
Sexual Violence in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: An Individual and Contextual Perspective

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Abstract: *This study explored the situation of Sexual Violence (SV), the context in which it occurs and the individual factors that expose female students to SV in Ethiopian higher education institutions by using an ecological approach as a framework and gathering data through interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Instances of SV in the form of verbal harassment, touching, coercion, and asking girls out on a date repeatedly despite the girls' lack of interest are common. Although the government has made commitments and taken some measures, SV remains a problem in higher education. Addressing sexual violence requires adopting an ecological approach to tackle the factors operating at individual, social, cultural, and historical levels.*

Keywords: *higher education, gender, sexual violence, violence*

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Introduction

Sexual violence is broadly defined as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, and the use of coercion to obtain sexual benefits (Krug et al. 2002). Regional research in selected African countries shows that it is a serious challenge in higher education institutions. For example, a study conducted in South Africa revealed that female students are more likely to encounter sexual violence in a university setting; 25.5% of the female respondents experienced unwanted touching, 10.2% were coerced into sexual relationships, and 2.7% were raped, (Oni, Tshitangano and Akinsola, 2019). A study by Ogunbode, Bello and Obunbode (2014) at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria showed that among the 388 female undergraduate students included in the study, 67.7% had experienced at least one form of sexual violence, the most common form being unwanted touching (53.4%).

Similar patterns have been observed in different universities in Ethiopia (Molla and Gale, 2014). A study carried out at Addis Ababa University revealed, among the 612 female study participants, 41.8% indicated that they have encountered verbal sexual harassment, 27.5% attempted rape, and 1.8% were raped in the 12 months prior to the study (Tadesse, 2004). A study that covered 1,024 female college students in Mekelle city revealed that sexual violence is a serious concern among female college students. The study covered physical and sexual violence experienced during a lifetime and in the 12 months before the study. Accordingly, about 62% of the study participants reported being lifetime victims of sexual violence, 46.8% during their stay in college, and 40.2% during the year in which the study took place (Gebre Yohannes, 2007). In Jimma University, 50% of the 304 female study participants mentioned that they had faced insistent requests for romantic relationships; 45% were repeatedly asked for dates even when they said 'no'; 43% were touched in a sexual manner; 35% encountered attempts by men to stroke or fondle them, and 30% were exposed to unwanted discussion of personal or sexual matters (Kassahun, 2009). Similarly, a study

conducted in Hawassa University revealed that among the total of 336 female students covered in the study, 14.3% of them encountered completed rape, and of these 68.7% were raped multiple times (Sendo & Meleku, 2015).

In another study conducted in Wolaita Sodo University, of the 374 female students who participated in the study, 23.4% reported attempted rape; 18.7% verbal sexual harassment; 11.3% forced sexual initiation, and 8.7% mentioned completed rape. Among the victims of violence, 30.9% indicated that the violence happened during their stay at the university (Tora, 2013). In the same university, a 2017 study revealed that among the 462 female students covered in the study, 36.1% reported experiencing sexual violence during their stay at the university and 24.4% indicated that they experienced sexual violence during the year the study was conducted (Adinew and Hagos, 2017). In Bahir Dar University, of the 400 female students included in the study, 35% of the respondents reported that they were victims of sexual violence including attempted rape. Among the forms of sexual violence were showing sexually appealing writings and pictures, sending sex-related electronic messages, touching female students' bodies, using sex related nicknames, stalking, and hiding learning materials to persuade female students into sexual acts (Mersha, Bishaw and Tegegne, 2013). A study conducted at Debre Markos University showed that of the 422 female students who took part in the study, 21.3% mentioned that they encountered sexual violence such as rape, attempted rape and sexual harassment (Temesgen, Endale & Aynalem, 2021).

The studies carried out in different countries across different periods of time show that sexual violence in higher education institutions is a persistent problem, which requires deeper scrutiny. However, most of these do not discuss the multilayered factors that initiate and sustain the practice (Parke, et al., 2023). As a result, the recommendations they forward do not comprehensively address the factors that cause and perpetuate sexual violence in higher education institutions. For example, Kefale et al (2021), based on a meta-analysis of studies on sexual

violence in Ethiopian higher education recommend the provision of life skill training, enforcement of regulations to control alcohol consumption and revision of curricula with a gender lens. Another meta-analysis study conducted in Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana suggests the formulation of youth violence policy and provision of services (Beyene et al, 2019). Unless interventions are based on the analysis of factors operating at different levels, their effectiveness cannot be ensured. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by paying attention to the personal, contextual and temporal factors behind the prevailing sexual violence in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Identifying these factors and addressing them at various levels would assist the efforts being made to eliminate sexual violence against female students. As highlighted by Molla and Gale (2014), *understanding inequality as numerical disparity rather than as structurally embedded has quite different implications for addressing the problem* (p. 7).

