

# **'Sexist Humour' towards Female Students in Higher Education Settings: A Case Study of Great Zimbabwe University**

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## **Abstract**

Sexism and sexual harassment in educational settings have rightfully gained much attention from researchers. Explicit harassment has seemingly been restrained through the introduction of policies criminalising these acts, but latent or less discernible harassment still occurs through channels such as sexist humour. This study sampled 20 female and ten male students at a university in Zimbabwe. Through interviews and focus group discussions, it explored how gender intersects with 'culture', manifesting in sexist humour, and how this contributes to campuses being hostile for females. Grounded on Bourdieu's theory of practice, the study explored issues of power and powerlessness and the invisible power that underlies sexist humour in education settings. It revealed that females in higher education settings are often subjects of gender ideology and stereotyping where female submission is emphasised, as evidenced by the kind of sexist humour that prevails. The study concluded that sexist language use is related to a particular kind of hegemonic masculinity that condones verbal violence against female students.

**Key words:** Misogyny, sexist humour, patriarchy, harassment, gender

Le sexisme et le harcèlement sexuel dans les milieux éducatifs ont à juste titre retenu l'attention des chercheurs. Le harcèlement explicite a apparemment été limité grâce à l'introduction de politiques criminalisant ces actes, mais le harcèlement latent ou moins discernable continue de se produire par des canaux tels que l'humour sexiste. Cette étude a échantillonné 20 étudiantes et dix étudiants masculins dans une université au Zimbabwe. À travers des entretiens et des discussions de groupe, elle a exploré comment le genre

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se recoupe avec la “culture”, à travers un humour sexiste et comment cela contribue à rendre les campus hostiles aux femmes. Fondée sur la théorie de la pratique de Bourdieu, l'étude a exploré les questions de pouvoir et d'impuissance et le pouvoir invisible qui sous-tend l'humour sexiste dans les milieux éducatifs. Elle a révélé que les femmes dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sont souvent sujettes à l'idéologie et aux stéréotypes de genre où la soumission féminine est mise en avant, comme en témoigne le type d'humour sexiste qui prévaut. L'étude conclut que l'utilisation d'un langage sexiste est liée à un type particulier de masculinité hégémonique qui tolère la violence verbale contre les étudiantes.

**Mots clés :** misogynie ; humour sexiste; patriarcat; harcèlement; le sexe

## 1 Introduction

This article explores the interplay between gender, sexist humour and power in relation to how they (re)construct, (re)produce and maintain the current social reality and thus deny women equal opportunity in higher education contexts. It argues that higher education systems continue to rationalise and reproduce injustices against female students through the normalisation of sexist humour. Drawing on Woodzicka and Ford (2010), sexist humour is defined as humour that contains sexist beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes. The #MeToo movement (a social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment where people publicise allegations of sex crimes that began in America and is now widespread) is a reminder of how common sexual harassment is and how it has endured and spanned decades. The campaign raised questions on why violence against women has reached such alarming levels with only a few women speaking out. It appears that the justification of humour as fun, and the subsequent trivialisation of sexist humour has been a means through which its invisibility has been enforced, enabling sexist harassment to flourish. As such, it is imperative to understand the lived experiences of women within higher educational contexts.

Higher education for women was identified in the Beijing Platform for Action as a route towards female emancipation (United Nations, 1995). The Platform targeted 12 critical areas including poverty, education and training to remove the obstacles to equal participation by women in various spheres of public and private life. Higher education is widely acknowledged as an important pillar of the social system that imparts new knowledge to all genders,

interrogates the status quo, and engages with long-held ideas in society. It is regarded as crucial for the realisation of a just society and as a gateway to a better life. This article thus looks beyond women's presence in higher education settings to examine how female students experience everyday social citizenship in contexts that are arguably a replication of the socio-cultural, political and religious systems that shape and determine the gender roles that define women. Investment in these discourses conceals gender inequalities and social power relations that contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence. It has been noted that “the provision of a safe and inclusive environment is the responsibility of the university in order to allow all students to achieve their potential” (FAWE, 1998. p. 6). The study's findings could improve the lives of women in higher education through the realisation of a just social order.

