

## The School and the 'Second Sex': A Feminist Response to Verbal and Non-Verbal Sexual Harassment of Girls by Boys in Zimbabwe's Secondary Schools

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### Abstract

Sex discourses are regarded as taboo in Shona society and its various institutions. However, a worrisome development, corrosive to Shona etiquette values and social fibre, in which male members including pupils are so fond of using words and gestures with sexual connotations, is rapidly engulfing the society. This article, therefore, explores the magnitude of sexual harassment of girls in Zimbabwe's Secondary Schools and its impact on the well-being of the girl child. Evidence gathered through questionnaires indicates that verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls by boys is rampant in schools. This harassment contributes enormously towards girls' distraction from lessons, obliteration of their self-esteem and potential for academic achievement. From a feminist perspective, we contend that sexual bullying practices, rampant in Zimbabwe's Secondary Schools, are manifestations of sexual power struggles motivated by masculinity and patriarchal social structures. In this regard, this article calls all responsible authorities to create school environment and policies that promote gender justice. The greatest limitation we faced was that due to the tabooed nature of sex discourse in Shona society, some pupils were shy to complete the questionnaire.

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**Keywords:** sexual harassment, patriarchy, masculinity, femininity, gender.

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### INTRODUCTION

Verbal and non-verbal harassment of females is rampant not only in schools, but in the wider Zimbabwean society, despite the country's constitutional provisions which make harassment a crime. Thus, the sexual bullying of girls in schools is just a microcosm of the macrocosm. Chapter 9:23(77b) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act says that: "Any person who knowingly or realising that there is a real risk or possibility that he or she will be heard, utters or makes use of indecent or obscene language in or near a public place, or in or near a private place within hearing of another person shall be guilty of public indecency and liable to a fine not exceeding level nine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months or both" (The Sunday Mail, 12-18 December, 2010:D4). Authors of this article posit that the confession by some women during a 'Mai Chisamba' Zimbabwe television talk show (also recorded in the aforementioned newspaper article) that many men often give derogatory remarks such as "mutumba asekuru," (sexually connoting big buttocks), whenever a heavily built woman passes by, must be viewed as a tip of the iceberg concerning the magnitude of verbal and non-verbal sexual bullying of women folks in all sectors of the Zimbabwean society.

This harassment could be explained in terms of the religio-cultural values and norms which act as the boundaries and barriers to the empowerment of women. Schools are not immune to these values and norms. The high magnitude of sexual harassment of girls by boys within the school settings contradicts efforts by government, in making sure that sex equity becomes one of today's most vital educational issues which prohibit all forms of sexual harassment and discrimination. The Education Act of 1987 which specifies that every child in Zimbabwe has a right to education is one typical example of such efforts (National Action Plan of Zimbabwe: Education for All, Towards 2015). Similarly, Chingarande in Maphosa, Kujinga and Chingarande (2007:51) observes that:

*The National Gender Policy in relation to the education sector aims to amend all relevant education and legal instruments to promote gender equality and equity; incorporate gender issues in all curricula at all levels of education; educate and encourage parents to treat boys and girls equally ...*

The use of sex-loaded words and gestures affect the balance of power between men and women in no small measure. Lakoff in Fasold (1990) contends that with respect to the use of language, women's identities are submerged because they are denied the

means of expressing themselves strongly; theirs are expressions that suggest triviality and uncertainty. Whilst it is taboo for girls to expose their bodies publicly at or outside the school environment, boys have the privilege to unbutton and take off their shirts when weather is harsh or during sports training in the grounds. Female teachers and students are expected to accept and live with this kind of harassment. Although some authorities would like to attribute this to male-female differences in biological makeup, we contend that such behaviours are sexist. This study, therefore, posits that women's freedoms of speech, association, affiliation and movement are severely restricted.