In recognition of the need to address this research gap, the current study attempts to explore the problems of sexual violence as experienced and dealt with by female students. It examines the context of higher education as it relates to sexual violence and identifies the personal factors that make female students vulnerable. It further discusses the incidence of sexual violence in the broader socio-cultural and policy context.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sexual violence is viewed from different perspectives, and these suggest different approaches of prevention and reduction. Viewing sexual violence as a problem perpetrated by individuals leads to actions that target individual perpetrators. A focus on institutions, on the other hand, is about addressing structural inequalities that place women in a subordinate position, thus vulnerable to violence. The interaction perspective attempts to act on the immediate context by changing the norms of interactions and communications that are believed to cause sexual violence against women (Parkes, et.al., 2013). Though each

perspective has its own merit, none of these fully accounts for the complex and interrelated factors that initiate and sustain violence as it prevails at different levels ranging from institutional and structural violence to individual experiences of violence (Fulu and Miedema 2015). Parkes et.al. (2013) point out that the emphasis on individuals, interactions and institutions to define and address violence has been criticized for diverting attention away from the social and historical factors that underlie violence.

What is needed is, therefore, an ecological approach that better captures the various factors operating at different levels. An ecological approach views violence as an outcome of factors working at multiple levels and explores the relationship between individual and contextual variables (Krug et.al., 2002). The approach has been adopted in various ways by different researchers although all share the idea of ... *embedded levels of causality* (Heise, 1998). As highlighted by Campbell, Dworkin and Cabral (2009), the central advantage of an ecological model is that it can lead to developing multiple strategies for prevention of and intervention for sexual violence.

Krug et.al. (2002) in the *World Report on Violence and Health* used an ecological model with four layers: individual level discussing biological and demographic factors that an individual brings to the situation; relationship refers to proximal relationship an individual has within the family, peers, and intimate relationship circles. Community-level factors include the context in which social relationships are placed such as schools and neighborhoods. Societal level analysis is about factors that encourage violence through creating an acceptable climate for violence and reducing inhibitions. These include cultural norms and attitudes that encourage male dominance, and larger societal policies and legislation.

Espelage (2014) used the ecological framework in the discussion of preventing youth bullying. She discussed individual factors, family-related variables and peer influence under the layer of the microsystem. Mesosystem was used to elaborate on the interactions between different

microsystem variables such as family, school and peers. Exosystems included variables related to neighborhood factors, while macrosystem contains cultural factors, norms and relevant legal instruments. Espelage also underlined the significance of events occurring over time in the lives of adolescents and in the environment, discussed under chronosystem.

In their study of risk factors for sexual violence among college students, Bhochhibhoya, et.al (2019) employed an ecological approach using the individual, interpersonal, community and societal layers. Under individual factors they identified being female and lack of assertiveness as risk factors, while frequent hookups were a factor under relationship. Aside from perceived discrimination, their study did not come up with other factors related to community and societal levels.

Similarly, Martinello (2020) in her study of the impacts of the various factors affecting the prevention of child sexual abuse used the ecological approach with the levels including individual, microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. She argued that multiple and interconnected factors need to be considered in the prevention attempts.

This study uses the levels of analysis used by Krug et al (2002) (i.e. individual, relationship, community and societal) as this helps to explain the different factors that initiate and perpetuate sexual violence in Ethiopian higher education institutions. However, discussing the context helps understanding individual behavior better. The order is changed to discuss community and societal level factors under 'Contextual Factors', followed by 'Relationships' and 'Individuals factors'. In addition, the chronosystem level analysis used by Martinello (2020) is employed as the legal and policy initiatives and structural changes that have been made over the years influence the circumstances surrounding the occurrence of sexual violence and the way it is handled.

Approaches and Methods

Research design

Qualitative design was employed to generate data as it allows an in-depth exploration of the experiences, feelings, contexts and associated factors of sexual violence against female students in higher education.

Sampling

Among the universities in Ethiopia, four were selected by taking into consideration their years of establishment as this would have implications for female students in terms of accessibility, availability of facilities, and safe physical and social environment which are all related to the incidence of sexual violence. Thus, Addis Ababa University, Hawasa University, University of Gondar, and Debre Berhan University were included in the study. Older universities are relatively safer in terms of campus environment since they are accessible, and well fenced, and most places in the compound have lights in the evening. The universities also have gender offices, different clubs and student bodies that address various relevant social issues including violence. Accordingly, the oldest institution (Addis Ababa University), two universities upgraded from colleges, (Hawassa and Gondar Universities) and one which opened recently (Debre Berhan University) were included in the study.

Interviewees were identified through gender offices, dormitory proctors, and female students' associations or girls' clubs. Staff in gender offices, proctors in dormitories and members of the female students' associations were approached, and the study and its objectives were explained, and they were asked to assist in identifying interviewees for the study. Criteria for inclusion were being female students in their second year and above since these would be well familiar with the environment and social issues that challenge girls; coming from the various colleges, and willingness to participate in the study.

Accordingly, a total of 25 female students from the four universities were interviewed. Their age ranged from 19 to 22. They were 2nd, 3rd and 4th-year students from science, applied sciences, social science, humanities, business, and health sciences, covering a wide range of departments with varying educational performances.

