

Exploring the impact of intimate partner violence on the women students living in cohabitation^{1 2}

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to explore the impact of intimate partner violence on female students living in cohabitation in one South African tertiary institution. In a qualitative study comprised of 12 black isiXhosa-speaking female students, aged 19-24, from the University of Fort Hare (Alice Campus), a purposive sampling was followed. The study was underpinned by Emersson's social exchange theory. The participants gave their informed consent to be tape-recorded prior to conducting the focus group interviews, which lasted for almost an hour. Safeguarding their dignity, privacy and confidentiality was achieved by using pseudonyms. To ensure trustworthiness of the study, Lincoln and Guba's principles were followed, namely: confirmability, dependability, neutrality and transferability. The findings revealed that cohabiting female students are subjugated in terms of expressing their rights to negotiate safe sex and are physically abused when refusing to terminate pregnancies. Furthermore, an impaired sense of autonomy and deprivation to bond with their own biological children were reported. Based on the findings, the authors conclude that there should be empowerment programmes for gender equality at tertiary institutions and parental support for female students.

Keywords: abuse, alcohol, culture, psychological distress, sex

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, sexual assaults and intimate partner violence (IPV) have become a focus of public concern at institutions of higher learning (Kaukenin, 2014; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2018; Wood et al., 2018). Such IPV continues to reach unprecedented levels and South African feminist researchers such as Dosekun (2013) and Gqola (2007) are concerned because gender-based violence relegates women

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and constrains their behaviour to regard themselves as second class citizens. In a review report that commissioned the University of KwaZulu-Natal to investigate gender-based violence (GBV) in residences, MacKay and Magwaza (2008) found that more than 2 000 women students were sexually assaulted annually. In most cases, GBV at UKZN is experienced in heterosexual relationships just like at the University of the Western Cape (Clowes et al., 2009). Even outside South Africa, GBV escalated at Australian Universities in which heterosexual women undergraduate students experienced non-consensual sexual contacts owing to drug and alcohol abuse by their intimate partners (Durbach & Grey, 2018). In a survey conducted at one Zimbabwean university in Bulawayo, 49% of women students living in cohabitation reported high incidences of IPV (Svodziwa & Kurete, 2017). In African countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa, research indicates that due to insufficient provision of hostel accommodation on campuses and high costs of university fees, the majority of women students find themselves living in cohabitation (Aluko, 2011; Mligo & Otieno, 2018; Pengdid & Peltzer, 2016; Svodziwa & Kurete, 2017). Cohabitation refers to the sexual union between two people who are romantically involved and choose to share housing for a reasonable period before making the formal commitment of marriage (Greenberg, Bruess & Oswalt, 2014; Kasim & Falola, 2017). In this study, cohabitation is contextualised as involving heterosexual students at the universities, which is often precipitated by poverty (Kheswa & Hoho, 2017). For example, Murudi, Mashau and Ramathuba (2018) found financial constraints due to unemployment of caregivers (for instance, biological parents, aunts or uncles) resulting in Mashamba College's women students engaging in sex for money.

Furthermore, research indicates that university women students with a history of childhood physical abuse (Barrick, Krebs & Linqvist, 2013) and absent fathers (Malhebere, 2015) tend to become comfortable with dating multiple sexual partners and engaging in hook-ups (Black et al., 2019; Kheswa & Mahlalela, 2014) despite being susceptible to IPV. The works by Gould and Ward (2015), Makusha and Richter (2015), and Ratele, Shefer and Clowes (2012) confirm that a father's absence has a direct impact on the emotional stability, sexual behaviour and cognitive functionality of their daughters. The phenomenon of intergenerational sex (sexual relationships with older men) amongst women university students becomes common because women students would like to see their financial needs met (Masvawure, 2010). Such students may lack autonomy regarding their reproductive rights, and, owing to impaired self-esteem, they are most likely to engage in unsafe sex and become pregnant (Peterson, Carmen & Geher, 2013).

