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Living conditions and upkeep as antecedents related to academic performance of Zimbabwean female students in Masvingo tertiary institutions

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the nature of living conditions and upkeep of female students in tertiary institutions. A qualitative approach was adopted in order to solicit data for the case study. A sample of forty participants was conveniently selected from a population of six hundred female students in two tertiary institutions in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Data were collected from the female students using open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions. Data were presented in narrative form and analysed thematically in line with objectives. The findings from this study revealed that female students in the tertiary institutions are enduring poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep. The study indicated that lack of equipment and finances to cater for their upkeep was seen to be negatively affecting their academic performance. Stress which emanates from poor living conditions and lack of finances is causing most female students to produce sub-standard work. The study also revealed that poor academic performance may hinder the female students from finding high paying jobs which would empower them and improve their economic status. This study recommends that the government and all stake holders re-visit their policies regarding the funding of female students in tertiary education. The study recommends that the government should consider making provision of good living conditions and enough finances for the female students' upkeep as important antecedents related to achieving academic performance. The government may achieve this by re-introducing full bursaries for all students in tertiary education.

Keywords: Living conditions, upkeep, female students, tertiary education, academic performance

1. Introduction

Women in education of most developing countries have faced a myriad of challenges ranging from struggling to secure tuition, lack of moral and social support, minimum upkeep and poor living conditions (Kim & Lee, 2015) ^[14]. According to MCGowen (2007) ^[19] there is high correlation between poor academic performance and poor school buildings, outdated facilities, lack of adequate finances, overcrowded and small classrooms which have poor lighting and ventilation. Students who attend lectures under such poor living conditions may be disadvantaged in terms of good participation and producing assignments of high standard. In the same vein Narlesk (2018) ^[25] states that lack of proper maintenance of available equipment may cause stress and injuries to students. This implies that repairs and cleaning responsibilities are pivotal in improving living conditions and enhancing good lecture attendance.

Students in higher education of developing countries are provided with bursaries and loans from the government in order for them to train in an area (Hillman & Robinson, 2015) ^[11]. In such cases the government would have taken its full responsibility of educating its citizens. Web (2010) ^[34] and Mudekunye, Manwa and Manwa (2012) assert that the government of Zimbabwe has placed almost all the burden on parents to educate their children. In Africa most governments have relinquished its duty of educating its citizens and placed almost all burden on parents to educate their children. In Zimbabwe the government used to fully sponsor tertiary students through grants but gradually due to economic decline grants were no longer offered. It later allowed students to secure loans for tuition from the banks and then parents would take care of the upkeep of their sons and daughters. The economic conditions deteriorated to the extent that parents fully sponsor the education of their children and relatives. Female students are the most affected since most conservative families in Zimbabwe value education of the male child more than that of the female child (Manwa, 2014).

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This implies that in situations where resources are mean the girl child may suffer.

Most researches focused on the challenges related to tuition so as to ensure that all people are given the chance to get in to education system (UNICEF, 2007) ^[33]. However scanty literature is on student upkeep in colleges and universities in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Provision of resources in both elementary and higher education have been a cause of concern for most scholars especially those in developing countries (Web, 2010) ^[34]. Good living conditions at colleges are critical for students to exercise their right to education. According to Omoniyi and Oluruntegbe (2014) ^[26], it is believed that when the appropriate environment is created for girl child education, the nation will benefit from it in the long run. Parents and students are struggling to raise fees and all that is related to the upkeep of students is considered secondary. Such a scenario has left the living conditions and upkeep of students underfunded and in jeopardy. In developing countries the problems which are related to students' welfare are treated with almost equal importance with the provision of tuition (Hillman & Robinson, 2015) ^[11]. Such stance is based on the pretext that all factors which affect students' academic performance and attainments should be given the cognizance they deserve. Researchers have established that there is a relationship between resource provision and academic performance (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011; Malcolm, 2010) ^[29, 16].

