Male ‘Sexual Undesirability’ as a factor in the sexual violence experiences of female university students

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Introduction

- This paper seeks to account for the presence of sexual violence at a university campus in Zimbabwe; in particular, I focus on why some male students commit acts of sexual violence against their female counterparts;
- I suggest that many male students are considered to be ‘undesirable’ as romance or sexual partners by female students; this leads to a situation in which female students prefer to date ‘outside’ men, that is, those men who are not students at the university;
- This creates frustrated male students who are unable to secure female students as their girlfriends and who thus resort to the use of sexual violence;
- Part of male students’ undesirability stems from the fact that they lack the key traits that female students consider ‘attractive’ in men, such as having adequate financial resources, ‘being romantic’ and ‘responsibility’;
- Sexual experience and the ability to attract the attention of the opposite sex are considered to be markers of manhood in many societies; many young men therefore find themselves under pressure to live up to the ideal of a sexual male adulthood; similar pressures appear to be at play at the university in question, hence the many incidents of sexual violence experienced by female students.
Outline of the presentation

- Methodology
- Powerlessness and male students’ experiences of undesirability
- Sexual Violence as a Response to Undesirability
  - ‘Near rape’ encounters and the ‘gold rush’
  - ‘Tricked into sex: Deception and ‘ODI’s’
- Implications and Conclusions

Glossary:
- USA=University Spinsters Association (refers to all female students)
- UBA=University Bachelors Association (refers to all male students)
- NABA=Non-Academic Bachelors Association (refers to all non-UZ males)
- ODI=One Day Internationals (refers to casual sex relationships)
Methodology

- This paper is based on an ethnographic data collected over a fifteen-month period (Aug 2006-Dec 2007) as part of an on-going PhD study;
- During this period I interviewed a total of forty students (20 females; 20 males) from the University of Zimbabwe; I also employed the techniques of participant observation, which involved ‘hanging out’ with students and attending various functions on campus;
- This particular paper is based on a combination of in-depth interviews and informal conversations I had with more than fifteen female and male students on the topic as well as the personal observations I made during fieldwork;
- Because a thick cloak of silence and shame surrounds rape on campus, and in Zimbabwe in general, I was unable to find female students who had actually been raped; however, many of the female students that I interviewed on this topic shared stories of ‘near rape’ encounters that they had had at the hands of male students; some hinted vaguely at ‘knowing’ female students who had actually been raped; male students, on the other hand, freely narrated how they had ‘tricked’ (as opposed to forced) female students into having sex with them.
Powerlessness and Male students experiences of ‘undesirability’

- The notion of ‘male powerlessness’ is contentious; some scholars argue that there is no such thing given that all men benefit from the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (see Anfred 2001; Kandiyotti 1994) while others point out that men do not benefit equally from the patriarchal dividend (see Connell 1995; Lindisfarne 1994);

- It is not my intention to justify acts of sexual violence by male students as much as it is to explain them; the more we understand the ‘drivers’ of sexual violence, so to speak, the better placed we might be to develop interventions that target perpetrators.
Factors behind male students’ undesirability

1. Masculine ideal at the university
   - The UZ brand of masculinity is one that is predicated on intellect rather than physical strength or wealth per se; in fact, many male students use their ‘university student’ status to attract the attention of women, especially non-university women
   - E.g. male student: ‘Many mothers throw their daughters at me; they ask me to help their daughters who are in A’level with their school work. That [UZ] ID is powerful out there!’
   - Unfortunately, this brand of masculinity does not appeal to many female students, who are themselves just as intelligence
   - Unfortunately, this brand of masculinity does not appeal to female students

2. Lack of adequate financial resources
   - Wealth, or at the very least financial independence, is a key marker of male adulthood in many societies (see Hunter 2002;)
   - Unfortunately, few male students measure up to this ideal as many students are from poor rural and working-class backgrounds; also, the prevailing hyper-inflationary environment in Zimbabwe made it extremely difficult to most people to make ends meet
   - E.g. male student: ‘USAs have a love for money and will not open their hearts for the sake of love. And with a UBA, they know that he is not working, he is poor and so forth and we can’t afford the cellphones and cerevita that they want’
3. ‘Bad manners’ and lack of ‘courtship skills’
   - E.g. male student #1: ‘Most UBAs don’t know how to ask girls out, that’s a fact!’
   - E.g. male student #2: ‘The chi-UBA spirit says you should never go out of your way to impress a woman’
   - Female student #1: ‘UBAs are not romantic! I don’t want you to rush. Woo me. Make me yours. Don’t rush. This is not a land reform programme! [reference to Zimbabwe’s land invasions]’
   - Female student #2: ‘There are no gentlemen here on campus’
   - Female student #3: ‘They are too immature. They are like our little brothers.’