Key informants were selected purposively, the criteria being working closely with female students and working in offices to which students come to get services. These were representatives from Gender Offices, female students' associations, members of girls' clubs, guidance and counseling officers, student services officers, clinic nurses, and instructors. Gender offices are established in the universities with the aim of addressing different problems female students encounter. These could be violence, economic problems, academic challenges, and lack of information on various issues of concern. In addition, the offices organize various capacity-building programs such as workshops to train female and male students in gender sensitization, provide female students with assertiveness training, and arrange tutorials for those female students who encounter academic challenges. Similarly, female students' associations are formed to mobilize female students to work around the issues of the welfare of female students including their capacity building. Girls' clubs are groups formed by female students and led by female instructors in order to address gender inequality manifested in various forms, including violence. Student services officers such as counselors, dormitory proctors and nurses were considered as they are insiders who would have information on the issues of sexual violence against female students.

Male FGD participants were identified using snowball sampling. The first male FGD participants were identified using availability sampling. While going around the campuses gathering data, available male students were approached, the purpose of the study was explained, and they were asked if they would be willing to participate. Those willing male students were asked to identify other male students to participate in the FGD. Therefore, male students who were in their 2nd year or above and

who came from different colleges were included in the discussion. Including male students in the study helped to explore their views of sexual violence against female students, and the variation or similarities of discourses male and female students have in relation to sexual violence.

Methods and Procedure of Data Collection

Interviews and FGDs were used to collect the data. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 female students. Issues covered included demographic information; area of study; challenges related to teaching-learning, social life and relationships, economic constraints, and participation in various activities at the university. Particular attention was given to their experiences, perception, understanding of sexual violence and the coping strategies they utilize.

Two FGDs for female students in each of the four universities and one for male students in three of the universities were conducted. In addition, an informal discussion was held with male students in the University of Gondar. The number of female FGD participants ranged from 7 to 10, while those of male students from 5 to 8. Issues covered in the male students' FGD were their expectations of university education and its environments, classroom atmosphere, male and female students' classroom participation, number of female students when they joined the university and their number at the time of the interview, their social life, their relationship with female students both romantic and platonic, problems female students encounter, the existence of sexual harassment and violence against women, and the causes of these incidents.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were held with 14 individuals: two from Addis Ababa University, three from the University of Gondar, four from Debre Berhan University, and five from Hawassa University. As mentioned earlier these included Gender Office representatives, chairs of female students' associations, members of girls' clubs, guidance and

counseling officers, student services officers, student clinic nurses, and instructors. An interview guide was used to facilitate the interview. Issues explored included the enrollment of female and male students and their success, problems female students encounter in relation to their education, social life and other challenges, the violence incidents reported to their office and ways of handling them, and their roles and responsibilities in addressing the challenges female students encounter.

Once the interviewees were identified, each was approached. Prior to the interview, introduction was made and explanation about the research and its aims were given, and they were asked if they would volunteer to participate in the study. Those female students who volunteered chose the time and place of the interview. It was also indicated that their names would not appear in the report and their identities would be protected. They were further informed that their participation was voluntary, and they can withdraw from the interview any time if they did not want to be part of the study. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to an hour.

Similarly, a self-introduction was made to KIIs, followed by an explanation about the research, its objectives, its scope and the data needed, and consent secured. The interviews took place in their respective offices, and the interview with the nurse took place at the University's clinic.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Amharic. In all the interviews and FGDs, small talks were made about general issues such as school, work, and campus environment to establish rapport, and to make sure that interviewees and FGD participants feel at ease. Probes were made when interviewees give brief or unclear responses, and attention was paid to keep the interview or discussion on the topic when some research participants went off the topics.

Data Analysis

Interviews and FGDs were audiotaped and transcribed by research assistants. The data from the different sources were organized in separate files. The transcripts from each source were read thoroughly to become familiar with the data. Coding was carried out separately for each set of data focusing on contents that were mentioned on the challenges and coping strategies of female students. The coding was done manually using the hard copy of the transcripts by making notes at the margins.

Files of excerpts for contents related to sexual violence were made to facilitate the analysis. The materials on sexual violence from different sources were read further and recorded according to the different concepts and recurring ideas related to the study objectives (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Then, the materials from the different sources mentioned in relation to specific issues were brought together in one file. Attention was paid to similarities and differences in response to similar questions across the different sets of data. Especially, data that showed different perspectives on issues of discussion were highlighted, for example, the findings from interviews with female students and findings from male students' FGDs. The materials were then sorted out according to the different categories such as context which included physical, psychological, social, and policy environments to build the themes. In the analysis, we went back and forth between the excerpts and the data to ensure consistency and contextual appropriateness. Upon further analysis, themes were built, and interpretations were made in the light of ecological approach. The thematic analysis followed the procedure suggested by Creswell (2009).