Female students require more security in terms of accommodation and movement between campuses as compared to their male counterparts. Manwa (2014) affirms that female students require accommodation that caters for security in order to reduce cases of abuse. The question of where female students stay in relation to the rate of absenteeism has been under scrutiny recently. Attendance rate of students in most cases is connected to the distance between college and residential area. The mode of transport and the costs involved have a direct link to lecture attendance. The students may walk long distances for them to attend lectures. Female students require more resources for their upkeep as compared to their male counterparts because their needs are diversified as they go through more detailed phases in life such as pregnancy. Commuting from residential areas to campuses and inter-campus movements have been a challenge to most students and time consuming. Malcolm (2010) ^[16] asserts that non-resident students have generally more expenses as compared to resident students. Budgeting has become a nightmare for most students as they try to strike a balance between income and expenditure such as their needs and wants.

Places for accommodation in most Zimbabwean colleges are limited. Students who are in colleges residential hostels are at an advantage as compared to those who are non-resident students. Some students may stay with relatives in locations as they find college accommodation expensive and not affordable. Such students may opt to stay out of residence even when they have a chance of getting into college residence. Araujo and Murray (2010) ^[2] aver that staying on campus may enhance the growth in students' critical and cognitive thinking skills as they navigate on their own without the help of the family. The issue of accommodation and the living conditions are not given the attention it deserves in most colleges in developing countries (UNICEF, 2007) ^[33]. This implies that higher institutions of learning enjoy having high enrolment figures but very few are concerned about where these students stay in order for them attend lectures.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs specified that there are basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing which are supposed to be availed to all people. Subletting and living in flats and foreign homes are taxing as they demand rents and maintenance. Minsky (2016) ^[20] says that students who sublet are likely to face challenges related to social relationships which may be stressful. Finances for upkeep such as food and clothing have become a burden for both parents and students due to the prevailing economic hardships in Zimbabwe. Attending lectures with an empty stomach is counterproductive in terms of full attendance and participation of a student. A student who is hungry has in most cases a limited listening span which reduces understanding of concepts (Mudekunya *et al.*, 2012; Manwa, 2014). Food may in some cases be available at campus canteens but some students may find it to be expensive. Manwa (2015) argues that food is very important in the well-being and functioning of the body and brain. Students need energy to think and participate during lectures. The female body requires extra nutrients for biological and nursing reasons. Thus a healthy body is a healthy mind.

Female students' upkeep has been given minimum attention as researchers focus on the welfare of students in general. Female students' upkeep is different from that of the male students since they require more detailed needs and wants. Female students in Zimbabwe tertiary institutions have no special board which specialises in advocating their unique needs. Most female scholars who have a feminist background such as those in Social Sciences are concerned about equal treatment of both males and females but the issue of needs which are different was over shadowed by the needs of power and money (WHO, 2012; UNESCO, 2003) ^[35, 32]. Female scholars are among the most vulnerable groups since they may be abused in search of survival (UNICEF, 2007) ^[33]. Living conditions in Zimbabwe tertiary institutions have created a ground conducive for abuse of female students (Munyukwi, 2018) ^[23]. Shortage of basic needs by female students may fail to achieve their educational goals of passing with good grades that may assist them to attain better jobs and subsequently good salaries which cut the vicious cycle of poverty. Accommodation, clothing, food, transport and tuition are critical in the life of students. Parents or guardians may face serious challenges in trying to meet the needs of the students considering the current complex Zimbabwe economy. The general populace is struggling to have decent meals on the table, so it is more difficult to think about students' upkeep.

Higher education students are adults who are parents in most cases. Parents have an obligation to take care of the offspring which may mean that there is role conflict and contagion. Being a student and parent at the same time means more responsibilities. Students from poor backgrounds may have non supplement such as parents and siblings who can assist financially. Universities in Zimbabwe may have demands which do not consider the fact that they are dealing with parents, siblings, children and social human beings who have innumerable tasks. Manwa (2015) posits that students are entangled with a network of responsibilities which involve financial demands. It seems from the point of view of many scholars, college female students face many more challenges in their life cycle.

