

A SCOURGE OF SEXUAL VICTIMISATION OF FEMALE STUDENTS: EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS FROM SELECTED UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global threat that affects women in different parts of the world. South Africa is one of the countries with high cases of widespread cultural and structural violent issues. South Africa's various institutions of higher learning are not spared from the spillover of rape and gender-based violence (GBV) cases, a spilled-over from the broader society where these institutions are located. Sexual victimisation is rife in institutions of higher learning, with escalating cases daily. This study explored the effects of sexual victimisation on female students. The study employed an interpretivist qualitative approach to collect data from students, security staff members, and student counsellors from three anonymous institutions of higher learning in KwaZulu Natal. Thus, 48 purposively selected participants were engaged in semi-structured interviews. The collected data was thematically analysed to generate findings for the study. Findings revealed that sexual victimisation of students in institutions of higher learning has long-term negative consequences on the victims, who are mostly women. The effects include social withdrawal from family, friends, and the university community, while the female victims of sexual abuse experience long-time trauma, stress, and depression. The study also established poor academic performance, contraction of HIV/STIs, STDs, and unwanted pregnancy. This study, therefore, recommends among others, that institutions of higher learning should rigorously implement the existing policies on sexual victimisation, to proactively address issues of sexual victimisation in the institutions. Furthermore, institutions must create massive awareness to sensitise students on the implications and consequences of such actions. While the student counselling division in the institutions should be capacitated.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are citadel of learning, where students from diverse socio-backgrounds are brought together not only for academic engagements but also for good moral upbringings that conforms with the societal norms (Ajani, 2022). However, studies have shown that various social vices such as sexual assaults of various forms have become worrisome to stakeholders in higher education (Makhaye, Mkhize & Sibanyoni, 2023). Sexual abuse as one of the leading gender-based issues against female folks is becoming worrisome as cases of

sexual victimisation are increasing globally (Machisa et al., 2021). According to Oni and Tshitangano (2019), citadels of learning have continued to record cases of sexual assaults on helpless female students. Thus, making female students conscious of where and who to be with, to avoid being sexually abused (Mahlangu et al., 2022). Universities and other tertiary institutions are meant to be knowledge production centres where students and lecturers are well-informed and accord self-respect to one another. However, many young female students have fallen victim to sexual assault within their institutions (Ajayi, Mudeti & Owolabi, 2021).

It is known that university students are among the highest risk groups for both sexual violence and dating violence victimisation (Hines & Palm Reed, 2015). According to Ajani and Gamede (2020), first-year students who transit to higher education institutions from their high schools, have been reported to have been some of the victims of sexual assaults on campuses. Hence, sexual violence in higher institutions is another dimension of violence that creates an atmosphere of intimidation and danger within the university environment (The Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). When sexual activities are forced or carried out forcefully against the consent of a female partner, it is a sexual assault (Ajayi, Mudeti & Owolabi, 2021). This is a fundamental violation of the human right to liberty and freedom from fear and is recognised as a public health priority (WHO, 2001). Sexual assault on female students is a serious violent crime that has no place in any ideal society. There is no justification for its prevalence in any community that thrives on mutual trust, especially our tertiary institutions (Mahlangu et al., 2022). It has long-term detrimental effects that affect the victim, hindering and restraining their progress. This paper discusses the effects of sexual victimisation on female students in institutions of higher learning. These serious effects range from social withdrawal; stress and trauma; poor academic performance; contraction of diseases and unwanted pregnancy.

Female students' vulnerability to sexual victimisation in institutions of higher learning

Krebs, Lindquist, Berzofsky, Shook-Sa, Peterson, Planty, Langton, and Stroop (2016) define sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work", sexual violence is negatively skewed against girls and women." Furthermore, South Africa has very broad legal definitions of rape, these definitions result in different classifications of sexual violence. In December 2007, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 went into effect, creating several "new" sexual offences. It broadened the definition of rape. According to the Act, "any person ('A') who unlawfully and intentionally commits an act of sexual penetration with a complainant ('B') without B's consent is guilty of rape" (Stats SA, 2015/16). This includes oral, anal, or vaginal penetration of a person with a genital organ, anal or vaginal penetration with any object, and oral, anal, or vaginal penetration of a person with an animal's genital organs.