In the analysis, the ecological approach with four levels of analysis as a framework was used: individual, relationship, community, and society, as used by Krug et al (2002) to discuss the violence encountered by female students. Community and society are brought together under contextual factors to explain the social, physical and policy contexts as

they relate to sexual violence, while relationship discusses the every day and lasting interactions taking place in the immediate context. Individual factors include the personal characteristics of the participants. In addition, the historical and political factors that influence the occurrence of sexual violence are discussed under chronosystem. The totality of these components is employed to explain the incidences, experiences and persistence of sexual violence in Ethiopian higher education institutions. As underlined by Ungar, Ghzinour and Richter (2013), it is both individual qualities as well as the quality of the different systems in which a person lives that determine developmental outcomes.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability in this study was addressed through triangulation of data gathered through in-depth interviews with female students, key informant interviews as well as FGDs. The triangulation of data sources helped to see the consistency of findings across data collected from different sources. As indicated in the data analysis, the data transcriptions from the different sources were organized in separate files and read and reread thoroughly to know the data well and see consistencies or differences across the data from different methods. Patton (1999) explained that triangulation is the use of multiple methods, and data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. It is an accepted strategy used to improve validity and reliability in qualitative studies (Golafshani, 2003). This was further interpreted using both theoretical and empirical literature.

Validity in qualitative research is considered equivalent to trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is achieved by ensuring that data saturation has been achieved by capturing the diversity, depth, and nuances of the issue under study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, trustworthiness was addressed through investigating the issue from the perspectives of different categories of research participants using different methods of data collection. Through careful recording, transcription and analysis the voices of the different research

participants have been captured. The different discourses regarding sexual violence and female students' perception and their reactions to it have been looked at.

Findings and Discussion

As indicated earlier, 25 female students were included in the study for in-depth interviews. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22. They were 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-year students enrolled in the colleges of Social Science, Natural Science, Business and Economics, and Health Sciences. Their challenges and concerns in the areas of sexual violence in a context set by campus interactions, societal and community norms, along with historical events are presented.

The section begins with contextual factors, which include societal and community level factors; individual factors, and chronosystem factors. It also discusses the interactions taking place in the universities that form relationships, all in the light of ecological approach.

Contextual Factors

Individuals operate in an environment that encompasses the social, physical, and policy context in which sexual violence takes place. An emphasis is given to the different layers of the environment because as indicated by Campbell, Dworkin, and Cabral (2009) and Ungar, Ghzinour, and Richter (2013), there is a need to think about multiple systems at multiple levels at the same time. *Adaptive functioning, in the face of adversity, is not only dependent on the characteristics of the individual but is greatly influenced by processes and interactions arising from the family and wider environment* (Ungar, Ghzinour, and Richter, 2013, p.356).

The Ethiopian society is patriarchal (Zewdie, 2014). Patriarchy, according to Sultana (2010) is characterized by the prevalence of male dominance over women, and in which male dominance is assumed in

everyday activities and interactions. In such societies the roles, voices and positions of men are recognized and given values over those of women. In patriarchal societies, women occupy a subordinate position both in domestic and outside arenas (Nash, 2020). In most instances, policies and legal instruments fail to address gender equality as men predominantly occupy the positions in the structures that formulate and implement policies, thus perpetuating inequality (Becker, 1999).

In explaining patriarchy in Ethiopia, Dibabu (2005) indicated that it is a system that primarily promotes the benefits of men. In the area of sexuality, he elaborates that a man considers a woman as a species created for his pleasure, as a private possession that he can do whatever he wants with. He further mentions that her body is his to use, sanctioned by nature as well as his religion. Molla (2018) also indicated, *in the context of Ethiopia, patriarchal power frames gender relations at the levels of family and other institutions in the society* (p.16).

The lower position Ethiopian women hold is reflected in the various beliefs and practices that favor men. In most parts of Ethiopia, there is a preference for male children over female, and in areas where parents prefer to have both male and female children, they want to have more of male children (Short and Kiros, 2002; Dibabu, 2005). Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (65%), child marriage (the median age of first marriage is 17), and domestic violence (35%) are practiced widely (Central Statistical Agency [CSA], 2016). According to Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), 63% of the women surveyed indicated that a husband is justified in beating his wife for reasons such as leaving the house without informing him, neglecting the children, burning food, or arguing with him. Twenty-eight per cent of the men also agree that wife beating is justified in at least one of the reasons indicated (CSA, 2016).

The community in higher education institutions reflect the patriarchal values prevalent in the wider society both in its structures and everyday operations. University campuses in Ethiopia are predominantly occupied by male students, and this has been the trend over several years. For

example, the latest available data from the Ministry of Education (MoE) shows that in the academic year 2016/2017, the percentage of female students in undergraduate programs was 36.8%.