College demands of assignments, tests and presentations have demands which are cognitive and also the demands require financial support. Financial demands from college start from when the students start applying, when being enrolled and

also attending lectures. Schooling is considered one of the main avenues to eradicate poverty and a way of emancipating women and girls from being marginalised (Saito, 2011) ^[28]. Educating females is considered as a one pay off as mothers are the carers of the family. If a boy is educated, not only an individual benefits, but when a girl is educated a mother and a nation builder is in the offing (Omoniyi & Oluruntegbe, 2014; Mathias, 2009) ^[26, 18]. In the Zimbabwean culture a woman is the nest builder and a home maker.

Stress is inevitable if the students are worried about their living conditions and upkeep. Munyukwi (2018) ^[23] suggests that lack of support as administration turns a blind eye on student welfare and living conditions may cause students to be anxious and stressed. This implies that poorly prepared meals in college canteens and lack of maintained college facilities are a hazard to health. This entails that poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep may result in emotional, physical and psychological stress. Research has established that lack of basic needs may cause austerity and depression, which is counterproductive in terms of good academic achievements (Hillman & Robinson, 2015; Saito, 2011) ^[11, 8]. This study therefore sought to find out the nature of living conditions and upkeep the female students are exposed to and how the conditions affect their academic performance.

2. Methodology

The research used a qualitative approach in order to gain entry into the social world of the female tertiary students under study. Creswell (2014) ^[5] and Denzin (2012) ^[6] describe qualitative data as soft data that is rich in descriptions of human behaviour, conversations and places, which cannot be easily handled statistically. The specific design used was a case study since the main aim was to uncover facts concerning female students' living conditions. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) ^[4] define a case study as a detailed examination of one setting or a single subject. In this case, a case study was the best since female students were in a specific setting with its own attributes. Marshall and Rossman (2011) ^[17] also assert that a case study deals with a particular group of individuals who share meanings or some cultural commonalities. The advantage of using the case study attributed to the depth search of the specific phenomenon under study. However, it is difficult to generalize the findings to other settings. The findings can be used in similar settings. A population of six hundred students from the university and teachers' college were considered for the sample selection. A sample of forty (both married and single female) students was chosen using convenient sampling technique. Twenty female participants were chosen from each institution. The sampling technique was best in that only those students who were forthcoming were used to collect data. Data was collected using open-ended questionnaires. Open ended questionnaires were best suitable since the matter under study involved sensitive matters. Marshall and Rossman (2011) ^[17] view the open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions are based on questions which addresses the research objectives. Students were given open-ended questionnaires for them to fill in and no names were placed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. It took a week to collect data from both institutions as the researchers personally gave the instruments to the students. According to Sidhu (2003) ^[30], open-ended questionnaires enable the researcher to study the interconnected factors that affect human behaviour in a confidential atmosphere.

2.1 Ethical issues

Research ethical issues were observed at all stages of the research study with particular attention on consent and confidentiality (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Silverman 2010) ^[4]. All the participants voluntarily participated in this study and anonymity was enhanced by using codes during data collection (student 1 representing student 1). Hence information provided by participants did not in any way reveal their identity (Gilbert, 2011).

2.2 Data analysis

Data from the female participants were presented in narrative forms and thematically analyzed in line with research objectives. Qualitative data is best analyzed in narrative forms which give room for the voice of the participants to be heard (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Cohen *et al.*, 2011) ^[17, 4]. Excerpts from the participants were captured in order to present their actual sentiments.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings from this study revealed that female students were experiencing some challenges related to poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep. The conditions were very stressful and negatively affect their academic engagement. The main concerns were expensive accommodation, transport and food. These resulted in absenteeism, erratic attendance of lectures and failure to submit standard assignments.

3.1 Upkeep and living conditions of female students in tertiary institutions

The current study established that poor living conditions for female students in Zimbabwean tertiary institutions are a cause for concern. Most female students who were non-resident students revealed that accommodation, transport and food are the major challenges related to their living conditions and upkeep. Some students are also struggling to raise their tuition let alone their upkeep. The following examples confirm the findings.