4. Bravado and Macho-ism
   - For all their high levels of education, many male students subscribe to the ideology of male superiority (see Shire 1994) and they try to reproduce it at the UZ (see Gaidzanwa 2001; 2007), with varying levels of success;
   - E.g. male student #1: I was very traumatised to see one of my home-girls wearing some trousers the other day. Down there, where I come from, we have been groomed to look down upon such dressing—mini-skirts, trousers and jeans. But I have had to adapt and be accommodating of such [behaviour]’
   - E.g. male students #2: I’m quite liberal when it comes to women’s dressing, but I can’t stand those hipsters! Ah! Hipsters appeal, they have a loud voice and they show everything that can be desired!’.
‘They take our women away’

- When confronted with independent university females, male student soon realise that they don’t have as much control as they would like, or as they imagine themselves to have.

- E.g. male student: ‘They [female students] know very well that we are struggling as it is. Even if I want to take you out for a movie tonight, you know I can’t afford it. And anyway, we [also] know that USA is a no-go area; they are the territory of those who already have title deeds over them, i.e. NABAs. So, when we date USAs, most of us [UBAs] are just doing it to keep ourselves entertained while we are here on campus.’

- Liz Walker (1995) describes a similar phenomenon in post-1994 South Africa; she notes that the granting of equal rights to black women ‘destabilised old notions of masculinity and male privilege’ with men realising that, they would now have to negotiate their manhood differently’. Many men, she further argues, responded to this new reality violently and incidents of rape in the country increased

- Anthropologist Isak Niehaus (1995) also shows how rape, in South Africa, is primarily those men who had fallen short of the masculine ideal, in that they are unemployed, unmarried and childless, and who thus felt under the most pressure to ‘demonstrate their heterosexual virility’
Sexual violence as a response to undesirability

- ‘university is where sex ceases to be taboo and enters the realm of the expected’ -Epstein et al (2001); indeed, male students indicated that they were often under pressure to be sexual;

- Male students have thus developed a scoring system in which zero points are scored for each year that one spends on campus without a ‘girlfriend’; a score of ‘3-nil’ translates to three years spent on campus without a girlfriend and is a source of much teasing on campus

- E.g. male student: “the pressure to at least score one point is higher when you are in your final year. Otherwise, you will be labelled a girl guide!”

- Some male students therefore use any means necessary, as I will soon show, in their quest to ‘score’ at least once before they graduate.
The ‘Gold Rush’ and Female students’ ‘near rape’ encounters

Case 1:

It happened to me on campus, in a place that I thought I would be secure. But it happened to me. Someone hugging you. Someone throws you on his bed. Imagine! He threw me on his bed! You know, I...I...I thought to myself ‘Should I scream?’ I couldn’t scream, you know. I always thought to myself that if a guy touches me this way I will scream, but you don’t scream. So, the only thing that I could do is I touched his mouth, like this,[demonstrates covering his mouth with her hand] because he wanted to kiss me. And then he said ‘You are no longer a child. So start acting like a grown up....

[They are interrupted at this point by ‘Someone’s’ friend knocking on the door].

When I was about to leave he asked me ‘how would you feel if I give you a kiss?’ I said ‘I don’t think I will be okay’. But I let him kiss me. Yes, he actually kissed me. I remember that. I didn’t like it’. 

-Chipo, 18, first year student
Case 2

I knew this guy from my former high school. One day I met him as I was walking to my res and we started to talk. I was surprised when we got to my res. He took the keys I had placed on the table and he locked the door. Then he said to me: ‘You know that I love you. I always used to watch you at school, what, what…’ He threatened not to live until I agreed to be his girlfriend. I spent three hours locked in my room with this guy, imagine. I kept thinking [to myself] that this is how girls are raped here on campus...

