

## A Reflection on how Peacebuilding skills can Mitigate Gender-Based Violence in Kenyan Universities.

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**ABSTRACT:** Gender based violence (GBV) is a cross-cutting issue that continues to attract prominent attention as a serious violation of human rights. It is deeply rooted in unequal gendered social norms and power imbalance. It is one of the major topical issues in Kenya's daily media mainstream. Attempts to mitigate the effects of GBV have remained futile both at local and international levels even after launching different frameworks and interventions. This research was part of the bigger research which sought to explore how peacebuilding skills could be used to mitigate GBV with a focus on female university peer counsellors. The study employed Participatory Action Research (PAR). It also adopted a transformative worldview with a focus on mixed methods design. Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), were used during data collection. Data was analysed using SPSS and thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that GBV was prevalent in the institutions of higher learning and mechanisms to mitigate it remain superficial. It was also revealed that when youth are equipped with peacebuilding skills like peer counseling, they have the potential to transform and create a culture of peace where they can enjoy the right to education and uphold human rights.

**Keywords** - GBV, Peacebuilding, university peer counseling, mitigate

### I. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) in particular, intimate partner violence is a global phenomenon that knows no geographical, cultural, social, economic, ethnic, or other boundaries (Leach et al. 2014; Mashiri 2013). It is a structural problem that cuts across all societies and represents a cruel violation of human rights - the worst manifestation of gender-based discrimination and a major obstacle to achievement of gender equality. It is accepted and sustained by social institutions, including institutions of higher learning, the very place where we expect our children to be safe and protected. It is a serious obstacle to the right to education and learning and its effects are felt in the ways that young people understand and enact their social lives and exercise their citizenship. GBV can take various forms, ranging from sexual harassment, sexual assault, verbal and physical abuse, and psychological and economic harm that is committed against a person as a result of power inequities that are based on gender roles. Women and girls are more vulnerable to these forms of violence due to their lack of power they possess within many societies, as well as in their educational institutions, and even in their families (UNESCO 2010; Edwards-Jauch 2012; UNESCO 2018).

GBV in most cases is deeply rooted in the historical unequal power relations and gendered social norms that are discriminative in nature based on sexes and continues to place women in subordinate positions in relation to men "The challenge, however, remains that there are rarely effective and appropriate mechanisms available to address the problem of GBV" (Mashiri 2013: 94). In addition, the lack of recourse and a socialisation process that can enable women to break their silence on the experience of GBV ensures the prevalence of the problem and compounds the experience of it. Although GBV manifests itself in various forms, the most common form among college students is victimization, especially of female students which continues to erode their self-esteem (Heise et al., 2002; Ellsberg et al. 2015). The purpose of this research is to determine the extent of GBV that is occurring in universities across Kenya and to test the effectiveness of peer counselling programme in mitigating the effects of the same by female peer counsellors. In determining this objective, the

researchers approached female and male students and staff at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST).

Peer counselling programmes have the potential to transform attitudes and behaviours and to change the mind-set of individuals to allow for the creation of a culture of peace. It is a philosophy based on the principle that people have the capability to solve their own problems when facilitated to, it is also a common practice in the Kenyan learning institutions. It focusses on mentoring and tutoring of the low performing students by their peers. In universities, the focus is on reproductive health issues like teenage pregnancy (Bururia 2015; Mason 2015). Young people are the future leaders of society. Through their peers, they facilitate behaviour and attitude change through critical reasoning and skills that transform mind-set to prevent conflict and violence, to resolve conflict peacefully and to create a conducive environment at both intra-personal and interpersonal levels. Sharp (1994) has been credited with this topic (Bururia et al. 2015; Smolleck & Fryd 2018), however, research on peer counsellors and management of GBV remain scant.

Given this, the research is driven by the desire to advance knowledge and learning in this field, both in terms of what is known about the phenomenon and its impact on individuals and on how best to mitigate it through peacebuilding programmes. The paper adopted a mixed methods approach with a focus on both quantitative and qualitative methods utilising both interviews and focus group discussions. The findings revealed that peacebuilding skills one of which is peer counselling have the potential to transform attitudes and behaviours and to change the mindset of the young people and to allow for the creation of a culture of peace. Although their work remains remarkable, the challenge remains that the existing structures do not readily support such initiatives at the University- the reason why a reflection on the topic is crucial.