## Background

Scholars in anthropology and sociology have highlighted the influence of pre-existing structures that discriminate against women on female participation in higher education (see Tamale, 1997; Gaidzanwa, 2001; Mama, 2003; Butler, 2007; Muasya, 2014). These manifest as the rules, rituals and customs of each culture and are permeated with specific expectations and requirements for male and female behaviour and what it means to be male and female (see Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 2004). This implies that issues relating to inclusion and exclusion, and how women should be treated, originate in society. As such, researchers have addressed the broad attitudes that define women in order to understand harassment of females (see Mama, 2003, p. 17; Barnes, 2007, p. 19; Bunyi, 2004, p. 36; Adusah-Karikari, 2008, p. 15; Kayuni, 2009, p. 88). However, there is little research on the use of sexist language in Africa and how women experience it, particularly in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. The term sexist humour remains unfamiliar in Zimbabwean societies and is the least understood and documented form of violence against women because it is dismissed as harmless fun (Kanyemba and Naidu, 2019). Although several studies have discussed the harassment of women in higher education in Africa (including Zimbabwe), the majority focus on blatant expressions of harassment (see Zindi, 1994; Muparamoto, 2012; Wekwete and Manyeruke, 2012; Mapuranga, Musodza and Tom, 2015).

A broader body of research has shown that sexism has evolved from being blatantly expressed to being hidden in humorous verbal cues which are

subtler yet equally harmful (Samantroy, 2010). While regarded as amusing and harmless, scholars maintain that sexist jokes are riddled with undertones of the ways certain sections of society perceive women because these jokes focus on women's attributes or lack thereof and are linked to sex, intelligence and women's assumed place in society (ibid). The distinction between a sexist and a gendered joke is subtle, but once a joke elevates one gender at the expense of the other, it has crossed over into sexism (Attenborough, 2014). If the joke merely compares and contrasts generalised gendered behaviours it is not sexist. It becomes sexist when it communicates contempt for one gender because of these differences (ibid).

There are both positive and negative sides to humour depending on the context and perception. This duality expresses how humour may serve the purpose of social cohesion and encourage a sense of kinship while at the same time threatening the target group (ibid.). It explains questions such as the use of humour in flirtation, seduction, pleasure and desire as well as pain and diminishment, at the same time exposing the power dynamics which may be at play. It can be argued that it is these power dynamics which lead to the reproduction of patriarchy. Against this backdrop, humour itself may be said to be non-sexist. What makes it sexist is the power dynamics of a particular context including the ridicule, mockery and sarcasm implied by the joke. Sexist humour infantilises and sexually objectifies women by relegating them to the domestic space. A close relationship can be noted between humour, malice, aggressiveness and hostility, revealing that sexist humour is a complex and puzzling phenomenon. Drawing from this, it can be said that language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings depending on context.

Mallet (2016) notes that sexist humour is a common way for men to express sexism because their thoughts and beliefs regarding sexism are cloaked in humour and presented as playful and unserious banter; yet they are motivated by a demeaning view that despises women and their achievements. The marginality and powerlessness of women implied by sexist humour is reflected in both the ways women are expected to behave and the ways in which they are spoken of. When these sexist sentiments are presented as jokes they are difficult to refute. Those who object, are accused of lacking a sense of humour, thus perpetuating this type of sexism by preventing it from being critically examined in line with democratic principles (Kanyemba and Naidu, 2019).

Research has shown that sexist humour creates a context in which men

with a sexist attitude can defend a gender status quo that disadvantages women through the creation of a 'safe space' to express "system-justifying beliefs" (Ford et al., 2013, p. 65). Ford (2000) found that humour increased tolerance of a sexist event. Again, Naus (1992) revealed in his study that males considered humour that endorsed sex discrimination as "harmless and acceptable". However, sexist humour may not always be a means of evoking amusement but can be a way to express deep-seated resentment. It needs to be critically assessed as in some contexts it is "light-hearted banter", while in others, "it can injure people's standing, or cut deeply into relationships and interactions between people within and across different social groups". (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008, p. 809). Nayef and El Nashar (2015) note that sexist humour was used to mock women who voted for the first time in Egypt (previously, only men were allowed to vote). Jokes were made to remind women that voting is different from taking a pregnancy test, implying that women are only good at giving birth. Thus, sexist jokes appear to reflect men's struggle to deal with their anxiety about women's changing role.

