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Ubuntu as resistance: Reimagining responses to violence against women in Eswatini's higher education sector

Edward MUZONDO and Weston CHIDYAUSIKU

ABSTRACT

Violence against women (VAW) in higher education institutions in Eswatini persists despite increased female enrolment and leadership representation. The persistence of this problem signifies that it cannot be fully understood through imported frameworks alone. Therefore, guided by Ubuntu Feminism, this paper situates the problem within African realities, resisting Western impositions while interrogating patriarchal structures embedded in Eswatini's tertiary institutions. Using a storytelling and Ubuntu-based participatory methodology, the paper draws on lived narratives from female students, lecturers, community leaders, and frontline service providers, providing a culturally resonant way to discuss gender liberation and restorative justice in educational settings. These dialogical encounters foregrounded collective voices and cultural insights, revealing that violence against women in tertiary institutions requires an African relational imperative which encourages empathy and collective healing as responses to structural gendered oppression. By privileging the 'narrative of belonging', where people with first-hand experience were allowed to freely express themselves, the paper advocates for an Ubuntu feminist storytelling approach to uproot violence against women in highly patriarchal environments. Parental involvement, communal accountability and girl child empowerment initiatives were highly recommended if institutions seek to design safe spaces for women in tertiary education. The paper underscores the urgent need for a decolonized and community-rooted approach that reclaims relational dignity in Eswatini's higher education sector.

KEY TERMS: Afrocentric feminism, higher education, Eswatini, storytelling, Ubuntu, violence against women

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) in higher education institutions remains a persistent challenge in Eswatini despite significant progress in female enrolment and leadership representation. This undermines the progress of Eswatini towards meeting Sustainable Development Goal 5 which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. While global frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW have advanced women's rights, these Western approaches alone have not adequately addressed the cultural and structural realities of African societies. In Eswatini, patriarchal traditions, socio-economic inequalities and community norms continue to shape the experiences of women and girls in tertiary institutions. This paper adopts an Ubuntu feminism as a lens of resistance, situating violence against women within African ways of knowing, being and doing. By grounding analysis in African philosophies of relationality, dignity and collective responsibility, the paper highlights how violence against women is embedded in cultural institutions and everyday practices. The choice to center Ubuntu and storytelling is not merely methodological, rather, it is a deliberate act of decolonizing gender justice and women empowerment narratives. This approach allows for an indigenized understanding of VAW that privileges homegrown knowledge systems and community accountability. The research gap lies in the limited use of African-centered frameworks to interrogate VAW in higher education institutions. Existing studies often rely on Western theories, which overlook the communal, relational, and cultural dimensions of violence in African contexts. This paper therefore fills that gap by situating VAW within Eswatini's socio-cultural realities, using participatory dialogue to foreground the voices of women with a history of marginalization in higher education institutions. To achieve this goal, the paper has been underpinned by two overarching objectives namely; to analyze the cultural, socio-economic, and institutional understanding of violence against women using Afrocentric Feminism and to reframe a decolonized, community-rooted approach that strengthens gender justice and safe learning environments in Eswatini's tertiary institutions. By adopting Afrocentric Feminism and Ubuntu-based storytelling, this paper contextualizes violence against women within Eswatini's cultural realities and generate transformative, community-driven solutions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Globally, women's participation in higher education has increased significantly over the past four decades, with enrolments rising from elite to mass levels across regions (Maguire, 2023; Correa et al., 2025). United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization {UNESCO} (2024) reports that female enrolment now surpasses 50% in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Eswatini, similar progress is evident, with women accounting for slightly above half of all tertiary enrolments and increasingly assuming leadership roles in faculties and departments (Mpofu & Tfwala, 2024). These developments reflect broader commitments to international frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW, alongside national policies such as the Eswatini National Gender Policy of 2010 and the National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 (Mlambo, 2021). Yet, these numerical gains in enrolment and leadership do not unilaterally translate to safe and equitable learning environments.