While over 40,000 rapes are reported to police in South Africa each year, it is estimated that only 14 percent of perpetrators face prosecution (Kapps, 2006). According to the South African Police (SAPS), 40,035 cases of rape were reported in 2017/18 (Africa Check 2018). Furthermore, the FACTSHEET (2019/20) depicts the rising rate of sexual offences in South Africa. South Africa, as a country, deals with cases of sexual victimisation daily. Research suggests that adolescents and young adults experience forms of sexual victimisation at rates higher than any other age group, and those college students are at increased risk for some forms of victimisation compared with their same-age non-college peers (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 1999). This means that rates of sexual victimisation for female students are likely to be higher compared to those of females in the general community. The emphasis on young female students in this paper does not negate the fact that young men also fall victim to sexual crimes. However, previous research reveals that young women are sexually victimised more than their male counterparts and females of the same age in the general community.

Findings from many studies are consistent with transnational comparative studies showing that prevalence rates of sexual violence are higher in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries (World Health Organization, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine & South African Medical Research Council, 2013). Sexual victimisation among students remains a major problem confronting colleges and universities across the country (Armstrong, Hamilton & Sweeney, 2006; Banyard, Ward, Cohn, Plante, Moorhead & Walsh, 2007). In April 2016, the #Endrapeculture protests spread across South African university campuses. These protests raised awareness of university policies regarding rape and sexual assault cases on campus (Orth, Van Wyk, and Andipatin, 2020). To create a backdrop of the prevalence of sexual victimisation the following incidences are highlighted:

- At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, an academic has been outed on social media as having made unwanted sexual advances toward students (Pillay, 2019).

- Aubrey Manaka, 28, who allegedly raped and murdered student Precious Ramabulana will appear in the Polokwane high court to be tried for the rape of a five-year-old boy (Ramothwala, 2020).
- The Mangosuthu University of Technology is meant to conclude disciplinary action against an engineering lecturer, who was suspended for accusations of soliciting nude photographs and asking for sex from female students in exchange for good marks (Makwakwa, 2021).

The aforementioned cases demonstrate that sexual victimisation is a serious concern for institutions of higher learning in KwaZulu-Natal. A true reflection of incidences is not accurate because most cases of sexual assault are not reported by victims for fear of stigmatisation and rejection among colleagues and society. Kullima, Kawuwa, Audu, Mairiga, & Bukar (2010) states that female victims were mostly blamed for the act, while the culprits are usually left unpunished.

The problem of sexual victimisation among university students has been highlighted by studies from different countries around the world (D'Abreu & Krahe, 2014). UNAIDS reported at the macro level that sexual violence against women appears to be more common in settings where gender roles are rigidly enforced and where masculinity is associated with toughness and dominance while femininity is with submissiveness (UNAIDS, 2016). Studies conducted in Ethiopia showed that violence against girls by older male students and teachers is a very common environment (WHO, 2001; Heise, 2010; Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Women suffer physical, mental, and reproductive health consequences of sexual violence like depression, loss of self-confidence, injuries, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and disability up to death (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottmoeller, 2002; UN General Assembly, 2006). Most young people are not aware of their sexual rights and do not even appreciate the degree of their violations (Centre for Rights, Education, and Awareness, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Theories aid in the creation of a better understanding of a phenomenon while also giving birth to the possibility of providing adequate solutions to the problem under study. According to the findings of a comprehensive victimisation analysis, several types of causes can be linked to sexual crimes. Theoretical advances in the field of sexual offending have been notable in the last 20 years or so, and researchers have developed many rich accounts of sexual offending, particularly the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending coined by Ward & Beech (2006). This theory aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of the aetiology and persistence of sexual offending. According to the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (ITSO; Ward & Beech 2006), sexual abuse occurs because of several interacting causal factors, operating at different levels and occurring in distinct domains of human functioning: biological (evolution, genetic variations, and neurobiology), ecological (social and cultural environment, personal circumstances, physical environment), core neuropsychological systems, and personal agency. This theory suggests that four sets of factors converge to cause sexual offending and its associated problems: biological factors (influenced by genetic inheritance and brain development), ecological niche factors (i.e., social, cultural, and personal circumstances – learning), neuropsychological factors, and agency-level factors (i.e., this is the level at which a person reflects on possible reasons for acting, decides on a course of action justified by reasons, and then [intentionally] acts to change some aspects of themselves, other people or the world in accordance with their goals).