In Hong Kong, more than 46.1% of women undergraduate students reported physical abuse (Chan & Strauss, 2008). Epidemiological evidence shows that due to being submissive and fearful of physical abuse, women students living in cohabitation use condoms infrequently and consequently become exposed to unplanned pregnancies and/or contract sexual transmitted diseases (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016). Due to the lack in sexual values and self-control, their sexual partners introduce them to substance abuse (Shorey et al., 2014). Owing to socialisation, an alarming number of women students tend to submit to patriarchal norms and tolerate the extradyadic sexual involvements of their male partners (Kheswa & Van Eeden, 2018). No wonder the Central Statistics Office/Zambia, Ministry of Health (Zambia) and ICF International (2014) reported HIV prevalence to be higher among heterosexual women students than among their male counterparts. To confirm the above assertion, at the University of Venda in South Africa, 14% of cohabiting students did not use condoms consistently during sexual acts (Anyanwu, Ter Goon & Tugli, 2013). Ekpenyong and Ekpenyong (2016) reported that women students had to suspend their studies at the University of Ibadan, Adekunle Ajasin University and Olabisi Onabanjo University (all in Nigeria) to avoid discrimination by their peers.

As cohabitation is short-lived as compared to legal marriages (Tesfaye & Jibat, 2014), a potential breakup and infidelity frequently lead to psychological distress and, in turn, impacts negatively on the emotional well-being of women students (Kheswa & Hoho, 2017). In previous quantitative studies, which investigated

the correlation between emotional abuse and sexual relationships among college students, Vidourek (2017) found that the majority of women students reported low self-esteem. Regarding the causal factors and effects of cohabitation at the universities, Ekpenyong and Ekpenyong (2016) established that women students reported insomnia (i.e. lack of sleep), social withdrawal, anxiety and mood swings. Additionally, due to a lack of dedication to their studies, Tanzanian women students who lived in cohabitation reported poor academic performance (Mligo & Otieno, 2018).

Allen (2017) agrees that due to male dominance in many cultures, women students would be physically beaten, raped and kicked upon touching their partners' mobile phones. Rather than terminating the relationships or laying charges for IPV and rape, women students would ruminate, apologise, promise not to touch the phones, and perform some domestic chores such as cooking and doing the laundry for their male partners (Coelho, Ribeiro & Valente, 2015). Due to socialised acceptance of the rape myth, an alarming number of victims or survivors of IPV tend not to report it to the authority figures at the universities or to the police (Adams, Mabusela & Dlamini, 2013; Dhloho et al., 2012). There is a concern amongst feminists and activists that in countries such as Australia, the United States and South Africa, the judicial system is slow in convicting rape perpetrators and recognising the rights of women (Le Roux, 2016; Monchgesang, 2015; Phipps et al., 2018).

Given that female students living in cohabitation experience abuse, there is a need for the university management to implement programmes aimed at addressing gender-violence (Harper et al., 2018; Kamimura et al., 2016). Allen (2017) found that due to a conspiracy of silence, an alarming rate of female students living in cohabitation prefer not to report sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation directed at them. Critics allege that many policies are ambiguous and university staff members serving in disciplinary committees tend to be biased when female students bring their cases of sexual assault (Cantalupo, 2016; Portnoy & Anderson, 2015). It is therefore expected that university management take legal steps to protect the rights of students who experience(d) emotional and sexual abuse on campus (Weiss & Lasky, 2017) and provide psychological services that are accessible to these students (Sabina, Verdiglione & Zadnik, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emersson's social exchange theory provides an in-depth understanding of why women students live in cohabitation and posits that unsafe sexual practices are common in sexual relationships characterised by gifts or money in exchange for sex (Emersson, 1976). In such relationships, due to financial power that the male partners possess over the female partner, emotional, physical and sexual abuse are likely to be reported by women students (Morrell et al., 2013). In their pursuit of a sense of belonging and identity, women students who have lived with absent fathers and who were reared in non-supportive family environments often fear rejection and are unable to stand up for their human rights (Kgadima, 2017).

