



African Journal of Social Work  
Afri. j. soc. work  
© National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)  
ISSN Print 1563-3934  
ISSN Online 2409-5605

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## The feminisation of gender-based violence at an institution of higher learning in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Gender-based violence (GBV) has become a devastating phenomenon in society with institutions of high learning founding themselves wanting as this challenge seems to manifest itself in various strands. Its manifestation shows skewed gender dynamics, a condition which points to its feminisation. The aim of this study was to explore the feminisation of GBV in institutions of higher learning. The study used the qualitative research method that was descriptive and explanatory, with a case study as the specific research design. The purposive sampling technique and thematic analysis were employed. Study results showed that perceiving women as weak, cultural background and toxic masculinity, as well as blame shifting, are amongst the factors that contribute to the feminisation of GBV. The study recommends that there is a need for a collective and inclusive fight against GBV and men should be actively involved. Custodians of culture should also play an important role, and women must be socially and economically empowered. The study concludes that institutions of higher learning are a mirror of the society and what transpires within them reflects the wider society hence, the feminisation of GBV in institutions of higher learning must not be taken lightly in the fight against GBV.*

**KEY TERMS:** gender-based violence, feminisation, nego feminism, South Africa, stakeholders, toxic masculinity

### KEY DATES

Received: April 2020  
Revised: December 2020  
Accepted: March 2021  
Published: June 2021

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: Not applicable

Ethics approval: University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

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Current and previous volumes are available at:  
<https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/>



### How to reference using ASWNet style:

Kanjiri N. K., & Nomngcoyiya, T. (2021). The feminisation of gender-based violence at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. *African Journal of Social Work*, 11(3), 132-138

## BACKGROUND

In universities and in the public domain, cases of gender-based violence (GBV) have attracted widespread attention. Awareness campaigns, seminars, *indabas* and social media movements are visible evidence of awareness efforts; yet GBV remains a plague. Casey, Carlson, Two Bulls and Yager (2018) posit that the prevention of gender-based violence requires broad community participation, particularly the participation of men and boy children. Perhaps, the lack of a collective effort in fighting GBV explains the continued outbursts of the menace that continues to haunt the country. The reticence of men to fight GBV and the suffering of women at the hands of men points to the feminisation of GBV, a phenomenon which this paper seeks to explore. Signs of GBV continue to appear in the South African social fabric despite an array of efforts to address it. GBV is slowly becoming part of the culture of the country's societies and institutions. This is evident in the recent episodes of rape and murder cases in institutions of higher learning. For example, the rape and subsequent death of Rhodes University student Khensani Maseko, the murder of Jesse Hesse, a University of Western Cape student, and the recent rape and gruesome murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana from the University of Cape Town, are some notable cases that point to the severity of the scourge of GBV in South Africa, particularly in institutions of higher learning (Gouws, 2018). Undeniably, GBV in the institutions of higher learning reflects the larger South African society. This is because pockets of communities in this country across racial lines and socioeconomic status seem to be characterised and overwhelmed by GBV and institutions of higher learning are no exception. Some of the most notable cases that put South Africa on the international scene as far as GBV is concerned are the Oscar Prestorius – Reeva Steenkamp case of 2014 and the famous Zuma - Fezekile Ntsukela Khuzwayo case of 2005 (Modjadji, 2017). These cases, amongst many that go unreported, point to the gruesome dynamics of GBV in South Africa.

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW

### Conceptualising the feminisation of gender-based violence

The feminisation of social ills is not a new phenomenon. Various scholars, such as Kang'ethe (2013) and Kang'ethe and Chikono (2014), have explored the concept of the feminisation of poverty and feminisation of HIV/AIDS in Botswana and Zimbabwe respectively. Both studies portray societal attitudes towards women, and how women continue to be at the receiving end of various negative social phenomena. As elucidated by Kang'ethe and Chikono in their studies, the feminisation of social problems seems to be evidenced by how prevalent it is amongst women and how it affects them compared to other population groups. However, the feminisation of social ills is not only highlighted by their prevalence but also by how women in many societies seem to be perceived to be at the centre of various social ills. Even in this study, many stakeholders that took part, both males and females, seem to blame women for the challenge of GBV. Considering this, GBV qualifies as a feminised phenomenon as its prevalence and effects are borne by women more than their male counterparts.