The biological factor in brain development includes genetics and evolution; an individual will enter the world with various genetic advantages and disadvantages (Ward et al., 2005). Ward and Beech (2006) expand on this by defining biological functioning as including genetic determinants as well as neurobiological brain functioning. Ward and Beech propose that sexual offending behaviour has a genetic basis that, when combined with dysfunctional motivation and cognitive processes, leads an individual to meet their sexual needs in socially unacceptable ways. Additionally, the physical processes of the brain that may underpin human behaviour are referred to as neurobiological functioning. Ward and Beech describe some possible processes that may influence sexual offending behaviour; for example, high levels of stress hormones may cause an individual to act impulsively (Sapolsky, 1997). Having said that, university environments are generally stressful due to the transition from a home environment to a university environment, the nature of the environment, and possibly academic pressure.

Furthermore, the concept of "ecological niche" refers to the set of potentially adverse social and cultural circumstances, personal circumstances, and physical environments that each person faces as he or she develops throughout his or her life (Ward & Beech, 2006; Makhaye, Mkhize & Sibanyoni, 2023). A person's psychological system's content and functional integrity are determined by a combination of biological inheritance and social learning. Once acquired, psychological vulnerabilities are thought to act as a diathesis, increasing the likelihood

that an individual will struggle to meet specific environmental challenges effectively, increasing the likelihood that he or she will commit a sexual offence at some point in the future (Makhaye, Mkhize & Sibanyoni, 2023). In the case of university students, sexual victimisation becomes opportunistic and can occur only when they are presented with the opportunity to sexually victimise a fellow student. When attempting to address the problem of sexual victimisation of female students, such vulnerabilities must be addressed.

Ward et al. (2005) proposed that dysfunction in both the biological and ecological systems could have a significant impact on an individual's psychological system. This could be due to a variety of personal or social issues that students face. They hypothesised that various dysfunctions in the three major systems would result in a wide range of clinical presentations involving various aspects of emotional problems, social difficulties, deviant arousal, and cognitive distortions. Perpetrators of sexual victimisation of female students may have a combination of these problematic representations, which eventually overwhelms them and drives them to sexually victimise females. The ITSO assumes that human functioning has multiple explanatory levels and, while naturalistic in orientation, contends that personal agency plays an important role in the initiation and maintenance of offending. The four sets of state factors seen in sex offenders are constituents of agency-level problems and, as such, have a distinctly experiential or phenomenological nature: deviant sexual preferences, distorted beliefs, and attitudes.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gaining lived experiences of victimised female students in university environments require in-depth information. Hence, this study employed a qualitative exploratory research design for the attainment and discussion of the data in this paper. Qualitative researchers place a high value on words (Patton, 2023). Not only are the general ideas prominent, but so are the variety of word choices, metaphors, and even slang (Creswell, 2014). The study followed the phenomenological tradition of studying the lifeworld experiences of the participants. Moreover, the study allowed participants to reflect on their immediate surroundings through their lived experiences and perceptions. This was an appropriate design to use because it addressed the primary goal of the study (Patton, 2023), which was to investigate the phenomenon of sexual victimisation in its entirety, providing answers to what effects sexual victimisation has on students.

Three universities were purposively because of the reported cases and were selected using snowball sampling to recruit the participants. The study employed one-on-one semi-structured interviews to collect data from 30 students, 10 security staff members, and 8 student counsellors from the selected three universities. Thus, a total sample size of 48 participants from the selected three universities was engaged in the interviews. The participants' lived experiences of sexual victimisation provided first-hand information, that answered the research questions. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis of the audio-recorded interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, coded, and theme generated for presentation and discussion of findings (Patton, 2023). Informed consent, voluntary participation, and participants' privacy were ensured in the data analysis. All ethical considerations were strictly adhered to in this study (Creswell, 2014). The selected universities were anonymously referred to as institutions A, B, and C. To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used to present excerpts from their interviews.

3. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Data analysis of the study was carefully and systematically done, to harvest quality and reliable information for the study. Thus, themes were generated from the data analysis of the audio-recorded interviews with the participants. This section of the paper shares verbatim responses from students and staff members. To adhere to anonymity, participants are presented using S for student, SS for security staff, and SC for student Counsellor. The number after represents the participant interview and the A, B or C represents which institution from the three selected ones the participant is from. The participants expressed various negative effects of sexual victimisation they experienced:

Detrimental effects of sexual victimisation of female students

Sexual victimisation is the new pandemic in institutions of higher learning that is linked to physical and mental health issues. Sexual victimisation is a violation of an individual's human rights and has negative consequences for the victim as well as the institution's general student and staff community. These effects can be

addressed and minimised; however, some are long-term and have a long-term impact on the victims.