Sex linked taboos on language use and behaviours which are largely biased against women jet-propel the construction of male supremacist attitudes in the classroom and society. The verbal and non-verbal sexual harassments of girls in schools are just but a pointer to how girls and women are viewed as secondary in status to boys and men. However, as alluded to by Kangira and Mashiri (2008) sexual harassment is not only about power because it can also be used to reprimand, shame and humiliate an individual or group for perceived anti-social behaviour.

#### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Various theories explain motivational factors behind the verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls by boys in school settings. Feminist and social learning theorists attribute the sexual harassment of girls to masculinity, the brain child of patriarchy, and its resultant social structures (Lingard and Douglas, 1999). Gender acts as a major classifier, dividing people into two broad groups, male and female. These groups do not occupy equal status. Male domination is evident in nearly all socio-economic and religio-political spheres where females are treated as the second sex. Thorne, et al (1983) see language as a major factor closely tied to this patriarchal social structure. According to Romaine (1994) language is manmade, made by men for men in order to represent their views and perpetuate them. Words and gestures used by boys with reference to girls, for example, slag; tart and spinster are pejorative and assassinate female images and character.

Barrett and Jones (1993) note that through socialisation, children learn gender distinctions which the family and society reinforce. This results in children developing a cognitive framework capable of organising stimuli relating to gender. Supporting the same view, Kangira and Mashiri (2008) observe that among the Shona, family is the basic institution for the socialisation of children into womanhood (*chikadzzi*) and manhood (*chirume*). Whilst manhood is associated with courage, strength and bravery,

womanhood means weak, emotionally fragile and docile. These unwritten norms and values filter other institutions including schools. Thus, in school, girls are expected to behave like women by exhibiting feminine qualities, not only by their male counterparts, but also by both male and female teachers. Failure to abide to femininity lends girls into serious verbal and non-verbal sexual harassments.

Among the Shona, a boy child is highly valued and regarded, hence the first question asked about a newborn usually concerns its sex. Mothers who give birth to sons are highly praised. Barrett and Jones (1993) posit that the importance and superiority of the boy child is further reinforced through, for example, the amount and type of holding, playing, speech and punishment practices. In many Shona families, a boy child is the *newanji* meaning the eldest boy child and heir. It is therefore, not surprising that parents and society show greater tolerance of non-compliance in boys than in girls. This socialisation spills into the school setting, hence we find boys sexually harassing girls wily-nily.

Patriarchy, which is embedded in most structures of Shona society, gives boys certain social privileges of sex that grant them cultural, professional and personal status in ways that dominate and marginalise girls. Privilege, a concept tied to images of status and wealth, has been defined by McIntosh, quoted in Brody, et al (2000:20), as "unearned and frequently taken for granted advantages accrued purely through one's birth into a certain group." Privilege exists, overtly or covertly, within our social systems and it gives certain groups (in this case, boys and men), choices, opportunities, dominance and permission to control members of a less privileged group (in this case, girls and women), while making the power relationships appear as natural. Following the privilege principle, we therefore assert that boys' use of vulgar words and gestures should be viewed as an attempt to emphasise their masculinity whereas girls' inability to use vulgar is taken to symbolise their femininity. Thus, sexual bullying practices prevalent in schools and society are inextricably tied to male privileges.

We agree with Duncan (1999) that male privileges have given birth to a paradox or hypocrisy regarding sexual behaviour. This means, while boys tend to increase their peer status by indulging and making public their sexual exploits, girls with sexual knowledge and experience are denigrated as polluted and unworthy of male attention. Even in the face of the ravaging effects of Human Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), the boy's sexual worth increases as he gains more experience whilst the girl's sexual value rapidly diminish with age and experience. The

verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls is related to this paradox in that, if they give in to boys' constant pressure to participate in sexual activity, they lose their sexual capital and become targets of sexualised name-calling such as *gaba* (muggy), meaning no longer a virgin, *hure* (prostitute) and *mai muponisi* (anyone's source for quenching sexual thirst). Refusal to take part in sex activity does not give them immunity against sexual harassment as they may be labelled lesbians, hermaphrodite and *mbonga* meaning a girl dedicated to a spirit.