### Prevalence of gender-based violence

In 2014, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that women are by far more likely to be victims of GBV, as they are primary targets and suffer aggravated consequences (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Statistically, Davenport (2019) suggests that one in three women in South Africa is sexually attacked; two in five are beaten by their partners, and half are sexually harassed at work. Furthermore, one in 15 is murdered by their partner and GBV currently costs the country more than 42 billion rands annually in its attempt to address this phenomenon (Davenport, 2019). Similarly, the South African Police Service (SAPS) recorded 443 387 rape cases over the past decade with 2019 having the highest number pegged at 41 583, the highest ever in four years (Cohen and Vecchiato, 2019). In a period of 12 months between 2018 and 2019, as noted by Cohen and Vecchiato, approximately 2 771 women were murdered. Cohen and Vecchiato further note that whilst these statistics are staggering, it is worrisome that the problem might be understated as cases of GBV are frequently not reported.

### Men's involvement in addressing gender-based violence

Casey, Carlson, Two Bulls and Yager (2018) believe that the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) requires broad community participation, particularly the active involvement of men and boy children. Probably because of this call, men's involvement in GBV prevention and their engagement in anti-violence behaviour has become a common global component. Further, these argue that men's anti-violence participation is a complex endeavour that involves mobilising them against the existence of their traditional symbol of power. Strategies and experiences that most effectively initiate men's involvement in gender-based violence events and work are still trivial (Casey, Tolman, Carlson, Allen and Storer, 2017). This indicates that though there could be some improvement, practically the burden of GBV remains largely on the shoulders of women.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEGO FEMINISM

The nego feminism theory, conceptualised by Nigerian feminist, writer, and scholar Obioma Nnaemeka in 1999 was formulated as an alternative to other forms of feminism like liberal, radical and Marxist feminist theories which Nnaemeka regarded as confrontational, thus, failing to bring the desired goal of gender justice (Muhammad, Mani, Talif, & Kaur 2017). Nego Feminism, sometimes interpreted as “no ego” feminism is premised on the conviction that by and large, African cultures have a culture of compromise and negotiation when it comes to reaching agreements (Nnaemeka 2004) hence it seeks to establish peace between patriarchy and matriarchy through cooperation, negotiation and reconciliation (Nkealah 2016). In its approach, nego feminism takes into consideration the effects of patriarchal traditions and customs and aims to dismantle them and negotiate for a better position for women (Muhammad, Talif, Kaur & Bahar 2019). The feminisation of gender-based violence, in its various forms and strands, comes as a manifestation of the defensive attitude by men due to confrontational approaches adopted by previous feminist theories. To avoid gender polarisation caused by confrontational feminist paradigms, society needs to adopt a reconciliatory and cooperative approach that acknowledges that, although patriarchy is the problem, men still remain an integral part in the matrix of dismantling male dominance to achieve gender justice. Thus, nego feminism with its negotiation, reconciliatory and cooperation approach presents itself as the best possible lens towards “feminist struggles”, some of which manifest in various forms of gender-based violence and its subsequent feminisation.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

This article sought to explore the feminisation of gender-based violence in institutions of higher learning. The article was extracted from a study that investigated the underpinnings of gender-based violence in universities and the feminisation of GBV emerged as an underlying theme contributing to the upsurge of GBV. This study used the qualitative research method that was descriptive and explanatory, with a case study as the specific research design. This design was relevant to the study as it addressed key aspects that are characteristic to the feminisation of GBV. The case study research design allowed an evaluation of human experiences, feelings and concerns pertaining to GBV. One of the institutions of higher learning in the Eastern Cape Province was the study setting with various categories of stakeholders such as male and female students, security personnel and student counselling unit officials. The study sampled 20 participants ranging from undergraduate students to postgraduate students. The study applied a non-probability sampling method, specifically the purposive sampling technique in selecting participants. More specifically, the study adopted the purposive sampling technique. Participants were selected based on the purpose and needs of the study which sought to deduce the extent of feminisation of GBV.