Sexist humour can have serious implications and repercussions as it strengthens a social system that trivialises and promotes sexism, thereby maintaining a sexist social order (Montemurro, 2003; Bemiller and Schneider, 2010). This contributes to women being relegated to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy as subordinates to men who degrade women and assert their power and dominance over them. In higher education, fear of sexist humour affects how women navigate spaces on campus. It appears that such humour controls the space, energy and mobility of the female student. Muasya (2014) noted that female students avoided lecture and residence halls, and sports grounds for fear of harassment. Manyeruke and Wekwete (2012) revealed that students at the University of Zimbabwe avoided an open area which they named 'Facebook' because this was where verbal harassment was concentrated. This negatively impacts their academic performance as some of the areas they avoid might be vital to their studies. It also contributes to a "chilly climate" for women in higher education (see Mama and Barnes, 2007, p. 9; Gaidzanwa, 2010, p. 16; Masvawure, 2010, p. 860; Muasya, 2014, p. 75). Such a climate exists where members of a particular group are systematically relegated to the side lines and are deprived of opportunity. Similarly, sexist humour may be a response to a perceived threat to masculinity in higher education. The literature observes that men may respond with violence when they feel that their masculinity is under threat (Vandello et al., 2008). Women

have made significant strides in participating in higher education (previously a male domain) and it appears that men see this as a direct challenge and a threat to destabilise masculinity and exclusively masculine spaces (Mama and Barnes, 2007; Gaidzanwa, 2001). As such, sexist humour in higher education contexts has the potential to escalate into serious violence because it is couched in the language of rough treatment, aggression and subjugation (Mungwini and Matereke, 2010, 1). However, this umbrella view of ‘men responding with violence’ when their masculinity is threatened is somewhat deterministic and limited. In reality, men are not unanimous in their performance of masculinity. Since masculinities are socially defined, the social contexts in which particular behaviours and gender roles are situated should be considered.

### Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded on Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu sees power as culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure. The main way this occurs is through what he calls ‘habitus’ or socialised norms or tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking. Habitus is “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them”. This theory was particularly useful for this study because it explains the intricacies of various social and institutional arenas referred to as habitus in which people express and reproduce their characters and identities and where they compete for recognition (social capital). University students are at a critical stage where they are experimenting and seeking to establish their identities and carve a niche for themselves, with some of these identities enduring into adulthood. Bourdieu’s theory of practice aids in explaining how socialised norms and tendencies guide behaviour and thinking that are taken for granted. Sexist humour is embedded in taken-for-granted assumptions that it is harmless and as a result it gives rise to unequal divisions in society (Kanyemba and Naidu, 2019). Through habitus, social inequalities are established by the subtle impression of power relations on the dispositions of individuals. These unequal divisions are gradually inscribed in people’s minds through systems of education, language and values in everyday activities. They result in “unconscious acceptance of social hierarchies and differences” which Bourdieu refers to as habitus, where structured propensities on how to think and behave take shape in individuals and guide them (Gaventa, 2003,

p. 141). Universities can thus be taken to be what Bourdieu referred to as “fields” which is an institutional arena where males express and reproduce their dispositions and compete with women.

### The Study Context

Higher education in Zimbabwe can be understood in the context of the colonial era where it was dominated by males because the few Black secondary schools that existed in colonial times favoured men (Gaidzanwa, 2013). The dominant colonial (British) gender ideology was essentially grounded in the Victorian ideology whose fundamental gender premise bordered on restricting women to the domestic sphere (also referred to as the ‘domesticity of women thesis’). Furthermore, education of girls and women was considered less important in Zimbabwe. The rationale was that in a patrilineal system a son perpetuates the family name and therefore investment in the future of the son cannot be totally fruitless, unlike a girl child who will marry and be under the care of her husband. As such, post-independence, women tended to enrol in schools that focused on home economics subjects such as sewing and cooking. Thus, universities remained dominated by males (ibid.). This changed when the Zimbabwean government introduced the affirmative action policy in 1992 that allowed female applicants with slightly lower qualifications than their male counterparts to enrol at university. This was meant to ensure that individuals (women) who would otherwise be lost to society and the economy would realise their full potential. Nonetheless, higher education remained a male domain and in 1998 (18 years after Zimbabwe’s independence) the University of Zimbabwe had 5 444 male students, compared to 2 408 females (Zindi, 2008).