Against this background, this study intends to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do female students living in cohabitation cope with intimate partner violence?
- (2) What are the effects of intimate partner violence on the psychological well-being of female students living in cohabitation?

METHOD

Design

An inductive, contextual, qualitative research design was employed by using focus group interviews. In focus group interviews, non-response is minimised while the quality of data to be collected is maximised

because all participants tend to share their own experiences (Creswell, 2013). Open-ended, structured interviews were administered to every participant in a private office in the Psychology Building.

Sampling and sample

This study opted for the non-probability procedure owing to the sensitivity of the topic. In non-probability sampling, not all the participants in the population stand an equal chance to participate in the study (Babbie, 2015). Thus, the researchers employed purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to a procedure in which the participants are selected based on sharing characteristics such as the same culture and similar life experiences (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2015). The authors agree with Shen (2014) that knowledge about dating violence is derived from research conducted abroad; it is clear that even by race, in South Africa, studies on sexual harassment at universities have had limitations. For example, at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), black women students represented only 20% of participants in Nene's study (2010). In the Western Cape, white women participants were overrepresented in Steenkamp's study (2010). It is for this reason that the present study intends to conduct qualitative research among women students experiencing IPV while in cohabitation at one South African institution. It is important to note that the 12 isiXhosa-speaking participants, aged between 19 and 24 years of age, are some of the students receiving counselling and coaching from the programme that addresses gender-based violence at the University of Fort Hare. One of the researchers is a trained champion against GBV and works in that programme under the mentorship of the Dean of Students. As suggested by Creswell (2013), the researchers ensured that the participants shared the same characteristics: they were all full-time students in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. There were six participants from first-year level, four from second-year level and two from third-year level.

Trustworthiness

In pursuit of trustworthiness, the researchers followed four criteria as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. To ensure that the study was credible, the researchers' questions revolved around GBV and cohabitation, and the participants shared the same characteristics. For dependability, the researchers ensured that the research methodology and data analysis are explained thoroughly as suggested by Houghton et al. (2013). Furthermore, de Vos et al. (2011) encourage the researcher to ask the participants the same questions through probing to get clarity. For confirmability, the researchers transcribed the responses verbatim and involved the participants in discussion to avoid bias (Houghton et al., 2013; Krefting, 1991). Furthermore, the researchers did not fabricate the responses. Finally, the researchers ensured transferability by comparing their findings to those of previous scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting the study, the researchers applied for ethical clearance from the Govan Mbeki Research and Development Centre (GMRDC) to safeguard the dignity of the participants. The researchers explained the objectives and the significance of the voluntary participation in the study. Thereafter, the participants gave their informed consent and agreed to be audio-recorded for trustworthiness. None of the participants withdrew from the study although it was time-consuming. To achieve anonymity and confidentiality, participants used pseudonyms. For privacy, the focus group interview was conducted on a weekend in one of the designated laboratory rooms in the Psychology Building, Alice Campus. At the end of the interview, the participants were also debriefed to ensure that they do not judge themselves as inadequate because they showed signs of depression.

Data analysis

Tesch's (1990) method was followed to analyse data qualitatively. After data collection, the researchers listened to the responses, which they had audio-taped. To capture the pattern as suggested by Braun and

Clarke (2006), the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by listening to verbatim transcripts repeatedly. Thereafter, the researcher grouped similar ideas to identify codes. The codes were further broken down to form categories and themes.

RESULTS

Biographical information of the participants

Of the 12 participants in this study, six of them indicated that they had been raised by unemployed single parents while four were raised by two parents, and only two lived with relatives prior to pursuing their tertiary education. Furthermore, five of the participants mentioned that they had children during their teen years as compared to the seven participants who had no children.