Data collection from all relevant sources to find answers to the research problem and evaluate the outcomes was enabled by the use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Participants played a fundamental role providing information on the underpinning factors associated with the feminisation of gender-based violence in institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, an interview guide was used for semi-structured questions for both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The study was cross-sectional as its data collection process was between the months of July and September 2018. Participants were subjected to one-on-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. English and Xhosa languages were used to enable study participants to express themselves freely without being constrained by language. However, data gathered in isiXhosa was transcribed and translated into English. Information collected was audio taped and handwritten notes were taken to complement the audio data. In the same vein, thematic analysis was used to analyse data. This is a process whereby raw data collected was rearranged, categorised and grouped into themes as illustrated by the views of the study participants.

This study focused on the University of Fort Hare, Alice campus. This is one of the institutions of higher learning in the Eastern Cape Province that has had its fair share of cases of GBV in recent years. Like many other institutions of higher learning in South Africa such as Rhodes University, WITS University and University of Cape Town – the University of Fort Hare has made audio-visual and newspaper headlines over GBV related issues. One shocking GBV related incident at the University of Fort Hare among others is the bashing of a female student at the hands of his male partner that went viral on social media (Gouws 2018). Having been at the University of Fort Hare between 2015 to 2019, the researchers noticed with keen interest and concern, the manifestations of GBV within the institution. The epidemic nature of GBV at institutions of higher learning including the University of Fort Hare influenced these researchers to consider choosing this study domain.

The researchers also ensured that the University research protocols were observed through seeking clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) in order to be granted permission to conduct the study. This ensured that the research was morally and administratively appropriate. Care was exercised to ensure that the rights of the participants were protected to avoid ethical dilemmas.

## STUDY FINDINGS

### Femininity perceived as a sign of weakness

The notion that women are weak is a critical aspect to consider in the phenomenon of the feminisation of GBV. Study results indicated that perceiving women as weak had a great influence on people's understanding of GBV. Whilst the statements below show that some do not synonymise GBV with women, they reveal that there is a general societal belief that women's perceived weakness contributes much to their subsequent vulnerability to GBV. A consideration of the following statements sheds more light on this assertion:

*To me violence has nothing to do with one's gender. I think the term GBV is sexist and identifies women as the weaker sex hence they are always the ones who experience GBV" (Key informant P5).*

*Gender based violence is abuse towards the opposite gender regardless of sex or sexual orientation. It does not necessarily refer to women only as generally perceived. This women-are-weak thing is misleading' (P6, undergraduate male).*

Drawing from the above findings, the stereotypical belief that women are weak has paved way to the idea that women are largely victims because they cannot stand up and fight their stronger male counterparts. In addition, it could be that men take advantage of this so-called weakness to perpetrate acts of abuse and violence. Either way, this has had a significant bearing on how or why GBV is feminised.

### Burden of blame apportioned to women alone

Gathering from the study results, there seems to be a sense in which men never claim responsibility for issues of GBV, but rather try to justify their actions. Apparently, the blame is placed on women, a sign which speaks volumes about why men identify GBV as being incited by women.

*It's not like we want to beat ladies, no. But these ladies are too provoking. They stretch you to your limits. These ladies are abusive, emotionally so (P9 undergraduate male).*

*Girls are manipulative and emotional abusers; they say words that will leave scars for life...how can someone say 'uneshandisi encinci (your penis is very small) and you are failing to satisfy me in bed. As a man I am bound to react (P8 Male undergraduate).*

*Somehow women are now taking advantage of the laws that seem to favour them more. Apparently, a lady can afford to yell at you and insult you but once you raise your hand you are charged with GBV (P15 Honours student).*

The above sentiments are worrying. In them lie signs of blame shifting which probably point to the traditional cultural belief that men are always right. The statements seem to tone down the seriousness of GBV in the guise of disciplining provocative women. To some extent, men appear to seek justification for their actions by soliciting sympathy.