Traditional patriarchal social and cultural values persist in Zimbabwe and are still valued by the majority of the population. They include the notion of women being domesticated and submissive. However, a shift towards equitable gender perspectives has developed due to growing understanding of the relationship between the subordination of women in many societies and the privileging of men. This created a desire for better understanding of women’s subordination and the conditions for their empowerment in different societies, resulting in improved enrolment of women in higher education. Half of the student population at Greater Zimbabwe University (GZU) is female. The growing population of female students at this university and the characteristics of the student population that differ from other universities in

the country, made make it an important site for this research.

## 2 Methodology

The study drew on interpretive social scientific and feminist critical paradigmatic approaches. The interpretive paradigmatic framing emphasises participants' lived experiences in order to understand how they understand their own experiences as opposed to imposition from the outside. The critical paradigm begins with the knowledge that systems are biased against 'others', such as women or marginalised ethnic groups. These two research paradigms were appropriate to explore how female students experience everyday social citizenship in sexist humour contexts by making women's marginalised voices heard. They require that the researcher create and maintain an open dialogical process that allows the participant's voice and accounts to emerge without fear of value imposition and judgement. As such, the researcher avoided expressing her personal views in any discussion and remained neutral throughout the data collection process.

Thirty students (20 females and 10 males) aged 18 and older were randomly selected for the study. The sample was identified through flow population and the inclusion criteria included being a student at GZU, and that the majority of participants should be female. Potential respondents were approached at sports grounds, common rooms and open spaces where students socialise. A deliberate decision was taken to select more females than males as the research aimed to examine female students' perceptions and experiences of sexist humour. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and what participation would involve. To enhance confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and no identifying information was requested in the questionnaires. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and GZU granted permission to conduct the study. Data was collected from February to April 2018 through observation, survey questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

The first stage of the study involved a survey using a close-ended questionnaire with all respondents (n=30). This was the exploratory stage to gather perceptions of sexist humour and information on campus. The questionnaires were supported by FGDs to follow up on the sentiments gathered from the survey questionnaire. An open-ended questionnaire was used to stimulate discussion in three mixed-sex FGDs, each with ten participants. The final stage involved follow-up individual interviews (n=30)

using an open-ended questionnaire based on the responses from the FGDs. This enabled the researcher to probe further in relation to responses that were not well articulated in the FGDs or with regard to issues that respondents could not discuss in a group setting. The data was analysed and interpreted using thematic analysis. The thematic approach clarified the topics on which the problem was based. Discourse analysis was also utilised and involved analysis of verbal and non-verbal language and any semiotic events related to sexist humour. The data was presented as narratives.

## 3 Findings

While the study involved 30 participants, this section presents verbatim data from respondents whose cases are illustrative of what was highlighted by other respondents. As students studying at the same institution and more or less exposed to the same environment, their experiences are similar although there are some unique cases that are discussed.

### *Women as Targets of Sexist Humour*

The findings from the survey questionnaire indicated that generally, women are targets of sexist humour often perpetrated by men. These findings are in line with previous research that indicated that women are most often the subjects of harassment (Zindi, 1994; Gaidzanwa, 2001). The reasons were clarified in the individual interviews. Tendai said:

*It's because of culture, men pursue women for relationships so sexist humour paves way for and makes it easier for men to approach women. You cannot be direct when trying to woo a lady; you have to go around in circles. You test the waters first...*

This narrative presents males as hunters and women as the hunted as sanctioned by patriarchal culture and its expectations of courtship. Bourdieu sees power as culturally and symbolically sanctioned through structures such as culture (ibid). Tendai's response draws our attention to the ways in which gendered values and expectations are imprinted on people, leaving little or no room for change, or to resist gender norms. It can be argued that it is the socialised habitus that guides behaviour and thinking. Tendai's view of sexist humour fails to recognise the 'other' who might have a different view to him and deems sexist humour as harassment. This reveals the complex nature of sexist humour in relation to flirtation and courtship depending on

how one interprets such humour. Thus, it can be argued that sexist joking strengthens male confidence and heterosexual behaviour by consolidating dominant myths about the social roles of men and women. Men see sexist humour as part of enacting their masculinity and feel justified in their acts. Bourdieu's concept of doxa explains that gender relationships, attitudes, gender stereotyping of female students and sexual harassment may be taken for granted through repetition. These general sentiments portray existing social arrangements as given, unquestionable as well as acceptable, which fits well with sexist humour.