Biological, cognitive developmental and psychoanalytic theories relate verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls to factors such as adolescence, boys-girls lag-time in terms of sexual maturity and conditioning. Epps and Hollin (1993) note that adolescence is a period of psychological upheaval and disturbance, which is characterised by identity crisis as the young people struggle both for increased autonomy and independence from their family, striving to achieve their own distinct personality. It is associated with egocentricity and vulnerability as teenagers vacillate between ecstatic vibrancy and crushing ennui.

During adolescence sex-hate language and bullying increases and this can be attributed to the pupils' growing awareness of their sexualised identity. According to Duncan (1999) adolescent boys tend to be very aggressive towards girls. Questionnaire responses revealed that the aggression increases if boys' advances are rejected. Boys behaviourally compensate by ganging up and making frequent unwanted sexual remarks against the girl(s). In some instances, the group's behaviour may take a very threatening sexualised form resulting in actual sexual assault, for example, fondling of breast and buttocks. Barrett and Jones (1993) attribute the physical aggression and the tendency for boys to become more muscular as they mature to higher levels of androgens. Whilst this is true, we are more persuaded by the social-feminist perspectives which explain the aggression of boys in terms of socialisation and patriarchal structures. This is because aggression in boys starts long before the on-set of adolescence and persists into the post-adolescence period.

From questionnaire responses, we can argue that sexual harassment of girls by boys in schools is related to mid-adolescent crisis which is characterised by a sexual maturation lag in which girls develop and mature sexually earlier than boys. For girls, there seem to be a dearth of fanciable boys in their own age range. They are also scared of the perceived culturally attached stigma of going out with anyone of the same age or younger. This reinforces the aggressiveness and feeling of rejection in boys which they 'act out' by sexually bullying girls. Moreover, because boys cannot confront the older boys going

out with girls in their class, they vent all forms of abuse on the girls. At times due to fear of being beaten up by older boys for defaming their girlfriends, the verbal abuse is not particularised but diffused into a general sexualised antagonism. Glaser and Frosh (1993) support this view by positing that the masculine-feminine psychology typical of the mid-adolescent crisis period enhances sexual abuse. This is because most boys are brought up and conditioned to think that they are stronger, superior and independent of girls. To this end, Manyonganise and Museka (2010) contend that the sexual bullying of girls should be viewed as an attempt by boys to exert power and authority over girls.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The study relied on questionnaires and observations as data gathering tools. These methods were considered ideal because any subject matter that involves sex is secretive, sensitive and delicate among the Shona. The questionnaire method allowed participants to express themselves freely by responding in confidentiality, hence our assumption that the data we obtained and used is valid and reliable. A total of one hundred and twenty (120) questionnaires were randomly distributed to three secondary schools as follows: ninety (thirty per school) to forms three and four at Zurura (Rusape, rural), forms three to six at Matoranhembe (Zvimba, peri-urban) and Mufakose 2 (Harare, urban) pupils. We chose pupils from these classes because of the assumption that they are at the peak of mid-adolescent crisis. The other thirty were equally distributed among teachers at these schools. The rationale for choosing these schools was premised on our desire, not to draw a comparison, but to capture information from different social milieu.

#### **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

From the questionnaire responses, we categorically state that verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls in schools is not an abstraction but real. The harassment seems to be embedded in the hegemonic masculinity and power imbalance between boys and girls as well as men and women in both the school and society. Through pressure group influence, boys use words and gestures with sexual connotations in order to reduce, ridicule, shame and belittle girls. Conversely, boys sometimes use sexually loaded words and gestures as a way of expressing their admiration, affection and a yardstick for judging their chances of winning the girl's heart. This according to some respondents is called "one-two testing" (slang) meaning weighing one's chances of being loved by the targeted girl. A number of responses indicated that if they use sexualised names such as *lovie*, my queen, sweetie or make gestures or physical contacts with sexual connotations, for example leaning, winking (*kuchonya*), blowing kisses towards a girl and pretending to touch the breasts and the girl is not

furious, they would interpret that to mean she is interested. Given that culturally girls cannot propose, this calmness is often taken to mean *kuganha*, meaning a girl's indirect way of inviting a suitor.