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Globally, according to WHO report, GBV is estimated to be between 30% - 35% (WHO 2013: 2) for women aged between 15 – 49 years. Efforts to mitigate the same have remained superficial focusing on the descriptive aspect of the topic. The action component which is vital to allow for the enjoyment of educational right and transform the mindset, behaviour and attitude have been ignored. In Kenya, it is estimated that 45% of women aged between 15 – 49 years suffer violence from an intimate partner and universities are not exceptional (Gender Violence Recovery Center 2013; Chege 2007: 1). GBV remains underreported in Kenya and possible reasons for this could be; patriarchy, gender socialisation, a culture of silence (Damba, Lunga and Musarurwa 2013), inadequate support from the authority, and institutional culture and practices. GBV is a manifestation of gendered power inequalities used to maintain power and control over another (Sidanius and Pratto 2011; Standish 2014: 113). At the university level, although statistical evidence is scant, evidence continues to unfold of the increasing cases of GBV and in particular, intimate partner violence (IPV) directed towards female students. This continues to undermine the achievement of equality, inclusive and equitable education for all (Chege 2012; UNESCO 2015; Dunne and Salvi 2014). Use of force and resources is a true reflection of gendered power relations and is used to coerce female students into unwanted intimate relationships, as evident in universities (Galtung 1990: 292; Edwards-Jauch 2012; Umana, Fawole and Adeoye 2014). Female students, therefore, find themselves in a trap which they cannot easily exit. The purpose of this research was to develop and test an effective intervention that can transform the mindset of the young people and allow them to work towards building peaceful co-existence with one another in Kenyan universities.

## III. JUSTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study addresses a significant issue in the field of gender. It allows for thoughtful and deliberate actions to build peaceful coexistence, promote justice, and inclusion, and allow for inclusive institutions at all levels of society where women and girls can realize their rights free from discrimination. Transforming the mind-set, facilitating attitude and behaviour change to build peaceful coexistence, inclusive and violence-free universities for female and male students is key to achieving the goals of education. Therefore, the study was designed to contribute to building inclusive, equitable and peaceful universities, and the achievement of the national sustainable development goals 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality) and 6 (peace and justice) of vision 2030 thus advancing the field of gender.

## IV. OVERALL OBJECTIVE

Various studies have been conducted in the field of gender regarding GBV across the world. Findings reveal that GBV has serious implications on the educational performance of female students (Chege 2005; Gebreyosus 2014; Umana, Fawole and Adeoye 2014). However, the challenge has remained and continues to prevail on how best we can curb GBV, which is rampant in the universities. Various approaches have been adopted, but they have been under-researched and continue to lack the action component, including peer counselling. Peer counselling has the potential to transform mind-sets, and to change the attitudes and

behaviours of young people so that they can learn to solve problems and conflicts non-violently. Studies also revealed that youth feel freer talking to their peers as opposed to talking to those in authority (Mason et al. 2015). This topic was therefore chosen to allow the researcher and co-researchers, who are direct victims of GBV, to develop and test an effective mitigating strategy for GBV through their peers. In the course of this work in academics, we have met students who display overt and typical symptoms of GBV and seem to live “normal lives”. Although they have developed this as a survival strategy, these students portray symptoms of psychological disturbance and resentment whenever some topics like GBV are mentioned. As such, the aim of this study was to explore how peacebuilding skills can be used as a tool for university female peer counsellors to mitigate GBV.

## V. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:

- To examine the extent, nature, and prevalence of GBV among female university students;
- To assess effectiveness of existing mechanisms in mitigating GBV in the university;
- To develop and investigate the effectiveness of peer counselling in mitigating GBV;
- To conduct a preliminary evaluation on the effectiveness of peer counselling programme in mitigating GBV.

