



Gender Based Violence in Kenyan Higher Learning Institutions: Moving Beyond Academia

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ABSTRACT

Gender Based Violence (GBV) has been a concern in the Kenyan universities. Most of the universities have tried to address the menace. However, Gender Based Violence is still happening. Students who have fallen victim have died, some have sustained permanent disabilities, either physical or emotional. Others have had to suspend learning to either cope up with stigma or take care of children born out of rape. This article sort to explore the prevalence and types of Gender Based Violence in the Kenyan universities, factors contributing to Gender Based Violence in the Kenyan universities, impact on Victims of Gender Based Violence in the Kenyan universities, Challenges and Gaps existing at the universities in the management of Gender Based Violence and has recommended the way forward to prevent, control and manage Gender Based Violence at the institutions.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Violence, factors and Effects, learning institutions

INTRODUCTION

Serious regard to diversity in Gender, Inclusion and Equity in Academia plays a lead role providing for individual consumers working in or preparing to enter leadership positions in higher education. Gender inequalities has severely persisted in academia; having been documented by various empirical studies over recent decades. Many universities have tried to address the pressing negative impact of gender related violence by way of action research and action plans that address diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, a lot more is needed. In this regard, the term “gender-based violence” hereby refer to all forms of Gender Based Violence (GBV), physical violence, psychological violence, violations and abuse, including but not limited to, economic and financial violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, gender harassment, stalking, organizational violence and harassment; including both online and offline contexts. It further describes and includes a continuum of violence and violations, violent behaviors and attitudes based on sex and gender, and always intersects with and mutually shapes other dimensions of inequalities, such as ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation and disability – (EU – 2022)

Persistence of gender-based violence in learning institutions has developed to appear like part of academic culture thus often driving women, especially those in vulnerable situations to be affected by other inequalities like sexual orientations, disabilities, marginalized backgrounds, age, sexism in the workplace, instability, and non-normative gender identities among others. Gender-based violence directly impedes access to academic freedom, which means that higher education and research as democratic institutions are consequently at stake.

LITERATURE

Significantly, 31.5% of women aged 16 to 70 have faced physical or sexual violence in Europe. Nearly a quarter have been victimized by non-partner men, including acquaintances and strangers, with physical harassment being the most common form of sexual violence (UN, 2023). In a study by from 46 research organizations and universities across 15 countries in Europe, 62% of the survey respondents have experienced at least one form of GBV since they started working or studying at their institution. Women (66%) and non-binary people (74%) were more likely than men to experience all forms of GBV, except for physical violence which more non-binary people and men indicated. Again, 43% of women in the EU have experienced some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner.

A study by RAINN (2024) about Campus Sexual Violence in the United States indicates that, 13% of all students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (among all graduate and undergraduate students). In the same study, among graduate and professional students, 9.7% of females and 2.5% of males experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation. Among undergraduate students, 26.4% of females and 6.8% of males experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation. 5.8% of students have experienced stalking since entering college (RAINN, 2024). Another study in Ethiopia indicates that, 36.2% of the students experienced physical violence; 46.6%, sexual violence; and 56.4%, emotional/verbal violence. The prevalence of attempted and completed rape was 36.7 and 28.8%, respectively (Ferhan A., et. al, 2021).

On the other hand, research from Kenya's tertiary institutions shows that nearly 90% of students enrolled in Nairobi's universities and colleges have once experienced technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with 39% experiencing it firsthand. In the study findings, 64.4% of female students experienced at least one type of online violence, compared to 35.5% for male students. However, in a study conducted in the year 2020 by Akili Dada, more than 40 per cent of students in Kenya's public universities experienced some form of violence and more than 68 per cent of this were female. Further, Cases of university lecturers asking for sexual favors in exchange for grades are real. GBV is not unique to Kenyan universities; it's a global crisis.

Prevalence and Types of Gender Based Violence:

From these studies, it comes out clear that violence in the higher learning institutions is in varied forms. For instance, the emerging dominant cases are:

1. **Physical:** Typical forms of physical violence are beating, strangling, pushing, and the use of weapons. It may result in injuries, distress and health problems, and sometimes results even lead to death in certain cases.
2. **Sexual:** It happens in case of unconsented sexual acts, attempts to obtain a sexual act, acts to traffic, or acts otherwise directed against a person's sexuality without the person's consent. New female students may fall victims more often than old students.
3. **Psychological:** Typically, it comes in form of psychological abusive behaviors, such as controlling, coercion, economic violence and blackmail.
4. **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence:** Female students have often been the primary targets of online attacks such as online defamation and non-consensual pornography (often through social media), with long-term psychological, social, and economic consequences for those affected,
5. **Intimate partner violence:** Intimate partner violence happens when a behaviour within an intimate relationship causes either physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.