Categories and themes

The categories with themes identified following Tesch's method of data analysis as conducive to IPV suffered by female students living in cohabitation are **abuse, constriction of contraceptive rights, sexual assaults, cultural practices and psychological distress.**

Six major categories and two sub-themes emerged from the analysis of interviews.

Abuse

When the participants were asked to describe how their sexual partners treat them, it was clear that women students in cohabitation are exposed to emotional abuse and their reproductive rights are constricted

Emotional and physical abuse

In a patriarchal society where power imbalances between women and men reign, most female students living in cohabitation often terminate friendships with significant others because their sexual partners always suspect them of hooking up with the male counterparts.

He has insisted on my phone's pin code to access my WhatsApp and Facebook and told me that he disapproves some of my friends since they are well known on campus. He insulted me upon scrolling my phone and found out that I was chatting with my male classmate. [Zowi, aged 19]

Nobantu (aged 22) and her boyfriend used to live together. She was quoted as follows regarding how badly she would be beaten by her boyfriend:

My boyfriend used to beat me. He will lock the room and play music loud and beat me. When I ask him why is beating me? He would say that his friends told him that I am cheating although I was not cheating.

Ntyebokazi (aged 22) with tears in her eyes, narrated as follows:

I remember one day he came and he started kicking me, accusing me of cheating him; like he use to beat me several times and for no reason. He is a violent person. I remember he was even beating me during my pregnancy.

Constrained movements

In addition to being controlled regarding friendship formation, another participant highlighted that even in social spaces such as the cafeteria, sports grounds and computer laboratories, her movements have been constrained by her sexual partner's low regard for others. She mentioned that she is not supposed to mingle with other fellow students.

If I had known that my boyfriend was this cruel, I would not have listen to him when he suggested that I should rent my room to come and stay with him. I have stopped playing for the netball team and when we go to watch soccer games, he does not want us to join other students. He has beaten me twice and claimed to assault me if I argue with him. [Ntsiki, aged 20]

Constriction of contraceptive rights

This theme relates to constriction of contraceptive rights. For example, upon Thembi discovering that she had missed her periods and that she might be pregnant, she informed her boyfriend. He forced her to terminate the pregnancy. The extract below attests to that.

He told me that he was not ready to be the father, I should abort and he was not serious about our relationship. If not, I should leave his place.

Julia also found out that she was pregnant and decided to terminate pregnancy because she had already noticed that her boyfriend was cheating on her with another other lady and has been controlling her.

I booked at Victoria Hospital when I was 12 weeks pregnant for termination of pregnancy as I was going to be an embarrassment to my family with two children with different fathers. Moreover, I have learnt my lesson, no more cohabitation while still studying because men don't care about us.

Sexual assaults

Sexual coercion

Rape at the tertiary institutions is common in cohabiting relationships where women students are financially dependent on their partners. As a result, women students succumb to coerced sex for fear of reprisal. One participant reported that her male partner insisted on having unprotected sex even though she had her periods at the time.

He came late drunk from the tavern and when he got into the room, he grabbed me and penetrate me when I tried to explain that my periods have started, he told me that I had sex with someone while he was gone. [Thembi, aged 19]

Gang rape

Furthermore, Bibi (aged 22), a second-year student, who stayed outside the campus, cried when relating that her boyfriend, aged 34, brought his friend to their room and she apparently had been drugged and had a threesome. She narrated as follows:

It was on Saturday night and we had agreed with my boyfriend that we would go to the Welcome Party of the first years. His friend came with alcohol and videos. They played music on the laptop and after an hour or so, they watched pornography. Because I also drank wine, I can't recall what happened except waking up in bed naked with my partner and his friend.

Cultural practices

Due to the myth that traditionally circumcised males are less prone to contracting STIs, some participants felt that their sexual partners who were circumcised overpowered them. Hence, they refrain from suggesting condoms. Furthermore, rather than to feel rejected and isolated, they succumb to unsafe sex.