## VI. THEORETICAL BASIS

This study was grounded in the Social Dominance Theory (SDT) by Sidanius and Pratto (1999). It is a theory of power within hierarchical societies which presents a multi-level analysis of group inequalities and oppression (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 31). SDT assumes that the basis for understanding group-based inequalities and oppression that results in GBV, lies within an understanding of the processes that produce and maintain such discrimination. This calls for a clear understanding of how cultural ideologies and policies, institutional practices, social relationships, the psychological predispositions of individuals, and the social interaction between the evolved psychologies of men and women work to produce inequalities (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Pratto, Sidanius and Levin 2006; Rosenthal and Levy 2010; Pratto, Stewart and Zeineddine 2013). Social interaction is characterized by unequal gendered power relations that have been shaped and continue to be shaped by the society.

## VII. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This project adopted Participatory Action Research (PAR) due to its nature and the quest to not only understand the problem under study but also; to offer participants an opportunity to reflect on how GBV has and continues to affect them and attempt to transform them.

PAR utilised explanatory and descriptive approaches and broader descriptions to convey the process and dynamics of the research. It adopted a transformative world view- a worldview that applies to people who experience discrimination and oppression including, but not limited to GBV (Mertens 2010b; Mertens 2010a). This framework allows for one to bring about changed social processes and relationships by changing the discriminatory attitudes and oppression among participants (Mertens 2003, 2010b). The mixed methods approach was adopted where both quantitative and qualitative data were used in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. The researchers chose mixed methods approach because of its effectiveness in understating the problem under study. This approach also complemented insights, compensated for limitations, and examined uncertainties for the problem under study (GBV) (Hesse-Biber 2010; Creswell et al. 2011; Creswell 2013; Aghtaie and Gangoli 2014b).

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS to produce frequencies and cross-tabulations (Hesse-Biber 2010; Creswell et al. 2011). Qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis approach. Data was coded and categorized to identify and merge important recurring themes and after, it was quantified and interpreted (Hesse-Biber 2010; Creswell 2013). The analysis was guided by the chosen theoretical framework and the researcher’s interest in the topic under study.

### Data Collection Methods

The researcher’s interest was to understand the extent, nature, prevalent and measures that have been taken to curb GBV within the participants’ environment. This laid the foundation for the researchers and co-researchers to develop and test an effective intervention that would help female students mitigate GBV. As such, the researcher utilised the mixed methods approach on their quest to understand the problem under study. The quantitative part answered the first objective and laid a platform for implementing and testing the effectiveness of the established programme.

The researcher's intention was to train female students (an action team) on basic peer counselling skills. These skills included but were not limited to self-awareness and the basic skills of counselling. The researcher used memory at work to help participants understand how GBV has been affecting them in life. The team was required to imagine their life as a river (the way it meanders) and at each point, explain what happened and how they were able to overcome the same. Later, they were required to conduct training and talks, participate in psycho-social support, conduct campaigns on gender activism around campus, and establish an association that would keep the intervention alive. An evaluation took place at the end of the action phase of the study.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity is determined by how truthful the research results are, whilst reliability is the extent to which results are consistent over time and accurately represent the total population under study (Golafshani 2003: 598-599). Primary and secondary data was used to discuss the problem under study in addition to richly describing the research procedures and instruments (Davey, Gugiu and Coryn 2010: 143). Also, a pre-test for the instruments was run with a non-participating team, the questionnaires were administered across all the departments (Golafshani 2003; Davey, Gugiu and Coryn 2010; USAID 2013; Creswell 2014) the departments; triangulation and member-checks were employed to ensure replicability, accuracy, and credibility of measuring instruments, thereby increasing validity and reliability of the study. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data into one database also helped to increase the accuracy thereby allowing for greater confidence in the findings.

## **VIII. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

This paper discussed the findings from the survey and the qualitative phases. Focus was placed on the prevalence of GBV within the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology community and the mitigating mechanisms that the university has put in place. The research adopted a MM(in full) approach to have a better and clear understanding of the concept. Seventy-eight participants took part in the survey with all the seventy-eight questionnaires being returned. Both females and male students aged between 15-24 participated voluntarily.