Factors contributing to Gender based violence

A number of factors contribute/enhance gender-based violence in higher learning institution. They range from socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that contribute to the perpetuation of gender violence on campuses. They include patriarchal norms, power dynamics, alcohol and substance abuse, and lack of effective policies and support systems.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Institutions of high learning admit students with a diversity of social grounding. Much as the institutional culture may play a role, the students' cultural origin will always influence beliefs, thinking and even behavior at the institution. For instance, a child who has witnessed marital violence in the home, had an absent or rejecting father or had frequent use of alcohol will tend to adopt that behavior as being normally acceptable (Banda, 2019). Interestingly, the abused students especially women tend to accept the acts as normal and acceptable to some level especially the physical harm meted on them since that is the way of solving conflicts where they come from. From studies, cultural norms at societal level linked to abuse include women and children tolerating being physically punished, settling personal conflicts with violence, and women allowing men to think they own them. Other cultural factors include gender stereotypes and prejudice, normative expectations of femininity and masculinity, the socialization of gender, an understanding of the family sphere as private and under male authority, and a general acceptance of violence as part of the public sphere

Economic Factors

Poverty has contributed immensely as a factor fueling sexual abuse at the universities. Girls find it enticing to engage in transactional sex in order to gain financial support from the “sugar daddy” (sometimes sugar mammy for boys) or rather, financial support from older men/women in return for sexual services rendered; often the victims are very young and the experiences they go through are abusive. In some cases, a girl will opt to “temporarily marry” or cohabit with male colleague from a rich family in order to survive the financial nightmare at the campus; an act that ends up in sexual abuse and sometimes unwanted pregnancies. The girl will more often get dropped when another “better one” comes into the picture. Actually, the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey in 2012 reports that 15% of adolescent girls who have ever had sexual intercourse have done so in exchange for money, gifts or favors in the previous 12 months (Government of Kenya,2012). In this regard, poverty places learners in high-risk sexual exploitation situations to sustain themselves. The promise of favors, gifts and money has caused many youths to engage in sexual activities of sexual intercourse among youths.

Institutional factors

Most university campuses cater for about 22.6% of their student housing needs. Lack of dormitories forces students to look for housing elsewhere but near the campus. The situation opens a lop hole where male students may visit at will and assert their ill motives on their female colleagues; some of which maybe exploitative and bordering on abuse. Even within the campus dormitories, movements within a block might open up chances for physical and psychological intimidation especially to female students by their male counterparts.

Again, some institutions do not take seriously the protection of female students especially with their male counterparts. It appears like normal when minor cases of violence are reported. In actual fact that causes a lot of damage to some students' character and esteem. Some cases like bullying, harassment, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, may appear normal. Where abuse is rampant, there is fear of victimization. This affects student and staff engagement in institutional activities.

Alcohol And Substance Abuse

Women are more likely than men to suffer from their partner's drinking behavior and harmful consequences, such as domestic violence. The effects of alcohol use on male perpetrators may also increase the severity of aggression toward a female partner. According to Atwoli et. al (2011), students who used substances reported negative effects including medical problems, engaging in unprotected sex, relationship problems and poor academic performance. Alcohol can lower inhibitions, impair judgment, increase aggression and thus potentially contribute to violent behavior. Several studies have found that a significant proportion of perpetrators of gender-based violence were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incidents. In such circumstances, girls are likely to suffer gender violence when their male colleagues consume substances that suppress their good way of conduct.

Lack of effective policies and support systems.

The Kenya government has enacted a number of laws that give direction on the management of GBV. These includes The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011, the Sexual Offences Act 2006 (SOA), Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act 2011 and The Protection Against Domestic Violence Act 2015 (PADV). However, these laws have little effect especially at the institutions of higher learning. A lot of the GBV cases goes unreported due to other factors like cultural beliefs stigma and even coercion. In some cases, the legal system might be the impediment due to its bureaucracy and evidential support requirements. Strengthened laws are necessary to enhance control of Gender based violence.