“This is from experience, it’s not a nice feeling. You see yourself as an object, that a person felt that they can do as they please and they don’t care if you were crying and begging but they do as they please. The flashbacks cause trauma and at some point, I struggled to complete a simple task related to my schoolwork because I was so hurt that someone could do this to me. The perpetrator just wants sexual gratification and does not care that they are damaging the victim. It also becomes very hard to report especially for young black women because of the stigma and judgments that society will have towards them. For example, it becomes so difficult when a victim has to go report at a police station because firstly, she’s a woman, she also gets there to find a policeman, and she has to say her story over and over and respond to invasive questions in front of other people. That is secondary victimisation and others are forced to privately deal with the victimisation until they heal. The trauma after being victimised also has a long-term effect on intimate relationships. Victims will have trust issues and not feel safe around a man. They have the perception that every man will hurt them. That’s why many women end up not being in intimate relationships others hate men to the extent that they become lesbian” (A: S9).

The personal reflection shared above delves into the complexities of trauma. Participants expressed various views on the detrimental effects sexual victims experience. No doubt, the victims have long-lasting negative experiences that trail them for the rest of their lives. This paper discusses four sub-themes of effect that emerged from the study.

Social withdrawal from family, friends, and university activities

Female students who have been sexually victimised withdraw socially from their immediate environment and avoid routine activities, according to S6:

“Someone who has been victimised withdraws from social activity. As a residence assistant, I have dealt with a few cases where the victims will lock themselves in their rooms and not engage in any social activities. They do not talk to anyone and are always crying. This most probably affects their academic performance since they don’t attend classes and don’t submit their assessments” (A: S6).

Upon reflection about a victimised friend, an S participant elaborated that:

“I noted when my friend was victimised that she developed mood swings, she no longer spent time with me or any of our friends. Before she told us we thought she just changed on us but after she disclosed the incidence, we began to understand why she was moody and emotional. It also affected her academic performance as her grades dropped in that academic year until she attended counselling, and it helped her a lot” (B: S2).

Another participant also observed that:

“I play netball. I know of a female who was in our team, after being victimised and she never played with us. I did not know why she stopped coming to practice until months later I hear of her sexual harassment case. I think this affects a person so much that they stop doing things they like or just withdraw from activities associated with the institution” (C: S8).

Furthermore, participant SS4 confirmed that:

“It affects them so negatively. You can physically see it in their demeanour, you see the fear they exhibit. It affects them emotionally and affects the way that they function on and around campus. They operate in fear that they still have to see the perpetrators on campus which is why many choose to lock themselves up in their rooms. It is very traumatic for quite a lot of them” (A: SS4).

Findings from the participants revealed that victims usually withdraw from social activities due to sexual victimisation. The reasons being some of them are labelled by community members or avoid being made jest of by the community members.

Experiencing trauma, stress, and depression

Sexual victimization inflicts a series of traumatic, stressful, and depressive experiences on its victims. The participants highlighted various concomitant effects of victimization which include trauma, stress, and depression. According to Participant S5:

"It alters the person's self-confidence because one starts to see themselves the way that the perpetrator has put it. For example, if something is said about one's dress code or appearance then the victim will develop negative feelings about themselves. It also evokes feelings of trauma and a lack of trust toward men. They fall into a phase of depression" (B: S5).

The reality of depression and its effects on well-being is further shared by Participant S1:

"Sexual victimisation impacts very negatively on a victim regardless of gender. It puts the victim in a mental disequilibrium because now they are put at a crossroads whereby, they need something, but they also have to give up something in return. Sometimes our needs take the better of us and then we find ourselves succumbing to those demands. It is a very difficult and uncomfortable situation and I have seen people go through it. It impacts their self-esteem because now they have this baggage of experience knowing that someone victimised them. After all, you were in need. I have been exposed to it but fortunately enough I was able to identify the signs and take my stand against them. However sexual victimisation is highly prevalent in our institutions and I'm so grateful that you came up with this research because I believe that this is the starting point of addressing this issue" (A: S1).