However, girls' responses to harassment are in most cases misinterpreted. Duncan (1999) says a girl may actually laugh when being harassed not because she is enjoying it but that she has no control and laughter or calmness becomes a mere emotional response. In addition, if the girl becomes furious, a scene is created, other pupils' attention is drawn and rumours start to spread. Eventually, the girl is blamed and her image is soiled. Labels such as *akagarwa* or *ane shavi* (she is possessed) or *mbonga* (a woman dedicated to a family spirit such that she cannot fall in love or marry) are given to her. Because of this fear, most girls prefer to suffer in silence. Their predicament is aggravated by lack of faith in the school discipline system on matters of sexual harassment. Ninety (90%) of the students at the three schools dismissed their respective discipline systems as "toothless."

Our findings also revealed that sexual harassment take place in the form of sexualised name-calling, rubbishing sexual performance, ridiculing physical appearance, criticising sexual behaviour, aggressive propositioning and unwanted touching. These forms are in turn related to factors such as visible signs of puberty, concealed areas of the body (usually accessed via intimate contact and later relayed to peers), historical facts about the girl(s), and level of intelligence. How each of these factors influences verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls is explained below.

### Visible Signs of Puberty

As girls graduate into adolescence, their bodies undergo several biological changes. In relation to these changes, boys make frequent unwanted and unwarranted remarks or physical forays against them. According to questionnaire responses, some of the words and their meaning(s) that are commonly used by boys in sexually harassing girls are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Verbal Sexual Harassment (Abusive Labels) Related to Puberty

Label	Meaning(s)
<i>Chimoko chidanger</i>	Beautiful and sex girl
<i>Mazikaka</i> or dairy board	A girl with big breasts
<i>Mutumba/Ziheavy/Bootylicious</i>	Heavily built girl with big buttocks
<i>Muchinda</i>	Manlike in character and ugly
<i>Wakabatana</i>	Well shaped and attractive for sexual gratification or sexually enticing
<i>Une gumbo/gumbo fanta</i>	Sexy legs
<i>Ndinoda kukurowa CNN</i> (condoms not necessary)	I want to have unprotected sex with you (commonly used in relation to beautiful girls)
<i>Imbondinzwisawo</i>	Let me have a sexual taste of you
<i>Uri paheat</i>	A girl who is badly in need of sex
<i>Nzenza</i>	A girl of loose sexual morals
Loose biscuit	Sexually loose girl
Tart	Beautiful, sex but loose girl
<i>Pfambi/Hure/Prostitute/Slat</i>	Sexually loose
<i>Wakaora</i> (rotten)	You are infected with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV and AIDS hence suicidal to have sex with, (mostly used in relation to girls with pimples)
<i>Kuonererwa nemazamhu maviri, ko imbwa ine sixteen yozoita sei?</i>	If you brag with just two breasts, then what do you expect a dog to do with sixteen of them? (implying that a dog is better)
<i>Ndinoda kukukama</i>	I want to milk you.

### Concealed Areas of Development

Attacks on concealed or private parts were, according to the majority of participants, the most hurtful. This is because they stand as evidence that the abuser or one of them had access to these parts via intimate contact. Girls and women in general are very secretive about their sexual exploits and experiences. Publicising these adventures make them feel like fish out of water. The impossibility of refuting the allegation is the winning weapon for boys. Boys also make life very difficult for girls by imitating the utterances alleged to have been made by a girl during intimacy. Because the secret code would have been broken, they feel betrayed. Moreover, due to the fact that, culturally, sex outside marriage pollutes and stigmatises girls, exposing their sexual adventures

