident men would like to date. The young resident men are forced to re-channel their masculinities to studying, financially and politically motivated demonstrations and politics. While resident men's masculinities may not always be negative and abusive towards women, Chagonda recognizes the problematic aspects of these masculinities. These masculinities spill over to the communities in the vicinity of the university because of the ban on alcohol on campus by the university authorities. Chagonda advocates the lifting of the ban on alcohol but remains silent on the assumptions of the ban and the consequences of such action.

The banning on alcohol on campus was partly motivated by the failure and unwillingness of the university authorities to recognize that many aspects of the 'wild' masculinity of male students are not necessarily a result of alcohol abuse. Indeed, sexual harassment, the general abuse of women and intolerance of different political, social, class, ethnic and other views is characteristic of the patriarchal university structure as a whole. The university authorities are unwilling to penalize and sanction many types of masculine behavior that are anti-social on an everyday basis. The most common sanctions are very mild for offenses involving violence, sexual harassment and theft and the sanctions range from several warnings, paltry

finer to suspension for very severe offenses. Ndlovu and Somerai, who analyse and describe femininities amongst resident and non-resident female students at the University of Zimbabwe, address these issues and inequities in the two subsequent chapters.

Ndlovu describes and analyses the different femininities amongst resident female students on campus. She points out that economic problems amongst students have eroded the independence and autonomy of women students, leading them to explore relationships with materially comfortable men as a way of survival. Ndlovu focuses on the problems of sexual harassment of women students by male students and staff, resulting in the withdrawal of female students from participation in many campus activities within and outside the classrooms.

Ndlovu also highlights the resistance of some female students to seduction by material goods potentially accessible through waged and salaried men off campus. She also indicates that the femininities of these women are mocked as fanatical but she is silent on the submissive aspects of these femininities to the male dominance in the religious groups on campus. While pointing out the inequities in the treatment of men and women with respect to violence, Ndlovu argues for the need for women on campus to organize to confront these inequities since the university authorities appear to be complicit to the discriminatory and violent aspects of masculinities on campus.

Somerai concurs with the observations by Ndlovu. Her chapter provides additional insight to the stifling of student women's choices and exercise of femininities when they reside off campus. She describes how landlords and landladies in Harare impose domesticity on student women in ways they do not, for male students. She argues that landlords and ladies complement the subordination of women on campus, at home and in lodgings, making it difficult for young student women to re-define their femininities as they break away from home and start new lives as adult women at university. The economic crisis in Zimbabwe militates against the development of non-dependent femininities for student women because it makes them subservient to the whims of landlords, transport providers, fellow students who sometimes take notes for them when they are late for lectures and on males whom they date and on whom they sometimes depend for material goods and services.

Somerai describes the problems experienced by non-resident student women with transport, books and access to other university services, which curtail non-resident student women's ability to utilise university and public services. She advocates the need to organize women students in ways that enable them to express their femininities in non-victimised ways and to pressure the university authorities to take up the challenge of disciplining wayward masculinities that curtail women's freedoms and choices on campus.

Chivaura outlines the background to the Affirmative Action Policy in student admissions at the University of Zimbabwe. He analyses the data on student enrolment since the inception of the policy. Chivaura also examines the underlying assumptions of the policy, pointing to the different types of institutional opposition and support

for this policy. Situating the policy in the gender context of the university, Chivaura points out that the policy is erratically applied across faculties and departments, showing that compliance is not strictly monitored and implemented by the university authorities. He indicates the positive shifts in student enrolments by gender for a few years after the implementation of the policy and the slippage that has occurred after the third year of its implementation.

Chivaura examines the issues relating to gender equity in enrolment in different faculties, linking some of the problems faced by the policy, to secondary school subject choices by headmasters, students and by the schools' endowments in infrastructure such as laboratories. Chivaura also describes the problems relating to science teaching and achievement in Zimbabwe as a whole. These problems are related to the poor enrolments of both men and women students in the sciences. In the interviews that he conducted with staff and students in the university, Chivaura was able to discern lackadaisical enforcement of the policy, outright defiance and hostility to it as well as some support in some humanities and arts faculties for the policy. In conclusion, Chivaura argues that it is necessary for the university to take the policy more seriously by enforcing and monitoring it more consistently and advocating improvement in career guidance and subject choice in secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

The concluding chapter by Gaidzanwa, the Co-coordinator of the Affirmative Action Project and the gender research activities on masculinities and femininities, examines student masculinities and femininities through the lens of the Affirmative Action Project. She examines student masculinities and femininities in the classroom, the campus and the community. She points out the negative aspects of both masculinities and femininities on campus, posing questions about their relationship to democracy and human rights observance on campus.

Gaidzanwa also raises the issues of gender violence, not only through the more dramatic incidents of drunken assault, verbal abuse and harassment of female students by male students but also through the more routinised rituals of exclusion and contempt experienced by most women on campus. She draws on earlier work on students published in 1993, pointing out that there is a need to develop alternative femininities and masculinities that are not premised on dominance by men and subordination of women on campus. Gaidzanwa also indicates that the femininities and masculinities, which are to be found amongst students, are partly derived from the university structures and bureaucracy as presently constructed.

The university bureaucracy, administrative and management structures and practices make it possible for student men and women to construct, reinforce and defend the present gender relations which tend to be asymmetrical and disadvantageous to women. The absence of codes of conduct on gender relations amongst staff and students and amongst students makes it possible for the males to exploit the fluidity of interpretations of what constitutes harassment in very loose ways which make disciplinary action against violent and abusive men difficult. This looseness also encourages some women students and staff to attempt to exploit the

gender ideologies that give men license to harass women, for their unfair benefit in an environment that is tolerant of sexism.

Just before this volume went to press, students were involved in demonstrations against non-student men on campus, low payouts and battles with the police. In these incidents, property, such as cars, were torched and overturned. The irony of it was that one of the cars that were attacked belonged to a former UBA, (male student) who was an SEC leader who is now the spokesperson of the major opposition party in Zimbabwe. More unfortunately still, one student died in circumstances that are still contested between students and the riot police. The anti-NABA (non-university male) demonstrations, which resulted in the attacks on male visitors' cars, illustrate some of the issues raised by all the contributors, regarding the distressed nature of some male student masculinities.

These chapters, collectively, capture some of the more salient and sustained attempts to document and debate gender issues which prevail in the university. It is to the credit of the Ford Foundation that this research has seen the light of day and has been circulated within and outside the institution where it might make a difference to the lives of many men and women. It is hoped that this work will go some way towards moving forward the project of democratizing the university and creating a teaching and learning environment that truly espouses the values of universality, democracy, equality and the observance of the human rights of all the stakeholders in this institution.

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Masculinity as an aspect of gender has not been salient in literature. Changes in the global economic climate leading to increases in male unemployment, the problems of HIV/AIDS and the increasing violence (wars, and civil unrest) have all led to research on how men perceive themselves as men; how society produces the ideals and scripts men live by, and how men cope with social problems in a fast changing world. In this book, students “speak for themselves” and valuable insights emerge *vis-à-vis* students’ experiences of masculinity and femininity. This is a good foundation for further research in an unexplored area.

R.Mate *Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Zimbabwe*

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Rudo Gaidzanwa is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and is the Coordinator of the University’s Affirmative Action Programme. She has published extensively in gender issues, women’s rights and work issues in both the formal and informal sector.



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