The number of female students dwindles looking at post-graduate enrollment. In the academic year 2016/17, the percentage of female students enrolled in MA programs was 22% and in Ph.D. programs, 10.3%. Similarly, the number of female professors is insignificant; Ethiopian female professors make up only 12.3% of the teaching force in higher education institutions (MoE, 2017). Meskerem from AAU explained, *our class is predominantly male; we are only 12 among a class of 52 students. The attitude of male students towards us is not good either. Therefore, we are not really active in class, and we don't go along with male students well.* It is also noted that more female students leave the university because of academic dismissal. For example, it was explained in the interviews that in Faculty of Science, Chemistry Department, Hawassa University, among the 33 female students enrolled, by the third year, there were only 5 left. In Gondar University, Faculty of Business, among the 200 enrolled, by the third year, only 80 were left. Hagere, a 4th year Civil Engineering student, who worked in the Gender Office in Hawassa University explained that the dismissal of female students has become a concern that requires attention.

In addition to the predominantly male academic environment, the social and physical environment make life for female students extra challenging. The values, attitudes, and that place women at the lower rank of the hierarchy are reflected in the everyday life of female students. Yemata, a 22-year-old female student from Addis Ababa University, had to say this, *Male students insult girls for no reason at all; they think it is their right.* Rahel from the University of Gondar further explained: *especially during the first year male students mock us based on our body shapes and sizes including our dressing.* Participants in FGD held with male students at Addis Ababa University concurred indicating that harassment is a common practice, girls are not happy if they don't get teased. They understood that they would not consider this as

harassment since it is done for fun. This supports Kelly and Torres's (2006) finding in that the female students in their study reported that they are verbally harassed for just being a woman. As highlighted by Parkes, et al. (2013), violence is relational, situated in and produced by historical and social relations, with the broader social relations incorporated within the emotions, beliefs, and practices of individuals.

Regarding the attitude of male students toward females, Selam, a third-year student from the University of Gondar said,

Male students do not show favorable attitude towards us; they are not willing to work with us either.... Especially difficult is, when we are given a group assignment. They think that we are not good in what we do, and that we get a free ride.

Interviewees explained that male students are unhappy when female students attain better grades than themselves. Amal, a second-year female student from Hawassa University explained, *Male students don't like when they are outperformed by female students. They even suggested that affirmative action needed to be banned at a meeting held to discuss gender issues.* Male FGD participants in the same university indicated, *"Hardworking female students are nicknamed Horror".* The same was mentioned by Betselot, a 3rd year Psychology student at the University of Gondar. *Acting differently from the stereotypical portrayal of women as weak gets female students in trouble.*

The physical environment could be unfriendly. Some campuses, being newly established, are not yet fenced. There are areas that are not well lit in the evening. Kidist, a 22-year-old student from Addis Ababa University mentioned, *some areas in the compound are terrifying in the evening. It is dark since many of the light bulbs are burnt out or broken.*

In all the universities, there are areas that are predominantly used by male students, though they are meant to serve all. Zinabua, a 22-year-old 2nd-year student from Addis Ababa University explained, *there are*

areas exclusively used by male students. For example, the pool house, volleyball and basketball courts are used by male students. She further elaborated that female students do not generally go to these places. If they dare, they are made to feel unwelcome, they are stared at. Kelly and Torres (2006) indicate that these types of environments prohibit female students from being fully engaged in their campus.

All the universities covered in the study have some kind of policy that addresses sexual violence. These include gender mainstreaming policy and anti-harassment policy. Highlighting the importance of policy, Sigal et al. (2003) and Parkes et al. (2013) have noted that having such policies would help the prevention of sexual violence as well as handling cases when they occur.

Though policies are available, a lack of implementation is noted. A female instructor working in a gender office in one of the universities explained,

Once, a young woman came to our office and reported that she was sexually harassed by her instructor. The student, a faculty representative and myself tried to expose his harassing acts and take measure, but we were unsuccessful.

Supporting this, Molla and Cuthbert (2014) noted that even in the presence of policies that promote gender equality, addressing the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms is a challenge.

The lack of implementation of policies is one of the factors that discourages female students from reporting incidents of sexual violence. A proctor in girls' dormitory in one of the universities explained that female students, most of the time, do not report sexual violence perpetrated against them by male instructors. This idea was further supported by the director of the Gender Office in another university. Even if they do, it is a lengthy process, and the case gets left aside before appropriate measure is taken. Similar to other studies (Parkes et al.,

2013; Molla and Cuthbert, 2014; Spencer et al., 2017), female students in this study fail to report or challenge sexual violence due to fear as well as doubt about the possibility of getting support or following the case through to get justice. As highlighted by Mayhew, Cladwell and Goldman (2011) the reasons for under-reporting for sexual violence range from individual to institutional cultures.

Relationships

Relationship refers to the everyday and long term interactions that take place between the individual and others in the environment. In a male dominated environment that gives less regard to females, the relation between male and female students as well as some male professors reflect the attitude that perpetrating violence against women is part of a normal interaction. Such type of stereotypical attitude is one of the factors driving men to act in a sexually aggressive manner (Ferrer-Perez and Bosch-Fiol, 2014; Hiese, 1998; Lackie and Man, 1997). The fact that university settings can normalize sexual violence, especially harassment is also highlighted by Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch (2016). Violence is so common that in one of the universities, male FGD participants classified violence as positive and negative harassment. They agreed that positive harassment is when a girl is hassled for the length of time she spends in a library and her hard work, while negative harassment is when she is harassed for her physical appearance, and when the harassment becomes sexual and physical to include pulling and smacking. Tolerant attitude towards violence creates an atmosphere that breeds more violence as perpetrators get away without any punishment (Ferrer-Perez and Bosch-Fiol, 2014).