shames and belittles them. Cases of girls, who transferred from their respective schools because of the stigma that followed the disclosure of their sexual escapades, were reported by 15% of the respondents. Rubbishing sexual performance and sexualised name-calling through labels such as *danda* (log) and porn-star were according to the collected data the most common but denigrating insults. *Danda* means a girl who is unable to make rhythmic movements to sexually satisfy the partner and, porn-star refers to a sex expert reminiscent of those who feature in pornographic movies. The two extremes are shameful in that, whilst *danda* connotes sexual worthlessness, porn-star implies promiscuity. *Wakashapa*, meaning tasteless, was also reported to be commonly used. Labels like *bloody Chipo* also feature if boys discover

that a girl is in possession of tampons, pads or cotton wool. Because of the 'polluting' concept of menstruation, boys are aware of the intensity of feelings attached to it by girls. Respondents showed that boys also attack hairy tits, smelly, misshaped or wrong sized body parts. Publicising intimacies has a devastating effect on the victim's self-esteem, confidence and concentration in class.

### Historical Facts

Knowledge of the girl's past romantic relationship(s), usually acquired through the spreading of rumours, resources boys' verbal armoury. Due to societal norms and values that require girls, and not boys, to maintain their sexual purity until marriage, such knowledge is used by boys to mutilate the images of girls. Insults hurled in relation to this knowledge include off-layer, which implies a girl who has reached diminishing returns in terms of sexual worth; *chidangerous* or *mushonga wemakonzo* (rat killer), meaning a girl who is no longer safe to have sex with, especially with regard to HIV and AIDS and other STIs. Other mentioned degrading words include, *ngomwa* (barren), *nzenza* (a person of loose morals), *nyaparwe* (a baboon prostitute), *mvana* (no longer a virgin), *bichani* or *hure*, loose biscuit (slat, bitch, toy, prostitute), *dibhi harina mhuru*, literally meaning a dip tank caters for all cattle sizes but translated to mean a girl who does not discriminate who to have sex with in terms of age and *mai muponesi*, meaning a girl or woman who helps anyone in sexual need. Sexualised name-calling and criticised sexual behaviour are the major features of this category. Apart from shaming, stigmatising and belittling girls the insults are also intended to chastise and correct the perceived wrong behaviours and moral conduct. The authors of this article condemn these names and labels because there are better and dignified ways of correcting bad behaviour. Female respondents to the questionnaire indicated their aversion to the labels because they assassinate their characters and images.

### General Behavioural Patterns

Due to patriarchy, certain behaviours are thought to be feminine. For example, being smart, wearing make-up, beautiful, less challenging, shy and unassertive. Girls who cross these social boundaries are not only condemned, but labelled and/or name-called. Some such labels pointed out by respondents include, *jenga warume*, meaning a girl who is almost always in the company of boys. Dressing, especially clothes that constrict parts of the girl's anatomy attract abusive comments like, "she is wearing a condom." Labels such as prostitute/slat are also associated with tight and mini-skirts or dresses. Most respondents noted that boys often misinterpret this kind of dressing to mean that they are being invited or seduced hence they sometimes make aggressive propositioning and unwanted touching. Conversely, those who appear ugly and clumsy are insulted for

*kusanzwisa hawi*, meaning failing to stimulate one's sexual feelings and are labelled as *machinda* meaning man-like. Girls who do not entertain boys and have no known relationship(s) are not spared either, as they are referred to as *mbonga* or *tete wemusha* (meaning a girl/woman dedicated to a spirit and cannot have sex with any man). Ridiculing girl's physical appearance, aggressive propositioning, unwanted touching (fondling), sexualised name-calling and criticising girl's interaction with boys, all manifest in relation to the general behavioural patterns of a girl.