He always tells me that he won't wear a condom because he went to the mountain, and he does not care whether I contract HIV and as a Xhosa man, he doesn't feel sexually satisfied to sleep with one woman. [Nobantu, aged 22]

My partner told me that in his culture, men have the right to dominate sexually and should he contract any disease, it would be my promiscuity. [Zowi, aged 19]

Psychological distress

It became evident that the participants were not coping and that their psychological well-being was impaired. For instance, Bibi nearly risked her life.

... I attempted to commit suicide because the rape ordeal left me thinking that I might have contracted HIV. I was depressed and I drank alcohol because my boyfriend whom I trusted betrayed me.

Neglect of biological children

Two participants, who left their children in the care of their single mothers, described how hopeless and helpless they felt because their partners would not allow them to visit home. They were quoted as follows:

I was going to be in my sixth month now not seeing my 4-year-old boy because he would refuse to let me go home even on weekends. He would ask me what if I was going to meet my son's daddy when I went to the village. [Julia, aged 20]

I had promised my mother to come home during the Easter holidays since she takes care of my 2-year-old daughter. I failed because Mandla, aged 26, deliberately refused to give me money. He told me that I should stop mentioning my daughter because he has also abandoned his two kids. [Babalwa, aged 19]

However, Sizakele, aged 24, a final-year student and a mother of an eight-year-old boy, lives in cohabitation. She expressed the unconditional support and love from her sexual partner of three years as phenomenal. She said:

He regards my son as his own. During school holidays and long-weekends, he is the one asking me to request my parents to allow my son visit us. He tells me how fortunate he is to be with me and has promised to marry me.

Substance abuse

Amahle (aged 23) has been living in cohabitation for two years and that she was raised by an unemployed single parent, she mentioned substance abuse as a form to cope with psychological distress.

Alcohol helps me to cope with my daily challenges and just to think I have no financial support back home, I am even afraid to report my boyfriend to the university that he abuses me.

Gender-based programmes

The majority of the participants highlighted the need for empowerment programmes aimed at equipping female students with skills to prevent IPV and rape when asked to respond to the question: What steps do university female students in cohabitation take against oppression of their human rights? For example, Julia (aged 20), Zowi (aged 19), Amahle (aged 23), and Sesi (aged 21) agreed that due to patriarchal structures within the campus, their grievances are not taken into consideration. Thus, some victims suffer in silence and do not report sexual assaults to the university management and the police. In this regard, they suggested that the university should organise rallies, campaigns and workshops against women abuse irrespective of the kinds of sexual relationships they have. Sesi in particular was quoted as follows:

At other universities like Rhodes, Wits and UCT, there are forums for addressing gender inequality and the management plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the male perpetrators are dealt with.

Thembi mentioned that she could not even go to the police station after her boyfriend raped her because the police officers lack professionalism. She echoed...