Depression is a pervasive aspect as reiterated by another participant:

"It affects the victim in so many ways. I would say that it hinders the way a person thinks. I can imagine one trusting someone only for that person to victimize you. It distorts the trust not just in that one person but in the entire of humanity. They don't know whom to trust. The victim becomes paranoid and starts blaming herself and falling into depression. It can damage the victim physically and mentally; some will even try harming themselves just trying to forget what happened. It damages the person's health" (B: S3).

As previously stated, depression and self-harm are possibilities, both of which have long-term consequences. This was affirmed by Participant S1:

"It is something that leaves long-term trauma to the extent that some victims end up having hatred towards men. Some will even have problems in their romantic relationships because the victim will not trust any man. This requires a lot of therapeutic support" (C: S1).

While traumatization was further elaborated as what can recur when victims encounter similar scenarios:

"It evokes trauma. They are always reminded of what they went through" (A: SC1).

However, participant SC5 affirmed that the psychological effects and the power dynamic become salient:

"There are a lot of psychological effects and often the self-esteem of the victim is damaged. The victim experiences feelings of guilt, shame, and powerlessness which causes stress. Many victims that I have spoken to are very traumatised and mention that they keep getting flashbacks of the incident. They exhibit symptoms of depression which also affects their academic performance" (B: SC5)

The long-term trauma has further implications as affirmed by the participants. Findings revealed that sexual victims suffer a series of physical, psychological, and emotional effects.

Poor academic performance

Poor academic performance has been indicated as one of the critical effects of sexual victimization, especially for student victims. This direct effect of poor academic performance was expressed by Participant S2:

"This attacks a person's self-esteem and impacts their entire identity resulting in a loss of identity. The stigma attached to being sexually victimised causes a lot of damage to a person's social life and well-being. The results of this also affect academic performance" (C: S2).

The immediate effects on their academic performance are further justified as participant SC4 elaborated:

"The cases I have attended have resulted in the victim performing poorly in their academics. They are sent to us for counselling but sometimes the damage is so deep that it causes students to not perform well academically" (B: SC4).

Failure becomes a reality as Participant SS narrated:

“It affects the person badly. You find that the victim performs poorly and even fails exams. It has long-term effects; a person will suffer for a long time” (A: SS1).

Students who experience sexual victimization are usually disturbed academically. According to the participants, some victims stay away from classes and other academic engagements, to avoid embarrassment.

Contracting STIs, STDs, and unwanted pregnancy

There are health implications of sexual victimisation. Young females who are victimized experience various sexual infections and unwanted pregnancies as confirmed by Participant SC:

“It has a range of effects as it is very invasive in nature. The victim suffers physical, psychological, and medical effects such as STIs and HIV. Some victims even fall pregnant after being raped” (B: SC2).

Participant SS3 asserted that perpetrators of sexual victimization rarely use protection:

“It has very bad effects. You find that a perpetrator is a person who normally engages in unsafe sex so the victim often contracts sexually transmitted infections. You also find that the victim becomes stressed because they fall pregnant because of the victimisation. All of this affects their academic performance” (A: SS3).

The reality of an unwanted pregnancy is also mentioned by SS participant:

“It is a sad reality that some victims are impregnated by the perpetrator in the process of their victimisation” (B” SS5).

It was established from the participants that victims of sexual victimization end up contracting sexually transmitted diseases/infections from their abusers. This is because most sexual victimization occurs without any protective measure.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sexual harassment is one of the social vices that is not condoned in any civilised society. The University for Development Studies (UDS, 2018) abhors and clearly states that "sexual harassment is unlawful and distasteful" and "violates the affected person's rights to self-determination and bodily integrity". It has been documented that many victims of sexual harassment exhibit cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and physical symptoms following the harassment, which may last for a long time and even change the course of their lives (Christofides, Webster, Jewkes & Penn-Kekana, 2003). According to Makhaye et al. (2023), the possibility of encountering the alleged perpetrator within the university setting exists, especially if reporting to formal structures has not occurred. The victims most time often remember the ugly events and healing physically without any form of therapeutic support creates further complexities. The historically black university study found that sexual assault survivors had significantly more symptoms of depression and were more likely to screen positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than were no victims (Lindquist, Barrick, Krebs, Crosby, Lockard & Sanders-Phillips, 2013). Historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa, are higher education institutions who were disadvantaged during the apartheid system or who lack necessary and adequate school resources, as compared to their counterparts in cities (Ajani & Gamede, 2021).