Sexist humour against women at GZU was related to how male students viewed increased female participation at the university which they saw as a threat and encroachment on masculine space. Fidza, a male respondent, remarked:

*When women come to university, they must prove that they have steel balls in their pants because this is different from cooking dinner at home. We need to show them that Beijing was a lie.*

This response highlights that women are expected to assimilate into unwelcoming institutional cultures; to accept and tolerate stigma and continued forms of marginalisation as the price of entry (Badat, 2016). Fidza's reference to the Beijing Declaration of 1995 (that aims to advance the goal of equality for women) showed his contempt for an era which laid the foundation for women's emancipation. It also suggests that he blames it for increased female participation in previously male spaces. It was not clear how Fidza was going to show women that Beijing was a lie. Given Reidy's (2014) assertion that men overcompensate when masculinity is challenged, it can be argued that through sexist humour, masculinity might drift towards violence. This highlights that violence is deeply rooted in beliefs that emphasise a gendered division of labour where women are relegated to the domestic space.

Gramsci's concept of normalisation posits that the beliefs that the dominant culture supports are so powerful and have such a hold on people that alternative ways of envisioning reality are very hard to imagine. Bourdieu explains this through the concept of *illusio* whereby individuals are invested in and "taken in by the game", with the game representing competition among actors in a given field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 116). Men are presented as the canonical citizens of higher education spaces, an identity which women should reify and which feminists argue is an illusion. As such,

it can be said that sexist humour reflects men's struggle to deal with their anxiety about the changing role of women.

### Safety and Belonging

In the in-depth interviews, female students expressed anxiety about their safety and belonging in higher education spaces. Sibongile said:

*It's frustrating that sexist humour is not only prevalent in public spaces such as sports grounds during sports events, but is also evident in class. This other day we were in class and I [was] checking [the] time on my wristwatch when the lecturer said to me, 'Sibongile, are you wondering if the lecture will be over in time for you to make dinner at home?' I was so embarrassed and the whole class burst out in laughter.*

Diana also recounted that sexist humour was used in the classroom:

*Our lecturer asked us to form groups of ten students each for group assignment presentations. When I approached James (male) to join our group he jokingly said he preferred a male only group because he didn't want to fail. James said women are always gossiping and bickering and therefore he was not going to join our group. When he noticed that he had offended me he said 'lighten up, I'm just joking'.*

James' response and Sibongile's narrative show how beliefs about male superiority and women's inferiority cement women in a gender role that reduces them and their actions to exaggerations of existing sexist stereotypes. This causes women to feel shame, and to doubt and undervalue themselves and others of their gender. It illustrates that sexist humour not only influences interaction at a personal level, but also contributes to a hierarchical position of women as subordinate to males in society through exclusion and isolation. As citizens of the institution, female students reflected that on-going feelings of being marginalised in particular spaces on campus are both disabling and prohibitive in their academic project. This symbolises the experience of women in higher education who walk a path littered with sarcasm, questions and doubts about their ability to build a career. Through sexist humour, male students degrade women and create a broader social structure that asserts their dominance and power over women students.

Further investigation revealed that sexist humour may result in sexual harassment through the normalisation and promotion of attitudes and

expressions that appear to justify sexual violence. In the FGDs female students discussed how some male students take sexist humour further by groping female students, all in the name of joking. The male students in the FGDs stated that they did not mean any harm by groping women; it was just harmless banter. They denied that it was harassment and alleged that women were overdoing the gender harassment thing.

Claiming that *women are* taking things too far when they reject harassment and demand gender equality and respect is itself a manifestation of modern sexism (see Fiske and North, 2015). Asking women to lighten up about sexism is another form of sexist behaviour, whether or not it is intended. Indeed, some female students revealed that they had been harassed. In the follow-up interviews, Susan shared:

*There is this guy I always see around campus with his friends and they pass these kinds of sexist jokes to ladies. I have decided that I will not laugh at his jokes because I feel they belittle women. One day he followed me to the res(idence) together with his friends and aggressively demanded to know why I hated him and called me ice queen. I was saved by a security guard who passed through and they apologised and said they did not mean any harm. I don't know what would have happened if the guard had not passed through.*

Thus, sexist humour legitimises a hyper-masculinised and potentially violent space, which is very intimidating, particularly to female students who feel uncomfortable with the sexual gestures made by fellow male students. Violence is taken as part of violent masculinities as a way of reinforcing dominance.