I normally doze during the lectures because of fatigue during lectures after I have walked for one hour to get to college because my parents cannot pay fees as well as bus fare (S14). Accommodation is very expensive to the extent that four to five students rent one small room. It is difficult to sleep when some are still chatting or studying (S7).

High prices of food have caused most students to have one meal a day and this is worrisome because most sponsors are struggling to supply enough funds because they cater for many family members (S1).

When I fail any module, I don't tell my parents because they become more stressed (S3).

Most students submitted that the colleges are not providing enough ablution blocks which have all the necessary supplies. Lack of neatness in the rest rooms is not pleasing at all. The following were the sentiments of the students.

There are incinerators which are not functioning properly. Disposal of used supplies are a health hazard (S11).

Refuse disposal is generally posing a risk of diseases. Refuse is sometimes left in open rubbish pits (S22)

As a resident student I am not happy about the general cleanliness of hostels especially bathrooms and toilets (S2).

The study also revealed that the lecture rooms are not enough to accommodate all the students at the same time. This causes some students to loiter around when they have free periods. Female students are the worst affected as they normally want

comfortable chairs to sit on because of their biological make up. The following excerpts verify the findings.

Most female students abscond afternoon lectures as they fail to get a comfortable place to do their studies as they wait for the next lecture. This may result in them failing to meet assignment deadlines and poor academic performance (S40). Shortage of furniture and library books has caused most students to submit substandard assignments as most non-resident female students do not go to the library during the evening (S33).

When it is raining we will be overcrowded in small rooms which are a health hazard (S24).

This study revealed that most students were concerned about the poor living conditions and the lack of proper upkeep from their parents. Web (2010) [34] asserts that across Africa public funding of education is decreasing in real terms. The Zimbabwean higher education system suffered excessively for more than a decade because of tense political system and harsh socio-economic environment (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011; Mpfu & Matienga, 2016) [11, 21]. In the same vein Malcolm (2010) [16] asserts that students in the United Kingdom are experiencing high costs of accommodation. Female students revealed that their major problem is lack of reasonable accommodation. College hostels are very few as compared to the vast numbers of students. Most students have also revealed that they are facing challenges of connecting home and college. Transport costs are very high and also walking long distances from home to college before lectures was seen to be causing fatigue. One participant said that excessive sweating due to brisk walking may result in producing undesirable scent that may cause males to repel or shun females.

Parents are struggling to produce basic needs especially three descent meals a day. The majority of the participants revealed that their sponsors struggle to meet their needs at college. Most sponsors were civil servants who earned salaries which were far below poverty datum line. A few were self-employed as cross boarder traders, vegetables sellers and farmers. The nature of the jobs simply tells the nature of income for the families and the college needs much higher than what they get. The other major problem was that most participants revealed that their sponsors cater for other family members which made the sharing of family resources very difficult. Non-resident students are the ones who were seriously affected since the cost of preparing a single meal is high and time consuming. The female students who stay in college residents were complaining about lack of maintenance of ablution blocks. Most toilets are not functioning properly and in most case very dirty. Non-resident students echoed the same views as they use the same toilets during the day. It seems that disinfectants are rarely used and disposal of sanitary pads is quite a health hazard. Disposal of refuse in general was pointed out as of low standard. Most parents are failing to subsidise and provide other requirements to maintain better and clean hostels such as tissues and floor polish. To reduce the costs for accommodation Dutch students would stay in nursing homes and the programme has seen students in their early twenties sharing lives with residents in their eighties and nineties (Harris, 2016) [9]. This implies that such accommodation compromises a lot of concerns about the conflicting ages in relation to study time and rules.