Research participants, both male and female, agreed that there is a high degree of harassment of female students by male students in the campus. Especially during the first year, female students are targeted for sexual relationship by senior male students, and in many cases, this takes a form of sexual harassment extending to physical violence. Mahider, a 20-year-old 2nd year student from the University of Gondar

explained that senior male students want to date among the incoming first-year students. There is also coercion. As a gender office staff in one of the universities explained, *some male students approach female students saying that they will give them handouts, reading materials or provide other academic support.* Talking about her personal experience, Firehiwot, a 22-year-old female student from Addis Ababa University said the following,

While a first year student, I found some courses tough. My friend introduced me to this outstanding student to help. When I tried to fix a time, the guy kept saying that he could not make it during the day, and suggested a time in the evening to meet him in one of the classrooms. Since he appeared to be religious, I trusted him and went. He closed the door and started explaining. After a while, he put his hand around my shoulder and when I tried to move his hand away, he started pulling me. After that I gathered my books in haste and ran out. If there were no students in the lobby, something bad would have happened to me.

Male students in this study noted that asking a girl for a date repeatedly, even when she refuses, is a common way of approaching her for a date, which sometimes turns into violence. In an FGD held with male students in Hawassa University, participants explained that persistence is necessary since young women may say no even when they desire the relationship. Male FGD participants in Addis Ababa University concurred with the idea. They indicated, *girls sometimes do not say what they want.* This seems a common belief and practice. Gofu and Demisse (2007) in their discussion with high school students found that insistent request for sexual relationship, despite the girls' lack of interest, is considered as a normal way of approaching them. Another related myth Tesema (2006) discerned in her study of high school male students is that girls do not like to start sex, but once they start they come to like it. As Terrance, Logan and Peters (2004) noted, though males may recognize that sexual harassment as inappropriate, they may not view it as threatening. In this regard, Parkes (2013) underlined that what for

some may be seen as legitimate and sanctioned, others may view as violent and destructive.

When male students find their workload easier, especially after their exam, they go after female students as a way of entertainment. It was explained in the FGD conducted at AAU that one of the entertainments for male students is spending time with girls. One participant explained *I don't like to study in the library. I go to the library to find girls to talk to when I get stressed out.* The participants in male FGD in Hawassa University admitted that when they reach the third year, as they get familiar with the education system and the academic pressure gets less, they shift their attention to girls, especially to the incoming first-year female students. Unfortunately, the way they approach the women could be accompanied by harassment and coercion.

Returning a favor given in the form of academic support with sex could be expected of female students. Supporting this, male FGD participants in one of the universities explained that women bring violence upon themselves by rejecting the sexual demands of male students who helped them in their studies. Women are opportunists was the idea floated at the FGD with male students at AAU as well. In line with this, Semela (2007) explained that academic support given by male students is usually accompanied by the expectation that the women would return the favor with the sexual relationship. A similar assertion was made in the study by Tora (2013) and Campbell et al. (2017). As Ryan (2011) contends for some, sexual aggression could be considered as a punishment for women who tease and exploit men. She further argued that beliefs such as this rationalizes the actions of sexually aggressive men.

Prevailing assumptions and myths further perpetuate violence. Some male students believe that female students enjoy the attention that comes with harassment. Yamrot, a 20-year-old, 2nd year student from Hawaasa University stated, *When I asked male students why they don't just shut up, their reply was, Girls get bored unless we tease them.*

Rahel, a 19-year-old 2nd year student from the University of Gondar expressed the same opinion. This was corroborated by male FGD participants at the AAU; they explained that there are some female students who enjoy the attention that comes with harassment. Such myths dissuade men from taking responsibilities for their actions. As Ryan (2011) explained myths about sexual violence serve men as a ... *means to rationalize and justify their own tendencies to engage in sexual aggression.* (p 34)

Refusing to go out with a male student when asked can also cause violence. It was highlighted in the interviews that if a girl refuses to go out with a male student, she could get insulted, and he could also ask his friends to harass her making her life in the campus miserable (Messeret, a 21-year-old female student from Addis Ababa University).

As explained earlier, there are also instances when female students are subjected to violence by instructors. Discussing the experience of another student, Amele, a 21-year-old student from Addis Ababa University said the following,

A student received an 'F' from her instructor and she had to go to his office to discuss her results. Apparently, she had earned a 'C' grade. When she asked him to correct her grade he asked her to meet him outside the University. She did not want to go, and she had to beg the instructor for a month before she was given the correct grade.