My friend told me that she got humiliated by a police officer in front of other patrons by asking her to speak louder when reporting a sexual assault.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study clearly indicate that women students living in cohabitation suffer emotionally owing to IPV. More than half of the participants expressed that their sexual partners would start by accusing them of cheating and then severely punch them with fists. As a demonstration of gender inequality, which emerged as the main driver of oppression of women's rights, women participants no longer had friends or were not actively involved in group discussions with other students. They highlighted that when living in cohabitation, once their sexual partners return from drinking alcohol, they would insist on checking the phones of their sexual partners to determine if they did not cheat by calling or chatting with other men. This finding aligns with the study that found that the majority of women students living together with their sexual partners illegally are more likely to experience cheating and physical and emotional abuse. Given that some of the participants have children whom they should visit, especially during school holidays, it is clear that they have neglected them. Ricks et al. (2016) noted that in cohabitation, IPV is perpetuated by increased negative communication between couples as a result of spending less time together, especially in situations where men would go to bars and come back home drunk. Drawing from the theoretical framework of this study, Emersson's (1976) social exchange theory affirms that when women students are financially dependent on their sexual partners they compromise their life and stay in abusive relationships. Hence, some of the participants remained subservient to the demands of their sexual partners such as practising unsafe sex because of cultural precepts attached to traditional male circumcision. When traditionally circumcised men ascribe to the norms of masculinity by forcing women to engage in sexual intercourse, the chances of contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, are higher. In societies which embrace culture, women are bound to be stigmatised should they mention that their sexual partners have infected them with an STI (Fleming et al., 2017). To prove how dangerous unsafe sex is, Chanda et al. (2014) found that a disproportionate number of male students at one college in Lusaka, Zambia reported to have infected women students with STIs. It is of paramount importance to empower women students to be assertive because Ayiga's (2012) study conducted in Uganda clearly shows that women's rights to contraceptives or family planning are equated to infidelity by their male partners when they try to negotiate safe sex. In another study, Saha and Saha (2017) noted that, in India, owing to their poor-economic status, college female students had no say over challenging the risky sexual behaviour to which their male partners subjected them.

Another finding relates to gang rape, where one participant confirmed that her male sexual partner, aged 34, brought a friend to their house and raped her following a blackout amnesia. It is a fact that excessive alcohol use could lead to blackout amnesia as it impairs judgement. Blackout amnesia (sometimes referred to as 'alcohol-induced amnesia') is a type of forgetfulness in which an individual cannot recall what happened after drinking alcohol (Hingson et al., 2016; Tokuda, Izumi & Zorumski, 2011). This could be the reason women who have been raped do not lay charges. Milhausen et al. (2018), therefore, caution female students to be modest during the initial stages of cohabitation because some of the male partners might be anti-social. In their study among Canadian University female students who were living in cohabitation, a large number of female youths had contracted STIs from strangers. As much as the participants were never asked about their health status for ethical reasons, however, they might have

contracted HIV or other STIs, such as syphilis and chlamydia, because their male partners would not talk about practising safer sex and had been involved with multiple sexual partners.

Owing to power dynamics, there are participants who were forced to terminate pregnancies. This could be risky and lead to haemorrhage (i.e. heavy bleeding) that can be deleterious to the cervix as cautioned by Kheswa and Takatshana (2014). No wonder some participants reported impaired psychological well-being or psychological distress. Women students emphasised alcohol abuse as a form of coping and, in some instances, they attempted suicides. This affirms that when women have reached the stage of hopelessness, they devalue themselves and life seems to be meaningless for them. Kheswa (2017) is concerned that these women students might have been reared in dysfunctional families characterised by domestic violence; thus, they lack leadership qualities and are unlikely to report anxiety and depressive symptoms. However, one final year student's relationship was characterised by warmth, emotional connectedness, commitment and passion, which extends to her son because she was never ill-treated by her sexual partner. Instead, her male partner was supportive because he never capitalised on his financial position to suppress her rights to bond with her son. One of the factors could be maturity as compared to other participants who were still in their first year of study and never learnt their lovers' personalities. Yan et al. (2010) are of the opinion that women students, especially in their first year of study, should not be easily pressured into premarital sex and being accommodated by their male partners to avoid abuse.

The need to empower female students manifested in their desire to restore their dignity, sense of autonomy and purpose in life. De Wet and Gumbo (2016) agree that cohabitation has the propensity to diminish the future prospects of any women student lacking in emotional maturity and self-esteem. There was thus one women student who regretted having stayed in cohabitation.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In conclusion, the participants suggested there needs to be involvement of the university management in implementing programmes aimed at destabilising hegemonic masculinity to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS and tyranny brought by gender-inequality in sexual relationships marked by social exchange theory and cultural practices.

Although this study achieved its objectives, there are limitations related to demographics such as the race of the participants, the small sample size (only 12 participants) and the location since the study was confined to only one tertiary institution.

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