Shortage of lecture rooms and furniture was also mentioned as another problem that influences lecture attendance and academic performance. OECD (2011) [27] states that shortage of basic facilities at education institutions contribute greatly to

rate of lecture attendance by students. Female students in most cases are easily affected by standing for a long time in lectures as the male counterparts bully them and use the available chairs. There are no study rooms as a result the library is usually overcrowded and lack of enough furniture exacerbates the crisis. During the rainy season the situation becomes worse as all students seek for shelter. These findings resonate with those of Shizha and Kariwo (2011) [29] who found out that most African universities and colleges operate with overcrowded and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources as well as insufficient equipment and instructional materials. In dry hot seasons students may use the open grounds for study although they endure the discomfort of the concrete rest benches. Students who have better accommodation outside the college campus may opt to go back home and dodge the afternoon lectures as they will work on the other things.

Parents who fail to supply better upkeep of their children may also fail to make follow ups on students' performance. This discourages the female students from going an extra mile in order to achieve better. Some students said that even if they fail some modules they do not tell their parents as they feel they can also stress them since they are already in search of tuition and money for their upkeep. Some students were lamenting that they were between a hard place and a rock and both home and college situations are difficult to manage. For disadvantaged students, cash-in-hand maintenance support is more important than the level of fees and without decent support to help with living costs they find it difficult to cope with college demands (Hillman & Robinson, 2015) [11].

3.2 Influence of living conditions and upkeep on academic performance

This study revealed that all the female students whether non-resident or resident are somehow negatively affected by the prevailing poor living conditions at the institution and level of upkeep they get from their parents. All female students who participated in this study indicated that they were stressed or have anxiety in one way or the other because of poor living conditions and the upkeep they get from their parents. This results in poor academic engagement and consequently submission of sub-standard assignments and late submission of assignments.

The following excerpts confirm the finding:

I get stressed up when my expenses require a lot more cash than what I was given. In order to supplement my budget I resort to moonlighting. This is time consuming and causes me to submit sub-standard assignments (S15).

I experienced anxiety when I failed to know where I will get my next meal. This resulted in failing to engage myself to my homework and then fail to meet assignment deadlines (S9).

I sometimes during my spare time look for piece jobs so as to supplement the income I get from my parents (S20).

Some lecturers penalise students who fail to meet deadlines of submitting assignments. This results in low passes and poor academic performance (S19).

Most participants revealed that erratic lecture attendance and partial or total absenteeism were other negative effects of poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep. These factors contributed to poor academic performance.

Most students who are in the business of selling have a tendency of dodging lectures as they go far orders (S17).

Some students absent themselves from lectures due to lack of transport fees (S8).

Erratic attendance of lectures has become the order of the day as most students attend mid-morning lectures as they come late and leave early due to transport blues (S10).

Poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep were mentioned by most students as the major source of stress and anxiety. Students from a poor background may compare themselves with those from an elite background. Inferiority complex caused by feeling unworthy because of lack may affect the student's self-esteem and may also cause depression (Larson & Simonis, 2005) ^[15]. Students who find to be hard-pressed may seek undignified methods of improving their budgets. IRIN (2011) ^[13] asserts that scholars who fail to make ends meet may resort to unscrupulous means of getting funds. Some students may indulge in premarital sex in search of funds. The married ones may be involved in infidelity acts as they also want to supplement their budgets. HIV and AIDS in this case may be more prevalent and affects the future of the female students.

Students who may abstain from unscrupulous ways of getting funds may end up moonlighting at college premises without permission from the college authorities. Enterprising is a good idea but when it takes the study time or done on the expense of attending lectures becomes a serious problem. Hillman and Robinson (2015) ^[11] argue that students from less well-off backgrounds must work long hours, which disrupts their study, or, even worse, they may decide not to attend lectures in search for money. Students miss lectures as they may travel to order and get the goods during midweek days as shopping is best done during the week. Moonlighting is also quite taxing as one should move around looking for customers. Most participants indicated that they find means to survive or get basic needs. Strict budget was mentioned as one of the key strategies to survive. No luxuries at all. Some do fund raising projects like selling whatever they find which help them to raise funds. Some indicated that they were engaging in piece jobs as way to supplement their earnings. The majority also walked to college because they could not afford transport fares.