### Toxic masculinity influenced by culture and tradition

The majority of male students who participated in this study revealed a strong attachment to cultural and traditional beliefs which are largely chauvinistic in nature. Embedded in these beliefs is a sense of toxic masculinity influenced by male dominance as entrenched in the traditional society. In support of this view, the following sentiments were captured:

*Where I come from, my father is the final decision maker. The father is the head of the family and my mother has to submit to my father. Ladies here on campus do not seem to know this. Their education has gotten into their heads and they have forgotten our culture and traditions. As a man I do not want to be challenged, if you do, I will teach you a lesson" (P16 male masters student).*

*The problem we have is men who are adamant about cultural customs that suppress women. Maybe it is because they benefit from it, I don't know. Gone are the days when women were second class citizens. Unfortunately, men don't understand this. It's even amazing that guys on campus, the ones whom we think are learned and enlightened, cling to such practices. They feel threatened when we stand up. We are violated" (P20 PHD female student).*

Evidently, the above remarks bear witness to how tradition and culture have contributed to toxic masculinity. Men's over identification with culture blinds them to the reality that some cultural practices are suppressive and undermine the worthy and dignity of their female counterparts. Perhaps, men are not blind at all, but as echoed by one female student quoted above, they simply enjoy the benefits of patriarchy at the expense of women.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study revealed a sense of toxic masculinity amongst male students which is engrained in culture and tradition. Risal (2015) suggests that tendencies of GBV lie in the unequal balance of power between men and women that are institutionalised within the patriarchal system. The traditional gender roles prescribed by culture enhance women's risk of experiencing GBV as these bring a sense of dominance, superiority and ownership over women (Vyas and Heise, 2016). Possessiveness and unrivalled authority occupy men's domains whilst submissiveness is expected from women (Odimegwu, Okemgbo and Ayila, 2010). This creates a breeding ground for unequal power dynamics leading to the vulnerability of women. Men see themselves as culture bound to discipline women and it would be a shame if they do not do so (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). As such, men do not see their actions as abusive but part of their cultural dictates that promote the tradition of wife battery as a symbol of love (Odimegwu, Okemgbo and Ayila, 2010). It is for this reason that GBV at institutions of higher learning is not only feminised but is also a reflection of the wider society.

Seemingly, to the African men, education and culture are not compatible (Parkes, 2015). This could explain why at universities, the phenomenon of gender-based violence seems to be rampant regardless of the fact that students are educated and are expected to act differently. In the face of the wave of female emancipation, women have been self-conscious and well aware of their rights and perhaps this has become a threat to men's position and authority as afforded to them by culture (Risal, 2015). Men are now standing on the edge of insecurity as they feel challenged. As a result, the only way they can secure and maintain their hegemony is by adhering to beliefs that translate to toxic masculinity.

However, those who romanticise culture and tradition argue that toxic masculinity has more to do with personality than culture. Bichieri (2017) suggests that cultural expectations have to be differentiated from personal attitudes and beliefs towards women. Bichieri goes on to argue that, culturally, men are expected to be more protective than abusive. Therefore, the idea that men's abusiveness is a trait handed down to them by culture is a misconstruction of tradition. Probably, culture has fallen victim to misinterpretation by the modern society that finds itself at the mercy of men's egos. Whether culture is a casualty of false vilification or not, it goes without saying that, it is critical in the matrix of defining masculinity viz-a-vis gender relations. There is a need, therefore, to understand it in a way which is compatible with the demands of modern-day society if it is to be exempted from the guilt of contributing to the prevalence of gender-based violence and its subsequent feminisation.

The study identified that men do not take responsibility for their violent actions against their female counterparts. Instead, men seem to consider their behaviour and attitude as a reaction against provocation and this culminates in the burden of blame being apportioned to women. Whilst the physical abuse of women cannot be denied, men also see themselves as victims of emotional abuse by women (Robinson and May, 2019). Coupled with toxic masculinity, this emotional abuse manifests as aggression towards women. Three male students in this study were quoted as citing that they were emotionally abused by their girlfriends and some were called derogatory names for reasons ranging from failing to satisfy them in bed, having a small penile organ to far reaching tribal persecution for the mere fact that one is not circumcised. As a result, men end up beating their girlfriends to spare themselves from shame and protect their egos (Robinson and May, 2019).

