

Profile: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights among Female Students at the University of Zimbabwe: A participatory action research project

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Introduction

The University of Zimbabwe Young Women Leadership carried out an action research project entitled “Strengthening Research Capacity in Africa: Gender, sexuality and politics with a strategic focus on the lives of young women” in partnership with the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. The study’s aim was to investigate the sexual and reproductive health challenges faced by female students at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). The project had a specific focus on institutions of higher education in the SADC region, which sought to strengthen research and action which involves the lives and empowerment of young women.

The research was conducted during the period April 2010 to April 2011. During that time, the University of Zimbabwe was not providing accommodation to students as the halls of residence were closed in July 2007, mainly due to the fact that water was not being supplied to the residences. The closure of accommodation to University of Zimbabwe students brought many problems for the students, both male and female, but for female students, it has affected sexual and reproductive health and rights. Given this background, the team agreed to focus their research on “lack of accommodation at the University of Zimbabwe”. This profile discusses the processes involved in surfacing and documenting the concerns of female students and describes some of the findings that were presented to the university authorities to effect action that could alleviate some of the challenges faced by women students.

Rationale for the Study

Young people's reproductive health needs have been largely ignored by existing reproductive health services because they have historically been viewed as the healthy strata of the population (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2011). However, young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions and limited access to sexual and reproductive health rights (UNFPA, 2011). The university community, and female students in particular, constitute part of this vulnerable group. A high prevalence of multiple concurrent partner relationships has been reported in tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe, and our research shows that many young women have multiple partners who provide for them financially. These kinds of relationships are key drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (SAYWHAT, 2010). Our research shows that many young women also tend to believe men have a need for sex and the right to coerce women into sex.

The University of Zimbabwe offers a behaviour change intervention that focuses on the development of the skills necessary for a healthy, positive lifestyle and HIV/AIDS prevention (UZ, 2009). Although HIV/AIDS counselling and testing services are provided in tertiary institutions, unavailability of post-test support and stigma hinders students from seeking treatment even when services are available for free. Access to treatment remains a challenge for most Zimbabwean students in tertiary institutions (Students and Youths Working on Reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT), 2010). SAYWHAT (2010) identified the absence of youth friendly services as one of the reasons for students' failure to access treatment on campus. The team also reported that clinics at tertiary institutions do not have the capacity to treat STIs and often face shortages of essential drugs. Given this background, the University of Zimbabwe research team decided to focus their study on sexual and reproductive health-related challenges faced by female students at the University of Zimbabwe.

Selection of students

The process of selecting students to participate in the research involved two meetings with interested students after information about the project had been placed on notice boards across the University campus. The University of

Zimbabwe project coordinators met with female students with an interest in discussing issues of female sexual and reproductive health: gender, sexuality, and politics including issues on HIV/AIDS. The meetings attracted students from a number of faculties including Social Studies, Medicine and Commerce and in order to allow for meaningful participation of the students, a focus group discussion was used as a platform to allow students to brainstorm about sexuality and about reproductive health problems on campus.

Pertinent issues that were raised during the first meeting were the problems of lack of accommodation on campus, cross generational sex, multiple sexual partners, condom negotiation between partners, unplanned pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, and the economic situation and its effect on the increase of tuition fees and cost of living.

A second meeting was conducted with the main objective of finding a unique area of discussion peculiar to the University of Zimbabwe in relation to female sexual reproductive health on campus. The University of Zimbabwe research team decided on the “lack of provision of accommodation to students” as the main factor affecting sexual and reproductive health of female students. Ten students who were active during the two discussions were eventually selected to be the core group working on the project together with the project co-coordinators. Five of the ten students were then chosen to represent the students at a workshop conducted in Cape Town in September 2010. The students had the opportunity of meeting students from other universities and shared experiences from their respective universities.

A Reflection on Action Research Methodology

The methodology used in this research was aimed at strengthening female students’ capacities to participate in identifying sexual and reproductive health related challenges they face on campus and explores ways of how to deal with the challenges (Prieto, 2002). The University of Zimbabwe research team used varied methodologies which included environmental analysis, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews to elicit “I” Stories to carry out its research on how accommodation problems faced by female students at the University was affecting gender, sexuality, politics and reproductive issues. All the methodologies, though they are different, reaffirmed problems that were being raised by students.