The study revealed that all the female students indicated that they were affected with stress related to poor living conditions and the level of upkeep they get from their parents. Most of the students were revealing that they often endured emotional, physical and physiological stress. They come across stressful events which start from the place of residence to college campus and lectures. One student mentioned that anxiety of how to survive has reduced her academic performance as her listening span was always affected by thoughts of what to do next. Stressed minds are slow to process information hence grasping of concepts became very difficult. Akoomolafe and Adesua (2016) posit that proper upkeep may improve the level of motivation, academic performance as well as reducing students' stress levels.

Most student participants indicated that stress leads to absenteeism which may be mental or physical. They submitted that attending of lectures has become a formality because one may be physically present but actually absent as one is concentrating on how to find solutions to seemingly unending problems. This was mentioned by most students as partial absenteeism which negatively affects their academic performance. Women are more likely to fall in between stress and trying to cope with the demands of the school as compared to male students (Chee, Pino & Smith, 2005) ^[3]. Lack of good meals and rest has become the leading stressors of most college female students in Zimbabwe (Manwa, 2015). One female student who survives on moonlighting said that

she used most of her study time selling to fellow students. She was really stressed as signs of stress such as poor skin conditions were taking their toll on her.

Most students were blaming their weak passes on poor living conditions. Haile (2012) ^[8] avers that most developing countries hold a low profile of females in all spheres of development and this is mainly attributed to their low educational achievement. Submitting of substandard assignments due to lack of time and resources to produce assignment was said to be common among students. FAO (2012) ^[7] suggest that lack of time and resources to do given assignments compromises the quality of work submitted. Late submission of assignments was also part of their daily routines. One participant said that those who are resident students have a better chance of submitting good assignments as they can use the library during the evening.

Most non-resident students do not use the library at night except those who have their own transport. Walking between the campus and location during the night is dangerous for the female scholar. The students who fail to meet the required stands have always faced with the penalty of low academic performance. High grades are useful to secure better jobs and work places such as good schools in urban areas (Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013) ^[31]. This implies that the poor will remain poor as they may fail to secure better jobs. In Zimbabwe, most females are marginalized and some of them are in a vicious cycle of poverty. While many of these children are performing at higher levels than ever before, the fact remains that these children remain at the bottom of the economic and educational ladder (Anderson, Evans, Kozak & Peterson, 2000) ^[1].

The female students who participated in this study were advocating the need to rectify the situation. According to Chee *et al.*, (2005) ^[3] education has been seen to be a source of advancement, empowerment, and liberation for women. Improving living conditions and level of support is critical in ending the cycle of poverty and empowering females. All the stake holders such as government, NGO's and the community should look into the plight of female scholars in tertiary education. All female students who participated in this research shared the same sentiments that their needs are far more than those of their male counterparts. Mulugeta (2012) ^[22] confirms that strengthening the performance of female students is through provision of teaching learning materials and creating fertile conditions of the college that allow students to do their studies with minimum challenges is recommended. Hillman and Robinson (2015) ^[11] state that support for living costs is vital to participation and better academic performance by students, but grants that help to provide it are under threat in most developing countries. Anderson *et al.*, (2000) ^[1] state that the needs of disadvantaged students should not continue to be neglected by society and the public schools in many respects.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study revealed that female students in colleges are facing challenges linked to poor living conditions and lack of proper upkeep. These conditions were seen to have an adverse effect on the academic performance of the female scholars. Poor academic performance may lead to securing jobs which pay less and then that may also cause them to remain marginalised. It is against such a background that the study concludes that female students really need assistance from all stake holders such as the government, non-governmental organisations and the community for them to enjoy learning

in colleges. Most female students who were disadvantaged were widows, orphans and those from poor background. The intuitions are going through economic challenges because of the ailing economy. Both institutions are falling to maintain the facilities due to lack of funds hence the standards are going down.

The study recommends that sponsorship for female students' welfare especially the marginalised should be considered in all spheres of life such as improving their living conditions. This implies that the government may re-introduce full bursaries for all students especially the marginalised female students. Female students may also be allowed to have their own student's union that advocates and stands for their needs which are different from those of their counter parts.

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