Impact on Victims of Gender Based Violence

Gender based violence negatively impacts severely on the victim ranging from the psychological, physical, and academic performance, including effects on their mental health, educational attainment, and overall well-being.

a). Psychological

Gender Based Violence survivors are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, substance misuse disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide attempts. Studies indicate that, GBV perpetration was associated with higher depression, higher anxiety, lower self-esteem and lower social support especially among youth at the universities. It happens when intentional course of conduct that seriously impairs another person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats is done. The healing process for psychological GBV victims might take long and prove to be expensive. In some instances, it leaves a permanent impact on the victim. It actually alters the future way of the victims' regard to life. Those that were defiled might never know what sexual intimacy with future partners is all about for a long time since their esteem was destroyed. Some end up not marrying since "All men are the same".

b). Physical

In the learning institutions, gender-based violence may cause unimaginable effects like severe pain, permanent disabilities, and injuries such as broken bones, burns, black eyes, cuts, and bruises among others. Girls might suffer miscarriages from being beaten during pregnancy. Permanent disabilities caused by GBV will always remind the victim about the perpetrators thus permanently causing psychological stress, financial, hatred and low esteem to both the victim and family.

c). Academic Performance

According to UNESCO (2012 and 2014) GBV leads to poor academic performance, school dropouts, early marriages, class nonattendance, low self-esteem among the victims, and stress, among other effects. Most hurting is when the perpetrator is a fellow student who continues to complete studies while the victim drops out of campus. While a girl victim might be strangling with a pregnancy got out of rape, the perpetrator gives no support at all. The victim misses classes while attending to health-related services or even after delivery which cause suspension of an academic year. Poor parents are subjected to unforetold suffering by not only losing money paid as fees but also taking care of the baby who the mother (GBV victim) might hate. The diminished self-esteem of the victim might affect academic performance in class more especially when she comes back after giving birth to “unwanted child”.

Responses and Support Services

A number of organizations have undertaken to offer support services to GBV victims in Kenya. These includes, Healthcare Assistance Kenya, Gender Violence Recovery Centre (GVRC), FIDA Kenya, Kenya Men Engage Alliance, CREAM Kenya, LVCT Counseling Hotline, Kelin Kenya (Reclaiming Rights, Rebuilding Lives) and Childline Kenya. The organizations offer services and support ranging from financial, psychosocial and psychological. Some universities have chosen to work with them to offer the necessary support. However, some universities have a well-established support system for GBV victims in the institutions. For instance, The University of Nairobi has an established support system which at times gets funding from donors. The South Eastern Kenya University (SEKU) established a policy on Gender-Based Violence prevention in the year 2022 which provides a framework and guidelines to manage the vice in the university. Other universities have set policies about gender-based violence.

Some of the services provided are but not limited to counselling, legal guidance, medical support and structural and environmental physical adaptation and improvement for those who might have physically suffered to the extent of disability. Some of the universities have very accommodating systems that will accept back the affected students to continue with education once they are ready. Other than the established guidance and counselling programs, the universities have allowed some religious organizations and None Governmental Organizations to offer counselling in the campuses.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Reporting of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) allows survivors to access support services to minimize the impact of the violence on their lives. However, research shows that most SGBV survivors do not report. The barriers to reporting of GBV include shame, guilt and stigma associated with, especially, sexual violence; lack of access to medical care; concerns about confidentiality and being believed; and barriers specific to seeking help from police like the fear of reprisal resulting from reporting – (Ssanyu, et. al. 2022).

Other challenges include Various cultural and religious beliefs that persist around women and girls. These attitudes continue to perpetuate harmful practices such as the belief that women are inferior to men and that women are obligated to submit to men without question. The victim often chooses to keep quiet even when it hurts to know that some harm has been done on them in order to meet the religious obligations.

Financial and material support has too been a challenge in the management of GBV at the Kenyan higher learning institutions. Financial support may be needed for research, medication, counselling and material support when necessary. Some of the universities are strangling to get enough funds for the university programs and therefore Gender based violence may not be a priority.

Intensive approach to creating awareness is required. Some learning institutions may not have been giving GBV awareness creation the attention it deserves. This has been a challenge. On the other hand, the legal system on matters gender-based violence is lacking. A lot of bureaucracy is required in dispensing off some cases of gender-based violence; which the victim may not be in a position to provide, thus, opting to keep quiet.

Political good will is lacking on matters of Gender based violence. There is need for strengthened approach to the management of GBV at the universities by way of legislation by the political class. The existing law does not seem to effectively prevent the vice from repeating itself even though the media has often reported disturbing cases of GBV at the campuses.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Based on the prevailing circumstances at the Kenyan universities about Gender based violence, it is hereby recommended that,

- i. The Kenya government should strengthen the legislation governing Gender based Violence at the universities.
- ii. All higher learning institutions should be registered only when they meet policy requirements that address Gender Based Violence effectively.
- iii. Universities should intensify programs that create awareness about gender-based violence in their campuses.
- iv. Adequate funding should be made available and used prudently to control the Gender Based Violence menace at the Kenyan Universities.
- v. Professional personnel should be engaged in all universities to deal with Gender Based Violence.
- vi. Research about gender-based Violence at the universities should be intensified.

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