The flagged statistics of women in tertiary institutions somehow highlight progress, however, they often mask the persistence of structural inequalities taking place in institutions of higher learning (Maguire, 2023). Enduring structural inequalities and institutionalized patriarchy continue to undermine the promise of global, regional and domestic commitments, revealing a tension between policy and practice. Therefore, adopting an Ubuntu Feminism provides a critical lens to interrogate these dynamics, emphasizing that African women's experiences must be understood within local cultural, historical, and communal realities. This perspective resists both Western feminist impositions and patriarchal traditions, situating women's participation not merely as numerical inclusion but as a struggle against systemic barriers embedded in African institutions.

Studies highlight multiple forms of violence such as sexual, psychological, and physical manifesting through harassment, coercion and exploitation (Mingunde & Dejene, 2021; Muzondo & Chidyausiku, 2023; Muzingili et al., 2024). In Eswatini, patriarchal norms and socio-economic inequalities exacerbate vulnerability, with 48% of women aged 18–24 reporting sexual violence in tertiary institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Underreporting remains a critical challenge, with only a small fraction of survivors seeking medical or legal support (Eswatini Ministry of Health, 2019). This undermines the wellbeing of survivors, further revealing that institutional and systemic cultures of silence perpetuate stigma and harm. The lack of accessible support structures not only discourages disclosure but also normalizes violence as part of 'campus life'. Such dynamics underscore the need for culturally embedded interventions that move beyond punitive responses towards Ubuntu principles of relationality, empathy and communal healing

Key drivers of VAW identified include drug and substance use, financial instability, inadequate accommodation, and peer pressure (Dlamini, 2016; Keller, 2023). These factors intersect with cultural stereotypes that portray women as submissive and normalize coercive practices, undermining the effectiveness of legal protections such as the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 2018. Afrocentric Feminism underscores that these forms of violence cannot be fully understood through Western paradigms alone, rather, they must be

contextualized within African communal structures, such as the *umuzi/musha* (household), where patriarchal values are reproduced and extended into institutions.

Existing literature provides valuable insights into enrolment trends and the prevalence of VAW but often relies on Western theoretical frameworks that inadequately capture African realities. Few studies integrate Indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu or Afrocentric Feminism to analyze how cultural norms, communal values, and historical legacies shape women's experiences in higher education institutions. Moreover, while quantitative data highlight prevalence rates, there is limited qualitative exploration of lived experiences through storytelling and participatory dialogue. This gap restricts the development of culturally embedded interventions that address both structural and relational dimensions of violence against women.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative, Ubuntu-based participatory research approach, which privileges African women lived realities and resists Western epistemological dominance (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020). Ubuntu Feminism provides the theoretical lens, centering communal values, relationality, and cultural accountability. Storytelling and Ubuntu-based dialogue were employed as decolonized methodologies, enabling participants to narrate experiences of violence in ways that honor oral traditions and collective meaning-making (Chilisa, 2012). This design is transformative, as it not only documents experiences but also fosters empowerment and advocacy for gender justice within higher education institutions.

Sampling

Participants were selected using community-based purposive sampling, which involved the selection of people with lived experiences of VAW in higher education institutions. This was guided by ethical and relational commitments to inclusivity where people with suppressed voices were put at the fore. The sample included female students, lecturers, frontline service providers and community leaders who have direct experience or expertise in addressing violence against women in tertiary institutions. Community-based purposive sampling ensured representation of diverse perspectives, thereby promoting participant accessibility, reflecting the Ubuntu feminism principle of intentional and genuine inclusion of marginalized voices.