From survey findings, it was clear that the concept of GBV was not clear amongst the university students. As such, there was need to provide a clear conceptualization of the concept during the meeting and even the FGDs in relation to the way it is conceptualised at institutions of higher learning. It was upon this clarity that the participants admitted to the fact that they had been victims of GBV at some point.

It was also noted that GBV was prevalent within the institution and majority of those affected were female students in intimate partner relationships. Although this came from the students, evidence revealed that there were many reservations from the staff especially when the researcher sought to find out about the prevalence of GBV. FGDs and interviews further confirmed the findings of the baseline survey that GBV was a common practice among intimate partner relationships.

It also emerged from the surveys that GBV has far-reaching consequences with psychological disturbances being pointed out during the meeting, the FGDs, and the interviews. Lack of concentration during lectures was one of the examples of the effects of GBV on the victims. When faced with GBV, participants from FGDs and interviews acknowledged that they were more comfortable sharing with a friend (someone of their age) unlike those in authority because a friend would give them a listening ear and be able to walk into their shoes unlike those in authority.

Findings also revealed that although the university had put in place mechanisms to mitigate GBV, a lot needed to be done as the mechanisms were not clear on what constituted GBV and what should be done. Participants in FGD and interviews pointed to that fact that GBV was everybody's business and no one's responsibility within the institution. Although the university is "a GBV-free Zone, participants noted that this was in writing but the practicability part remained a challenge in an institution governed by patriarchal cultural and gendered social norms that believes in the 'rule' of a man.

In addition, use of force, power, and resources were pointed out as ways in which young girls have been lured into luxurious life, which in the end leads them into GBV. It was also revealed that peer counselling as a programme had the potential of mitigating GBV only if an effective approach is adopted, for example, reaching out to majority of the people especially the students. The findings are in tandem with earlier studies which revealed that peer education has the potential to bring about change by transforming the mindset of young people and allow them to co-exist peacefully (Arudo 2008; Bururia et al. 2014; Smolleck & Fryd 2018).

## IX. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, the research contributed to betterment of action research participants' knowledge, skills, and their situations. As researchers, we have also acquired new knowledge and skills in addition to the new perspectives gained on the use of Mixed Research Methods and a better understanding of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Whereas we are aware that the research is sometimes adversely affected by various factors, we do confirm that the integrity of this research process and data collection procedure would remain similar under similar conditions regardless of the improvements that one may execute in the entire research process.

In line with the findings, we therefore offer the following recommendations. The recommendations mainly focus on institutions of higher learning – universities. The aim is to help those in authority to adopt the best intervention strategies in mitigating the effects of GBV which continues to negate the girl-child an opportunity to freely enjoy their educational goal.

- Peer programmes have the capacity to mitigate the effects of GBV within institutions of higher learning. When students have been equipped with relevant skills, they are better placed to transform the mindset and allow for a culture of peace to prevail. They should therefore be supported to initiate such activities to create peaceful environments for both sexes to co-exist.
- Institutions of higher learning serve as the highest level of education in any country and therefore, they should lead in promoting the leaders of tomorrow. This is only possible when they adopt a gender-sensitive approach in their daily practice.
- Institutions of higher-learning should adopt effective mechanisms in handling GBV-related cases. The mechanisms adopted should be user-friendly and should be geared towards mitigating the effects of GBV. This study has revealed that students have the potential of mitigating GBV when they are enabled.. Institutions should therefore invest and support student-led programmes aimed towards the same.
- Institutions of higher learning should strengthen the existing mechanisms for mitigating GBV. The assumption that a course on gender issues is enough in this should not hold. Gender-awareness trainings should be regularly conducted. Evidenced from the field findings, victims of GBV are always blamed for their actions; something that shuns female students away from reporting. This approach should be replaced with a better approach where strategies to be non-judgmental in this dealing is adopted to allow the victim freedom of reporting. This will only be possible where the procedure is free and fair and effective measures taken against the perpetrators.
- Importantly, those in authority should hold onto their code of ethics which they have sworn to. Punitive measures should be taken against those in authority/lecturers found taking advantage of these young girls.

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