Environmental Analysis

The female students in this project carried out an environmental analysis which involved taking photos of the environment which affect their sexuality on campus. This process enabled students to identify places they regard as students' spaces and their accounts of these social interactions within these spaces testify to policing of hetero-normative gendered identities on the campus.

Students identified a space between the Commerce and Arts buildings commonly known as 'Facebook'. This is where "surfing" of girls by boys takes place, it is a place of gossip and a place in which many women feel embarrassed because of the way they are stared at. Female students identified the places in which they feel most comfortable and this is important for the University's management to understand so that if benches are to be placed, they would know where to place them. These would also be sites where small booths to sell newspapers, magazines and female sanitary-ware could be installed.

However, not all places at the university are liked by female students. They sometimes shun places because they feel intimidated by the environments or they don't feel comfortable being in such places. Female students expressed feeling uncomfortable and intimidated in many parts of the university as they are often harassed by male students and staff. Some participants explained that they felt offended by comments made by the grounds and cleaning staff about their bodies and clothing because they do not belong to the same class of education and there is no way they can ever date them. This was an interesting point to note because in the focus group discussions, female students were reported to be dating gardeners who do not belong to their class, for the purposes of getting accommodation in the university's neighbourhood. So this means that the gardener-student relationships are regarded as backyard developments which should never be known within the university campus.

In this study, it was also observed in one of the images taken that these general cleaners also sit almost at the entrance door of the ladies' toilet. This makes the students shun entering such toilets because they feel insecure and experience a lack of privacy. The University's Administration has since taken note of this issue and argued that an investigation should be carried out since the workers are supposed to be working and not sitting around ladies toilets.

The images taken by the students also show water around the floors in the toilets and outside. The female students identified this situation as undesirable. The problem of water at the university was identified as a serious issue affecting the lives of female students. The University has been experiencing water problems for a number of years. This period falls within the same period which Zimbabwe has been experiencing political problems, that is since 2000. This problem is also experienced by urban centres in the country as a result of failing to secure funds to purchase water purifying chemicals. The ladies' toilet facilities are not user friendly as evidenced by the lack of sanitary bins and full length mirrors. Tissues are never found within the facilities and there is rust and missing lids on the cisterns. There are black plastic containers which are normally filled with water for washing hands when there is no running water and everyone dips their hands in the container which is unhygienic.

The University erected boreholes on campus but because most of its buildings are located on high ground, the pressure is not adequate to get water supplies around campus and besides, borehole water is inadequate to meet all the water needs of the university. As a result of the problems being experienced by students, the University is constructing a water reservoir which can store water for a few days before City Council's water returns. The University is also cognizant of the fact that the problems may persist, if Council water takes a long period to resume pumping.

The Students Union in most universities is where you normally see students conversing freely and having their student's activism meetings. One of the images taken by students in this study shows the emptiness of the Students' Union buildings at this University. The building was closed at the same time as the closure of the University's accommodation. This should have been a place where female students' issues are discussed and some of them resolved. However, the emptiness, silence and lack of movement may almost symbolize no hope for a quick solution to students' issues in general and female students in particular. The absence of this political arm means that a platform for which female students can start their political career and gain milestones is not available to them.

The students involved in this project also took an image of an empty hall of residence to show how they feel about closed halls of residences. They feel anger at the University's Management system as they do not understand

why the halls of residences should be empty when they are struggling with transport and they can also not utilize the library at night because it will be very dark and unsafe and they will not find any transport to take them to their respective suburbs. On campus, there are no restaurants for students. Next to the taxi rank are the food vendors where most of the male students buy their food. The female students feel that the condition in which the food is sold and the dust raised by the taxis makes the area appalling to the female students. The lack of a proper sitting area makes it uncomfortable for most female students. Female students feel therefore marginalized at campus. They feel that their needs are not being considered by the university's management.