### Level of Intelligence

Brody et al (2000), note that Mathematics and Science subjects have a gendered tradition and this is aptly true of many schools in Zimbabwe. Despite decades of effort to make the high school curriculum less sex-differentiated, trends from 2008 to 2010 at Zurura and Matoranhembe Secondary Schools, show that few girls registered 'O' Level Mathematics and or any Technical subject and pursue them further. In spite of several intervention measures, for example, the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST) whose major objective is to "... promoting female participation in education, with special emphasis on Mathematics, Science and Technical Education", (National Action Plan of Zimbabwe: Education For All, Towards 2015, 2005:33), sex disparity still exists in Mathematics, and Technical subjects. There seems to be a masculinity-femininity charged and 'unspoken' assumption that girls are somehow deficient and incapable of performing in these subjects at the same level as their male counterparts. The few female students, who take up Mathematics and/or Technical subjects, compete and perform better than boys, are not spared from sexualised verbal harassment. Names like, *machinda* (meaning man-like) and hermaphrodite (a biological condition of having both female and male reproductive organs) were reported to be commonly used in assaulting such girls. These harassments are generally meant to tease girls and remind them that they are venturing into boys' domain.

From questionnaire responses and observations, we posit that sexualised harassment serve to remind girls that they are just girls and that their value is only in relationship to the boys. We contend that adolescent relationships are largely governed by sexual rivalry, with boys devoting a lot of energy into making life very uncomfortable for their female folks. Sexual bullying is not only verbal but also non-verbal and questionnaire responses revealed that this kind of harassment is rampant and equally damaging.

### Non-Verbal Sexual Harassment

This harassment often takes place in school hide-outs, out of the eyes of school authorities and is largely

driven by peer group influence (Duncan, 1999). The group may take a very threatening sexualised form against girls, resulting in unwanted touching or fondling. At times, girls are forcibly kissed. Some respondents cited drug abuse by boys as the major factor behind this aggressive behaviour. For us, drugs are just precipitating factors; the real cause is power imbalance between boys and girls. Symbolic gestures are also used in sexually harassing girls non-verbally, the most irritating one, according to respondents, being the raising of the middle finger, which they allege to mean "fuck you". Another widely mentioned suggestive gesture is the sticking and wagging of the tongue, which implies sexual intercourse. Winkling (*kuchonya*) is used by boys to register their interest in a girl or just to tease the girl. Responses also indicated that boys form a circle using their fingers to demonstrate that the girl is no longer a virgin or the size of their organs. In some instance another finger is moved in and out of the circle, symbolising a sexual act. Most girls complained about boys who scratch their palms in the process of hand shaking.

Boys seek to belittle and shame girls through various sexualised means. According to some respondents, boys place condoms and family planning pills in the victim's bag or desk and then spread rumours. These serve to purport that the girl is indulging. Boys strategically place a mirror under the dress of the victim which will reflect the girl's undergarment and then spread rumours. Other respondents claim that boys shame girls by placing pornographic pictures on their desks or bags. Boys also carelessly unbutton and display their chests. They sometimes threaten to unzip their shorts/trousers in front of girls and, in extreme cases; they actually show off their organs. Boys blow kisses in the air towards the direction of the intended victim. At times, they make suggestive rhythmic movements in front or behind the girl. Some responses showed that boys consciously and deliberately lean, rub their bodies and bump into girls and pretend that it is accidental.

These sexual bullying practices are an indication of sexual power struggles in schools and society at large. Patriarchy, masculinity, drug abuse and mob psychology are, according to some questionnaire responses, the key drivers of various forms of verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls by boys. These forms of sexual harassment are rampant in schools although 66.7% of the respondents regarded verbal sexual harassment as more prevalent.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment of girls by boys is ubiquitous in Zimbabwe's Secondary Schools. The harassment manifests in different forms, overt or covert, and is closely related to patriarchy, masculinity and gender stereotyping, with drug or alcohol abuse sometimes

functioning as precipitating factors. Shona society's patriarchal social structures, families and schools included, perpetuate the sexual harassment of girls by empowering and privileging boys. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the constitutional provisions which protect women against various forms of sexual harassment are not known to the generality of the Zimbabwean population. From these findings, we reiterate that, sexual harassment of girls by boys in schools, should be considered anathema because it is detrimental to the girls' academic performance, moral, social, and spiritual well-being as well as womanhood in general.

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