In relation to sexual violence, it is mentioned by many that most cases are not reported, one of the reasons being fear of revenge. Betselot explained that female students are afraid that the instructors might tell others who are his friends, and all would gang up to harm the student.

The campus is the center of life for college students. It is in the campus that students are accommodated, where they eat, go to classes and study. For many, it is not an option to live with families, since majority of

the students come from outside of the cities or towns where the universities are located. It is also in the campus where most interactions take place. Unfortunately, female students encounter negative relationships and interactions due to the incidence of sexual violence. As indicated by Molla and Cuthbert (2014), the environment in higher education reflects the patriarchal norms of interaction, which is unfavorable for female students.

Individual Factors

According to ecological approach, there are individual-related factors that create vulnerability for sexual violence. Interviewees explained that those who have been victims lack information about resources that would have given them awareness about the issue, and also could have offered support in case they encounter violence. In relation to lack of awareness, many explained that some female students cannot identify and articulate sexual violence. Mezgeb said, *male students pull you and touch you. Female students face this every day, but since they don't consider it as a problem it is not reported to the Gender Office.* The reason given for this was ... *lack of awareness about their rights; there are also some students who have no information about gender office and its aims* (A staff of the Gender Office in one of the Universities). A similar finding was reported by McMahon and Stepleton (2018) in that students covered in the study showed limited awareness of campus resources that support victims of sexual violence.

Lack of confidence, according to the interviewees, make female students tolerate sexual violence. Firehiwot, a 22-year-old female student from Addis Ababa University explained, *female students are afraid to talk about this problem due to lack of self-confidence; they prefer to endure and graduate.*

Similar to the study by Bekele, Aken and Dubas (2011), lack of confidence, lack of assertiveness and lack of communication skills are believed to be among the factors that expose women to sexual violence.

Many of the female students ascribed the lack of confidence to the way they were raised. Habtam, a 19-year-old student from the University of Gondar said, *many of us lack confidence, assertiveness, pro-activeness and social skills due to the culture in which we are raised.*

As highlighted in Beechey's (1979) ...the *family as a patriarchal unit socializes its children into sexually differentiated roles, temperaments and statuses.* (p. 68) With regard to Ethiopian society, a great emphasis is placed on male aggressiveness during socialization, the lower status women hold and the demand for women to be quiet, shy and obedient (Levine, 1972; Reminick 1976; Molla and Cuthbert, 2014). Underlining the importance of self-confidence, Terrance, Logan and Peters (2004) indicated that high self-esteem individuals are inclined to have less tolerance for sexually inappropriate behaviors since they are not apprehensive about social-sexual relationships.

Male FGD participants in Hawassa University concurred with the idea, *it requires strength, confidence, and perseverance to survive in higher education institutions. But most of the female students don't have confidence* Personality characteristics such as independence, confidence and assertiveness, in addition to assisting women to protect themselves from sexual violence, help them acquire necessary social services and support in case violence happens (Ungar, Ghzinour and Richter, 2013).

In summary, many admitted that social relationships, especially relationships with male students is complicated. Sofia, a 20-year-old girl from Hawassa University explained. *Social life is a challenge, especially relationship with male students is very challenging.*

Chronosystem level factors

Chronosystem includes the historical, social and political happenings that occur over time and which, in some way affect the development and circumstances of a person. In this context, from the perspective of girls' and women's rights, a lot has happened in Ethiopia that influences the incidence of violence against women and the legal lens from which it is viewed and handled.

In relation to the legal and policy framework, Ethiopia has put several legal instruments in place to ensure gender equality, and most of these address violence against women. For example, the Ethiopian Constitution, Article 35.4. states that the government shall protect the rights of women by eliminating harmful customs. It also provides that laws, customs and practices that cause bodily or mental harm to women are prohibited. In relation to laws, the Revised Criminal Code (2004) has criminalized various forms of violence perpetrated against children and women. Article 620 recognizes and criminalizes rape out of wedlock (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2004).

The historical and political initiatives made by the government have pushed the education system to follow suit in addressing gender/women's issues, among which is sexual violence. Accordingly, in relation to sexual harassment and violence in educational institutions, the MoE has been working along different lines. In its 'Strategy for Gender Equality in the Education and Training Sector', the Ministry highlights that harassment extending to violence is a serious challenge female students encounter. It also outlines measures that will be taken to mitigate the problem, including preparing a sexual harassment policy (MoE, 2013).

To address gender equality issues and support the increasing number of female students, gender offices have been opened in various universities. A number of activities are undertaken by these offices, including organizing workshops to orient incoming students on campus

life, and available services, and to train female students on issues such as assertiveness. Attesting to this, Amal, a 20-year-old 2nd year students from Hawassa University explained, *The day we arrived at the campus members of the Gender Office welcomed us. They showed us around; they organized tutorials on subjects we found challenging, and they also support students who are financially needy.* Training on gender issues and related services increases the likelihood of protecting oneself from violence as well as reporting if it happens (Spencer et al., 2017).