However, not all the female students resented sexist humour and in some instances, it was well received. This is evident in the reflections of female students in individual interviews and FGDs:

*Lady 1: We expect it from the men ... it spices up things...you can't have a serious and boring man after you. That's too boring and I will dump him for that.*

*Lady 2: There's societal pressure after all, to be liked – and to be, well, ladylike. You can't be a frigid granny. Be 'a good sport' – even when people are insulting your gender: let's not take the whole gender equality thing too seriously, right?*

This highlights that women are not a homogenous group and that they will inevitably experience sexist humour in varied ways depending on the gendered habitus instilled from infancy in different contexts. Some female students

welcomed sexist humour because it validated their femininity through flirting and courtship proposals. Their identities as females who are sexually desirable were thus strengthened.

However, one can argue that this points to an element of self-objectification. Symbolic violence is a form of domination that is imposed on social actors with their own involvement and complicity (Bourdieu, 1992). Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* explains how sexual objectification becomes normalised and accepted as reality and therefore not questionable. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence experienced by female students disguised as humour is interchangeable with physical violence as a mode of economic domination and may be more effective in that it is a "gentle, hidden violence" that operates under an illusion of choice (Bernard, 2016). Female students feel that it is their choice to engage in sexist humour as sexual banter. Again, system justification theory posits that individuals may be motivated to defend the status quo and by extension, existing inequalities, because doing so serves epistemic and relational needs to maintain a shared reality (Jost et al., 2004). This theory uncovers the ways in which individuals internalise and perpetuate beliefs that position them and their fellow group members at a disadvantage. However, it can be argued that femininity as part of habitus encourages subordination, making female students vulnerable and easy targets for sexual predators at university. Feminist theorists have argued that an accumulation of sexually objectifying experiences over time results in women internalising such objectification and turning it on themselves. Thus, women begin to evaluate and present themselves in a sexually objectifying manner.

Objectification of female bodies was also evident throughout the study. Male student Bla Tindo had this to say:

*Girls are like mangoes; while you are waiting for them to ripen someone is eating them raw with salt or busy making Atchar bottles like the Indians who use raw mangoes.*

Bla Tindo likens girls to mangoes, an African delicacy. The fact that he mentions that some people eat them before they even ripen indicates a sense of competition to engage sexually with girls. This represents the level to which women are sexually objectified; such attitudes can easily translate into rape. If women are like mangoes which can be consumed even if they are raw, men do not have to wait for their girlfriends to be ready for sex but can indulge themselves forcefully. Scholars such as Ehrlich (2001) concur that in the case

of rape, language is a very powerful tool as it has the capacity to structure events.

This kind of imagery that sexualises females and depicts women as objects of male desire was justified by this student because the Bible states that it is the type of behaviour expected from females. It appears that a woman's worth is dependent on her ability to sexually please a man. This implies that a woman should fulfil the male fantasy and deviation from the norm is not an option. Such imagery justifies the assertion that females are viewed as mere sex objects, a view that supports and legitimises rape, especially in higher education settings.

#### **Avoidance, Withdrawal and Silence as Coping Strategies**

Female students said that they generally avoided spaces or situations where they felt sexist humour was rife, including the sports grounds and the campus cafeteria. Chido stated:

*I have not even bothered to react to the sexist remarks made to me. If you react, everyone says 'so what's the big deal, you are just over-reacting!' So, I just don't go to the sports arena anymore ... or participate in sport. If I am walking around campus I don't wear revealing clothes even when the weather is hot. If you complain about being offended by the boys, people will blame you for going there and say that you wanted it.*

Chido's response reveals that women feel the need to manage how they dress and the areas they access. This suggests that female students feel responsible for being abused and that they have to adopt precautionary strategies to shield themselves from abuse. Muasya (2012) also found that women began to avoid certain areas on campus in order to protect themselves from harassment, including areas which might be crucial for their studies. By self-blaming rather than challenging this kind of harassment, women normalise it and this prevents both men and women from understanding it as a systemic social problem arising from inequality and collectively mobilising against it. This contributes to the continuation of harassment of women.

#### **4 Discussion**

This study offers insight into the experiences of females in higher education settings in their capacity as consumers. While higher education is regarded as the portal to enhance the status of women, especially in Africa, it shows

that the daily lives of female students are an on-going struggle. The study also exposes sexist humour as a form of violence against women.