To amplify this argument, Belluck (2018) tells us that "there is no evidence to suggest that current policies, procedures, and approaches have resulted in a significant reduction in sexual harassment," and therefore argues that it "undermines work and well-being in a whole host of ways, triggering symptoms like depression, sleep disruption, cardiac stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder". HEIs are expected to provide adequate support to victims of sexual acts. As highlighted in the harassment, GBV, and bullying policy for Institution B, the institution commits to providing comprehensive medical, psycho-social, and counselling support to complainants of Harassment, GBV, and Bullying. However, it has been noted in research that victims often do not report victimisation incidences. According to Ahrens, Stansell, and Jennings (2010), survivors who do not seek help report greater psychological distress and symptoms of depression and PTSD. Considering this finding, it has furthermore been established that the selected institutions of higher learning have student support services

(Makhaye et al., 2023). These services are, however, reported by the participants of this study to be unknown to some, offering inadequate services or unapproachable.

According to Holland and Cortina (2017), sexual assault can have a devastating impact on survivors' psychological and educational well-being, which can worsen if survivors do not receive adequate care. This paper confirms that sexual abuse has an impact on a victim's academic performance. According to Murphy and van Brant (2017), students who have experienced sexual violence, particularly when the perpetrator is another student, are no longer able to access the educational environment in the same way. Similarly, if the perpetrator is a lecturer, as validated by the study's findings. If a lecturer promises a female student sex marks, the lecturer may eventually fail them as punishment if the student does not consent to the lecturer's sexual advances. As Dranzoa (2018) points out, sexual harassment in higher education is a sign of institutional failure, and victims' academic careers may be compromised.

According to the wider findings of the study, some females are victimised by their intimate partners and others close to them. The consequences are much more severe in intimate relationships, particularly because victims rarely report due to fear or intimidation. As a result, there is no access to help, which perpetuates the negative effects. Decker, Latimore, Yasutake, Haviland, Ahmed, Blum, Sonestein, and Astone (2015) highlight the negative health consequences, which include sexually transmitted infections, injury, unintended pregnancy, poor mental health, and addiction. According to a study conducted by Pengpid and Peltzer (2016), male students who had impregnated female students were more likely to be victimised by intimate partners. This finding is consistent with the current study's findings that unwanted pregnancy is a result of sexual victimisation, particularly within intimate relationships.

Makhaye et al. (2023) assert that sexual victimisation is a violation of one's human rights and an affront to one's dignity. According to the discussion of this paper, victims of sexual victimisation face long-term consequences that necessitate the assistance of trained counsellors. Consistent with previous studies have been observed to withdraw from their academic and social environments. Shame, fear of judgment, and avoiding contact with the perpetrator are all reasons for this withdrawal. Victims frequently lock themselves in their rooms, refuse to attend classes or complete assessments, and refuse to participate in any institutional activity. After withdrawal, the victim experiences trauma, stress, and depression. Flashbacks from the victimisation incident may cause trauma where the victim undergoes a mental breakdown while trying to deal with the aftermath of the victimisation. If not professionally attended to, trauma leads to stress which ultimately causes depression. It was found that victims who do report victimisation suffer these extreme effects due to a lack of support.

Additionally, Makhaye et al. (2023) report that victims of sexual victimisation are in most cases infected with STIs, STDs, and HIV and deal with an unwanted pregnancy. Perpetrators of sexual victimisation were described as individuals who often undertake risky behaviour and are likely to engage in unsafe sex. Their victims are affected by this as infections and diseases are transmitted through rape where a condom is not used. Moreover, unsafe sex results in an unwanted pregnancy. If the victim does not get rapid health attention after the incident, she will likely have to deal with one or all the effects. Students are at university to work towards their academic and career goals. It is heartbreaking that those who become victims face the consequence of poor academic performance. The health and psychological effects of sexual victimisation negatively impact the ability of students to perform well in their academics. This could be attributed to the initial withdrawal that victims go through where they no longer attend classes or complete assessments. The outcome is academic delay and sometimes dropping out. This paper discusses that victims who report victimisation receive support that may minimise the negative effects of sexual victimisation. However, when the victim does not report, they deal with the aftermath alone causing all effects to be experienced greatly and negatively affecting the academic efficiency of the student.