Forums created around different social issues that carry out various activities including the provision of information are available. Habtam from the University of Gondar explained that at the time female students were doing better due to their involvement in various activities that provide with various information and enable them to get services. Female students' associations also play a role in addressing issues female students encounter including sexual violence. Saba, the President of the association at the University of Gondar explained that in the first place, they involved students whom they believed would be accepted by the student community, and worked closely with male students. The motto was that unless male students are involved in creating awareness and committing themselves to address violence, it would be difficult to eliminate sexual violence against female students.

Currently, some degree of awareness about sexual violence is evident. Salem, the president of the Female Students Association at Hawassa University explained, *I believe work done with male students around gender-based violence has shown fruition; it has brought changes in attitude.* Though not always, sexual violence is reported to gender offices, and in some cases, measures have been taken. For example, a staff of the gender office in one of the universities explained that the office had intervened when students were victimized. She elaborated that in one instance a male student who beat up a female student for refusing a sexual relationship was suspended for a semester.

With increased awareness and assertiveness, there are a few who challenge perpetrators. *“I once confronted a student who stuck chewing gum on my hair.... and said to him if you are educated and modern you have to change this attitude!’, and he was surprised and stopped bugging me’.* explained Yamrot. Amal also stated, *one time, one of the guys touched on the part of my body, which he was not supposed to touch, and I slapped him.* In relation to the inquiry whether he slapped her back, she explained, *he knew the consequences he could face if I reported him, and thus he left me quietly. He could have been suspended for one year, and he could even be dismissed based on the degree of violence he committed.*

Participants in the FGD conducted at AAU admitted that not every girl they approached for small talks was willing to be engaged. Some female students also agreed that now some male students behave in a better way due to the discussions made with them by different bodies such as gender offices regarding sexual harassment and that not all male students are bad. In fact, one of the FGD participants held at AAU explained that in his department the girls are good in their studies, and they also have studies materials to lend them when asked. In support of this idea, Anisa, a 21-year-old, 3rd-year student from Debre Berhan University explained that her friend in the Accounting department tutors students, and even male students come to get support from her. All these signal some degree of attitudinal changes.

Slowly change is happening, including the increase in enrollment of female students, availability of gender offices dealing with such issues, and other structures including the Student Council and, in some campuses, girls’ clubs. However, sexual violence is still a serious issue; it is an incident experienced by many female students every day. Despite the efforts made to address sexual violence, the findings show the different challenges encountered in tackling it. For example, it is found that the institutional response made to address sexual violence is not strong. Gender offices do not have sufficient resources, both human and financial, to undertake the different activities. According to the head

of the gender office in one of the universities, lack of budget, lack of awareness about the existence of gender offices in the different faculties, and lack of participation of students in the different programs organized by the office are challenges noted.

In summary, several political, policy and structural changes have happened in Ethiopia to tackle the problems of gender inequality, and these have permeated the university environment. The changes have brought about increased enrollment of female students, the creation of supportive structures, some degree of awareness about sexual violence, and the discussion of sexual violence as an issue in forums organized by gender offices. Nevertheless, the everyday interaction of female students in the universities still takes place in an environment where sexual violence is tolerated and, in many cases, taken as part of life.

Conclusion

Sexual violence is a practice linked to contextual and individual factors. In Ethiopian universities, sexual violence is an everyday reality for female students. The individual factors including lack of information, confidence, assertiveness and social skills expose female students to sexual violence. The attitude and myths such as women are harassed and raped due to their own behavior shift the blame on female students, and that female students enjoy the attention that comes with harassment sustains the practice. The belief that one has to ask female students out for dates repeatedly, despite their refusal also causes sexual violence. These problems are exacerbated due to the fact that universities are mostly male-dominated, and the structures put in place to address gender issues are weak and lack necessary resources including finance. In many cases, female students fail to report violence for the lack of awareness and skepticism that their complaints get handled properly. All these including the unfriendliness of the physical and social environment make the everyday interaction create a fertile ground for sexual violence.

A lot has changed in terms of legal frameworks that address gender/women's issues since 1993 when the first women's policy was formulated. Ethiopia has put in place laws, policies, and strategies to address gender inequality and protect the rights of women. Within these legal frameworks, educational institutions have taken measures to increase female enrollment and to address gender equality issues including sexual violence.

Some degree of change has been noted due to the initiatives that have been put in place to address the problem of sexual violence in higher education institutions. However, eliminating sexual violence requires more than taking sporadic actions; it has to be dealt in a holistic manner tackling the factors operating at different levels. Utilizing the ecological approach enables us to effectively reduce and eliminate sexual violence against female students. Measures that need to be considered include working on female students to empower them through raising their awareness; enhancing their participation in different forums that work on student development and protect students' rights; strengthening structures working on gender issues including gender offices and female students associations through provision of necessary resources to help implementation of available policies that protect the rights of female students; initiating more projects and activities that address sexual violence, and bringing male students on board to create more awareness and collaborations. As highlighted by Parkes et.al (2013), it is actions launched to address these factors at each level of interaction that can take us forward in eliminating the practice.

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