Another image taken by students on their spaces is the commuter taxi rank on campus. Most students do not own cars therefore they use taxis for their daily travels to and from college. One of the images showed a student boarding a commuter taxi whilst it was already moving and students described drivers and their assistants (*mahwindi*) as very rude, especially towards female students. This makes female students feel unsafe.

Focus Group Discussions

This study also gathered information using focus group discussions. The focus groups ranged from 8 to 15 students. Three focus group discussions were held on campus during lunch hours and were led by students themselves to enable them to speak freely on the issues that were affecting them. Students felt that the discussions gave them the opportunity to come together as female students and discuss amongst themselves problems they are facing emanating from lack of accommodation on campus and affecting gender, sexuality, politics and reproductive health. Students on campus generally no longer have their own meetings since they are out of university residence. Most of the time students want to just attend their lectures and go home immediately after these lectures. In most cases in the the focus group discussions students felt comfortable to discuss what their female counterparts were facing since they felt ashamed of some of their experiences like dating older man ("sugar daddies"). The conversation thus centred on a "friend of mine"; "a girl I know"; "a girl I heard of" and "a certain girl". The use of the pronoun "I" was limited in these discussions, which indicates why it was important in this kind of research to have the "*I*" stories which focused on personal experiences.

“I” Stories

The stories shared using this methodology showed desperation on part of the female students. In the section that follows we provide some excerpts from the “I” stories:

A: I am hurt and ashamed to say that I have resorted to becoming a commercial sex worker, not by choice, but due to circumstances since I cannot afford accommodation and my up-keep. I had relied on my mother's money which was not enough anymore. I needed clothes, money for lunch, bus fare, groceries, money for printing and photocopying, stationery and accommodation. I strongly feel that if only the university could open halls of residence, maybe for people like me, we wouldn't have to go through all this. Each time I sleep with a man, I try to bath myself as much as I can to remove the filth but the actions keep on flashing in my mind. My mother does not even know that this is what I am doing for a living. I am afraid to go for an HIV test because chances are that I am positive. My dream has been shattered because I might not graduate alive. But who can I blame? I am deeply hurt by the predicament of the girls in my situation, what is going to become of us and are we ever going to be normal people? I doubt it.

B: When I request for money for my upkeep it sometimes takes two months and I need to pay for photo copying, rentals, buy clothes and food each day. I ended up selling sweets during lecture breaks so that I can get money for lunch and at times I skip meals. I cannot stay late on campus reading in the library because I walk each day to campus and there are no street lights in the road that I use so it is not safe to walk when it's dark. Back at the room we live in, some girls would want to play their phones and radios during times you want to read making it so difficult for me to read and it is so frustrating because most of the time I'm behind on handing in my assignments. Some girls invite their boyfriends to the room and this might mean sleeping with a male in the room. As a young woman who had morals instilled in me since I was a young girl, I feel disgusted as if I'm the one sleeping with the men. Living in the room with the other girls has brought such a drawback in my education as well as social life as I feel I'm surrounded by people with a different character from mine.

C: ... I then moved to Mt Pleasant where I am currently staying. The living conditions are awesome it's just like home; a spacious house and only 3kms from school. But this is where I met the most indecent of men; friends and ... I attended parties, went for clubbing, drinking and had sex because the norm was that friends came and went as they pleased. I mean no one had control over me and as far as I was concerned once I was out of the school gate that was the end of school. But because I did not do it for finances, just for fun, this did not last long. I got broke and my father in Kwekwe would not support my drinking habits or promiscuity. Again my landlord got hind of this behaviour and asked me to move out – just for a break I guess. That's when I realised I was pregnant. Because of sex and alcohol abuse, lack of self-control and so on, I forgot who I was and how I was stuck in such a situation. The man could not be found and when I was left all alone, I began to rethink my behaviour.

The inclusion of “I” stories was an opportunity for students to tell their own stories and to present their problems by sharing what they have gone through as a result of the absence of campus accommodation. This methodology allowed students to use their own words to express their feelings and emotions when narrating their stories.

Knowledge Creation and Empowerment

The feminist action research approach taken has helped in facilitating building knowledge to change the conditions of lives for students at the University of Zimbabwe. The female students were involved in the research, investigated the concerns among female students and at the same time participating in the whole process. By engaging students in action research, critical issues concerning their sexual and reproductive health needs were illuminated. Students figured out their problems which they then presented to the university management.