Finally, sexual victimisation not only affects the victim but also affects the general student and staff community. It was revealed that sexual victimisation in institutions of higher learning compromises the safety and security of the institution. Participants shared that when they learn of cases where someone was sexually victimised, they feel unsafe and scared. Furthermore, students and staff members develop paranoia because they wonder if they are next. It was also eminent in responses that participants gave that sexual victimisation in institutions of higher learning translates into institutional failure. Therefore, high reports of sexual victimisation in on-campus facilities or residences diminish the reputation of the institution and cause mistrust between the student body and the leadership of the university. Students who are victimised within the university feel institutional betrayal because they expect to feel safe and be protected from harm while undertaking academic activities on the university premises. The betrayal worsens if the student is victimised by a staff member and when justice is not served.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the detrimental effects of the sexual victimisation of female students in institutions of higher learning in KwaZulu-Natal. Several conclusions about sexual victimisation were implicitly and explicitly inferred as discussed in sections of this paper. The use of literature, theoretical framework, and data collected to substantiate the findings of this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the problematic nature of sexual victimisation of female students and its long-term effects. The emerging themes discussed reveal that sexual victimisation affects students' reproduction, and affects them emotionally, psychologically, financially, and academically. It is not enough for institutions of higher learning to have sexual harassment and Gender-Based Violence policies; the institution must also vigorously and comprehensively implement problem-oriented rather than generic interventions. These include proactive measures such as correctly implementing policies and upgrading security systems. Furthermore, it is recommended that there is an expansion and capacitation of student counsellors so that victims are efficiently assisted. To eradicate the "silent pandemic", the DHET, institutional leadership, student body, and other stakeholders must work together. This paper offered both proactive and reactive recommendations that will make a significant contribution to addressing sexual victimisation issues in institutions of higher learning.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of the study, various recommendations have been inferred from the participants, to eradicate or control sexual victimization in higher institutions of learning, especially in South Africa. The victims of this barbaric act are predominantly women at various university institutions across South Africa. Hence, the following recommendations will assist stakeholders:

Improvement of various institutional policies on sexual victimisation

It is suggested that institutional policies should be improved by various universities, to integrate diverse comprehensive contextual approaches, which can eradicate or reduce cases of sexual victimization, proactively and reactively in the university campuses. Specific sections of the policies must be implemented exactly as written. Currently, the implementation of existing policies is hindered by many difficulties. Therefore, adequate resource allocation by the Department of Higher Education and Training to various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly intervention strategies to facilitate this process of comprehensive implementation.

Implementation of massive and visible awareness

In addressing issues of sexual victimisation of female students, massive awareness plays both a proactive and a reactive role. Awareness is critical in both preventing students from being victimised and providing support structures to the victims. Hence, there is an urgent need for adequate efforts to raise massive awareness. This will make female students more aware and how to report such cases if they became victims. Permanently visible awareness be implemented for everyday awareness in the forms of posters, banners, and stations that are visible to all students.

Upgrading security systems in residences and access gates of the institution

Institutions of higher learning have structurally open access, that allows students, staff, and the public to use facilities such as the library, lecture halls, computer labs, and residences. Institutional security measures necessitate signing in if you are not a registered student or staff member. This is untrustworthy because it cannot be guaranteed that proper identification and justification for access information is always used. It is recommended that security measures at university entrance points be upgraded so that everyone who enters the institution can be identified, as well as that all activities within the university be monitored to detect any unusual or dangerous behaviour within facilities. Student residences are also a high priority of concern, as many students are sexually

victimised in their dorms. Security guards must be visible and accessible to students in residences 24/7. Upgraded security measures include the installation of emergency buttons in residences, the installation of CCTV cameras, and the stationing of security guards at each entrance to the residence.

Enhancement of student counselling units

Victims of sexual victimisation face long-term consequences that necessitate the assistance of a trained counsellor. Studies in addition to the participants' findings have established that institutions of higher learning should cater to the needs of victims, by offering free counselling services and other support. Counsellors should be adequate in number and should be adequately capacitated to provide quality services to victims. Institutions of higher learning can train more student counsellors to accommodate large populations of university students. It is recommended that the universities can engage female lecturers, Residence Assistants, and other female staff members from the departments of social work and psychology. Because of the power dynamics that exist between males and females, this recommendation specifies the use of females only, which would discourage a student victim who has been victimised by a male from approaching another male for assistance and support.

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