Universities are microcosms of the societies they are part of. Since patriarchy dictates women's inferior position in society, it will inevitably do the same in tertiary institutions. Parallels can be drawn between broader societal gender ideologies and those found at GZU. Institutions such as GZU are fields of power in which actors deploy various forms of capital. Therefore, sexist humour at GZU mirrors the symbolic power of gender as the language one uses is determined by one's position (real or perceived) in a social space (Bourdieu, 1991). The symbolic power of gender refers to the almost unconscious modes of cultural/social domination through gender that occur within everyday social habits maintained over conscious subjects. Symbolic power suggests that cultural gender roles are powerful in determining how hierarchies of power are re/produced across societies. Men's power to accumulate various forms of capital, and to define these forms as legitimate, is proportionate to their position in the social space. In this case, men are perceived to be superior to women simply by virtue of being born male. Sexist humour is therefore taken not only as a harmless means of communication, but also as a medium of power through which individuals (men) display their practical competence and superiority.

As noted above, students at GZU are part of the broader society and bring pre-existing habitus into the university setting. Most students have internalised hierarchised gender ideologies that trivialise women while valorising men. As such, students see no harm in making fun of female students and telling sexist jokes that demean women. This makes universities unsafe spaces for females. Bourdieu proposes that women are not naturally capital-accruing subjects, which contributes to their actions being trivialised by males. Rather, they are "capital bearing objects" whose value benefits the primary groups to which they belong (e.g., her husband, the family, her male relatives). For example, in a patriarchal society, a bride-price is paid to the male members of the family. Females' increased participation in fields and spaces that were previously exclusively male (including tertiary education) threatens this value accumulation because women are now postponing/delaying marriage and some have refused marriage outright. Marriage structures have been challenged, thereby destabilising male masculinity and control of females and denying men capital accrual. While universities have long been regarded as beacons of enlightenment, change and 'modernity', a closer look

at students' everyday lives reveals that patriarchy informs the habitus of both male and female students. Education should bring new ideas, ideologies and knowledges that transform students. Instead, most continue to be guided by habitus they acquired through traditional socialisation. This explains the prevalence of sexist jokes that trivialise female's contribution. There have been calls to decolonise universities; there is also a need to de-masculinise them to accommodate female students.

### Limitations of the Study

Due to the highly unstable political situation in Zimbabwe, some students refused to be recorded as they were afraid their responses might be used for political purposes. This compromised the quality of the research as the researcher had to rely on jotting down notes and listening. Some students cited cases where they had been duped into believing that their participation was purely academic only to realise that their contributions had been used to gain political mileage.

In addition, it was difficult to recruit male students. Generally, they were more responsive when asked to participate by the researcher's male research assistants. The majority of those approached by the researcher flatly refused, saying the research topic was aimed at male bashing and that they saw no reason to participate in what they termed a "losing battle". Thus, the researcher left the task of recruiting male students to the male research assistants.

### 5 Conclusion

The study showed that male students at GZU had a sense of patriarchal entitlement to education and employed sexist humour as a way to reaffirm their masculinities. Sexist language results in the sexualisation of female bodies and demonstrates women's reality, particularly in universities. Sexist humour communicates a message that women do not belong in universities and tends to degenerate into violence. Common opinions about women that emerged during the course of the study have a common denominator; men are supposed to control women and the empowerment brought about by the admission of women to higher education is threatening this. As such, sexual harassment is used as a tool to socially, sexually and materially control female students. It can be argued that in this case, the phallus is presented as a disciplinary tool or whip to instil discipline. Since sexist humour paints a violent picture of how women should be treated, there is a danger of creating

and enacting the violence portrayed. Such humour creates a context that justifies prejudice against women. What is a laughing matter for one student may be traumatic and offensive for another. Therefore, it can be argued that sexist humour increases tolerance of discrimination and violence against women. The study revealed that sexist humour expresses uncertainties, fears, threats, intimidation and risky behaviour which create a hostile and risky environment, heightening female students' feelings of insecurity. Therefore, it can be argued that sexist humour restricts women's space in terms of both condition and position. This is a clear indication that it negatively impacts the quality of learning. It creates a context where sexist attitudes are adopted to enforce the gender status quo that disadvantages women. It is therefore safe to conclude that sexist humour provides a 'safe climate' to express misogynistic beliefs to protect and safeguard patriarchy. Through sexist humour, males extend the perceived boundaries between males and females by exaggerating their common qualities as the in-group and the way women as the outgroup deviate from them.

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