Whilst this might appear as sheer blame shifting by men, one can argue that this seemingly self-saving sideshow summons more attention than denunciation. Study results showed that, whereas men are physically abusive, women can be emotionally abusive. Male students saw themselves as burning from both ends and lamented how their abuse is overlooked and only that of their female counterparts is emphasised. They registered that they suffer emotional abuse mutely, only to be persecuted for gender-based violence when they react in the only way they know how to. To some men, it is never gender based violence but a justified reaction to emotional abuse. Undeniably, what makes women prone to gender-based violence is the general perception that women are a weaker gender. Whilst biology attests to this fact that women are physiologically weaker than their male counterparts are, it should also be understood that it is not only physiological weakness that men capitalise on to perpetrate acts of GBV (Vyas and Heise, 2016). The perception that women are weak has to be approached in a holistic manner, considering also the socioeconomic position of women in relation to men (Kang'ethe, 2014).

In these researchers' view, the weakness therefore, becomes more attitudinal than physiological. Somehow, women become dependent on men, hence making them vulnerable to manipulation and abuse and this finds ground in the studies of Odimegwu, Okemgbo and Ayila (2010), when they project that scientific literature has provided numerous examples of violence perpetrated upon the dependent and the weak. Students echoed that, no matter how physically strong a woman is, socioeconomic dependence on men exposes her to all forms of abuse. On campus, cases of GBV amongst cohabitating partners are rampant. Female students are victims of intimate

partner violence as they depend on their boyfriends for places to stay. Some female students are sexually abused in exchange for allocation of residence accommodation. These examples highlight the weak socioeconomic position held by women that exposes them to GBV related issues. The vulnerability of women to GBV should therefore be located more in the socioeconomic context than in physiological terms.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK**

The social work profession in South Africa now more than ever needs to promote a social milieu that will end GBV and encourage violence free intimate relationships and interpersonal interaction. This is because GBV in this country has become one of the biggest challenges just like the current poor socio-economic triple threats such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality. More social work interventions inclined towards increasing violence-free relationships and reduce clientele system victimisation and perpetration are needed if the profession is to promote a new societal trajectory that is GBV free. Social work as a profession which promotes non-judgemental attitude has to approach GBV issues not with a persecutory approach but with lenses that take context into account so as to deal with GBV holistically and systematically.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Inclusive approach to deal with GBV oriented behaviour**

To register significant progress in the fight against GBV, the government, civil organisations, community leaders, university stakeholders and other necessary authorities must come up with programmes that actively involve men on issues of GBV. Perpetrators of GBV, who are usually men, should also receive counselling in order to denote the underlying factors leading to their actions so that gender-based violence-oriented behaviour and attitudes can be dealt with.

### **Reconsidering the role of culture and tradition in fighting GBV**

Whilst tradition and culture contribute significantly to the causes of GBV, this study contends that the two have to receive considerable attention in the fight against GBV. In this regard, custodians of culture and tradition have to be involved in the battle against GBV so they can interpret how customs and tradition were used in the past to protect rather than abuse women.

### **Socio-economic empowerment of women**

This study noted that, the perceived weakness of women goes beyond physiological explanations, women are socially and economically incapacitated and this exposes them to abuse. There is a need therefore, to empower women and put them onto a better socioeconomic status, to cover all gaps that pave way for manipulation and subsequent abuse.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study discussed the feminisation of GBV, a phenomenon which contributes to the upsurge of GBV. The feminisation of GBV must not be taken lightly as it poses a threat to all efforts aimed at annihilating GBV. Consequently, it is time that men cooperate to solve, not distance themselves from GBV. Whilst this study was conducted at one selected institution, these researchers contend that the observations of this study are without doubt, a microcosm of the macrocosm. This study is a demonstration of what happens in many institutions of higher learning. It is also a portrayal of what is imported into and exported out of university confinements.

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