The research process included a process of empowerment and a contribution to action. The involvement of students in the participatory action research made a great impact on the lives of the female students. The fact that they were researchers and, at the same time being respondents, helped in tapping out critical issues affecting sexual and reproductive health of female students at the university. Effecting change in young women's lives was also enhanced by the direct interaction between the research team

and the university management. During the last meeting held with the Pro-Vice Chancellor and the rest of university management, the research team was promised that action would be taken, especially on the issue of accommodation. As promised, the halls of residence were re-opened in August 2011. Students had also raised concerns that some of the staff, both academic and non-academic, were rude to them. The management promised that this would be addressed through an awareness workshop. This again was fulfilled as a meeting was held with the Pro-Vice Chancellor and staff on Etiquette issues in September 2011.

The study has contributed to the body of knowledge on information related to sexual and reproductive health and rights issues with findings that emerged from the study. The issues concerning female students at the University of Zimbabwe, brought to the attention of the university authorities, include the following: female students' engagement with "sugar daddies", multiple concurrent sexual partners, prostitution, engagement in unprotected sex leading to HIV infection, unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions and non use of HIV and AIDS testing services. Some girls, because of desperation, are forced to abort their pregnancies, which is illegal in the country. One girl, in her testimony, reported that she became pregnant and when she told their boyfriend, he denied being responsible for the pregnancy. As a result, she was forced to travel to South Africa to have an abortion there since it is illegal in Zimbabwe to have an abortion.

Dissemination of Research Findings

Dissemination of research findings is a key factor in contributing towards "political" participation and influencing policymaking (Prieto 2002, p.6). In this case, the research findings were disseminated in various ways, namely through an exhibition referred to as the "Shine Day", meetings with university management to discuss the research findings, and also through publication. This was a learning experience as most of the academic reports are never disseminated in the first two ways mentioned earlier.

On the "Shine Day" the findings were presented in the form of a power point presentation, drama, poetry and songs at the end of the project in May 2011. People invited for this event included students and staff from the University of Zimbabwe, organisations representing students such as SAYWHAT and SHAPE Zimbabwe, representatives from Ministry of Gender,

Women Affairs and Development, Ministry of Youth Empowerment and Development, and non-governmental organisations such as Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN).

Conclusion

The methodology used by the University of Zimbabwe was largely participatory action research. This meant involving students throughout the study and allowing the students to interpret their own spaces and problems. It also included probing the students to explain the meaning of certain actions. Most importantly, the two meetings held with the University's administration where problems and solutions were discussed with the students and lecturers involved in the study together with the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Dean of Students and the Chaplain was an outstanding achievement of this research. Practical solutions were discussed with the university's management which largely means that female students will now be placed high on the agenda as a result of this study. Halls of residence were reopened in August 2011 and a meeting with the pro-Vice Chancellor and university staff was held in order to effect change on their attitudes towards students.

The following recommendations were put forward based on the research findings:

- The University of Zimbabwe authorities should provide accommodation for students to solve some of the social and health issues affecting female students, for example, access to the library until late hours. Most of the sexual and reproductive health concerns are emanating from the issue of lack of accommodation.
- The university should consider HIV and AIDS awareness sessions in between lectures vital so as to create much needed awareness about the importance of HIV testing, whether or not one is engaging in sexual activities.
- It was also suggested that the university should increase HIV and AIDS awareness among students by flighting posters and showing films on HIV and AIDS to students as the university used to do earlier. In the 1980's and 90's, new students were shown films on sexually transmitted diseases during orientation week to remind them of dangers in engaging in unprotected sex.
- The UZ should increase the number of counsellors and mentors on

campus as it was reported that only two HIV and AIDS counsellors served the university population.

- University authorities are strongly recommended to consider having friendly health services as students complained of rude staff at the students' clinic.
- There should be female students' groups that will be able to tackle or bring to attention issues and concerns of female students. It was highly recommended that the Young Women's Leadership should be established as a permanent group at the campus to tackle female students' problems.
- There should also be a female student charter for their sexual and reproductive health rights.

References

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