-Sihle, 19, first year student
Case 3

You can hear them [I.e. male students] knocking on doors at night. As soon as you open your door, they push their way in and even sit on your bed. Then they ask you what your name is etc etc. I had a drunken male student do that to me one day and because it was a weekend my roommate had gone home and I was all alone in the room. He refused to leave until well after midnight.

[Me: why didn’t you leave him in your room and get help from your neighbours?]

I didn’t think it was safe to leave a total stranger in my room. What if he stole something?

[Me: did you report the incident to any of the authorities?]

Who do you report to? The security will tell you that if you meet him again on campus, bring him to us.

-Rutendo, 18 first year female
The ‘Gold Rush’ Phenomenon

- These three stories capture some of the grim realities that many 1st year female students have to confront in their first few weeks of being at university; hardly any female student at the UZ has not been ‘gold rushed’
- The gold rush refers to a phenomenon, which occurs mostly during the first few weeks of a new academic year, in which male students accost female students with declarations of ‘love’
- 1st year female students are believed to be sexually inexperienced and therefore ‘pure’ in contrast to 2nd and 3rd year students, who are viewed as being ‘too sexually experienced’ and therefore not as pure (they become silver and bronze respectively);
- 1st year female students are therefore highly valued in the romance and sexual marketplace of the UZ and male students take advantage of their lack of familiarity of campus life
'Tricked into sex': Deception and ODI's

You gotta make them believe it’s love at first sight, you know. I can see you now and tell you that I love you. When you are gone and I see another girl, I tell her the same and not even feel any guilt... Once I got her talking, I knew that I was in! I was in! So I invited her to a room that wasn’t even mine! And once the door is closed! [does not complete sentence].

You sit next to her... look for anything that gives you an opportunity to touch her: [comment] on her nails or her hands. Touch her where you won’t let go! If you touch her and she is not pulling away, then you know that we are going there! Everything changes and you make your move! I was moving for real! I was moving!

[Me: Have you seen her since?]

‘If I have, I probably wouldn’t know because I don’t remember what she looks like. And anyway, the point is not to have a relationship with her. If you ever meet your ODI’s you should never show that you recognize them. Pretend that you don’t know them’

-Jabu, 23, final year student
'ODIs are easier to manage as they do not involve ‘title deeds’. You [also] have to be very careful that your ODI does not advance to a ‘test match’ because once that happens you will be in trouble’.

-Gameboy, 23, final year student
‘One Day Internationals’

- ODIs are named after the game of cricket and are the equivalent of casual sex relationships or ‘one night stands’
- In cricket, ODIs are those games that are played in a day, in contrast to ‘test matches’ in which one game is played over three or five days
- Male students consider ODIs to be less demanding both financially and emotionally; through ODIs undesirable male students are therefore assured of regular sex
Implications

- The high rate of pregnancies that occur among first year female students are evidence of male students’ ‘success’ during the ‘gold rush’;

- Sexual violence, as a category, should not be confined to actual acts of sex that are coerced; rather the ‘near rape’ incidents discussed here as well as the ‘trickery’ that male students use in order to ‘lure’ female students into having sex with them are also forms of sexual violence and they produce feelings of low self-worth and loss of dignity in the female students concerned that are associated with rape;

- All the female students who shared their ‘gold rush’ experiences with me had not reported the incidents to anyone, partly because they feared that they would be blamed for bringing the situation upon themselves in the first place, and partly because there is no system at the UZ to address such cases;

- Also, because female students may sometimes confuse the ‘gold rush’ and ‘ODIs’ for genuine boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, it makes it that much harder for them to report to anyone; it is this fuzziness which makes it possible for male students to commit these acts of sexual violence with impunity.
Conclusion

'It is not because you have suddenly become so beautiful that so many boys approach you here at the campus. I have discovered that these guys just want sex from you and they will do anything. They will flatter you and use all sorts of nice words, just for sex'.

-Chipo, the ‘near rape survivor’