Data collection

Data were collected through storytelling and Ubuntu-based group discussions. Authors attended a workshop on 'violence against women in Eswatini's higher education institutions' held at the Institute of Development Management (IDM) Eswatini. Two structured sessions were convened: (1) *Understanding VAW in Higher Education*, and (2) *Call to Action*. Each session combined narrative sharing, scenario-based exercises, and policy dialogue. This participatory approach allowed for co-creation of knowledge, where participants collectively reflected on causes, consequences, and strategies to address VAW.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Afrocentric coding framework. This approach privileges African-centered epistemologies and ensures that interpretation remains grounded in Indigenous realities. Data coding was validated through community consensus and collective interpretation (Chilisa, 2012; Asante, 1987). By centering Ubuntu feminism, the analysis interrogated institutional patriarchy while affirming women's lived experiences and Indigenous knowledge systems. The first step of Afrocentric coding framework is grounding narratives along African worldviews. This was done by embedding Ubuntu as a pathway for resistance for violence against women. Chilisa (2012) stated that the second step involves community driven coding, where codes and themes are generated from storytelling and lived experiences. The third step involves consensus validation where we brought together diverse participants including community leaders to code, review and refine codes collectively. This was done to ensure relational accountability and cultural accuracy. The fourth step is theme clustering where all members review themes to ensure that they reflect African thought systems of dignity, resistance and communal trust. This was followed by collective interpretation of themes through narratives where cultural metaphors, oral traditions and communal meanings were used to communicate women's lived experiences. The last stage of the Afrocentric coding involves presentation of findings, where results were shared through verbatim quotes emphasizing co-creation, dignity and cultural safety. This Afrocentric coding framework is spiral in approach (Figure 1), showing that data collection, analysis and presentation is a collective value system in decolonized research where the centrality of African indigenous ideals and values are legitimate frames of reference (Mkabela, 2005). Thematic analysis sheet is attached at the end (Appendix A) to summarize the coding and theme development process.

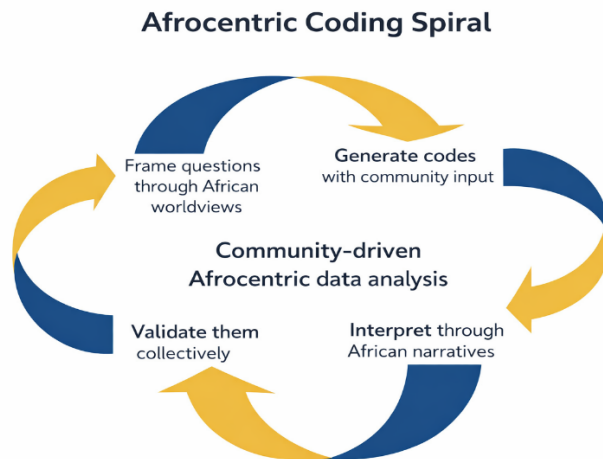


Figure 1: Afrocentric coding framework

To ensure ethical compliance, the study was covered under the blanket ethical approval from Women Unlimited Eswatini, an organization that hosted the event. The study adhered to feminist ethics of care, recognizing participants not as subjects but as co-creators of knowledge (Tamale, 2020). Ubuntu principles of dignity, respect, and relational accountability were considered during data collection and presentation. Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants, signifying the importance of oral tradition in African research. Confidentiality and cultural safety were prioritized throughout. Storytelling sessions emphasized collective trust, and empathy while ensuring participants felt safe to share sensitive experiences.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented thematically, guided by Ubuntu Feminism, which centers African women's lived realities and interrogates patriarchal structures within higher education. Verbatims are included to preserve authenticity and highlight the depth of lived experiences.

Understanding VAW in tertiary institutions

Provider-submissive dynamics

Violence against women (VAW) in Eswatini's tertiary institutions was recorded as a pervasive issue, with policy experts viewed it as a 'second pandemic'. Cases of patriarchal dominance, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural beliefs of the broader society were identified as key drivers of VAW. Characterized by high levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, violence against women directly impede women's academic, physical, and psychological well-being. During an Ubuntu-group dialogue, one police officer (PO1) narrated that:

"...at our offices we regularly come across sad stories about female students attacked by their partners. I gathered that female students tend to stay with their lovers, who are not even students, and the age gap is so worrisome..., the male partner is someone as old as the student's father, but because they need someone who provide for them during this academic journey, male partners regularly abuse female students, which raises moral issues about transactional sexual relationships within our universities..."

In concurrence, one female student (FS1) stated that:

"...I used to have my boyfriend, who was two classes ahead of me, we were staying together as a 'student couple'. He used to beat me up when I go out with my friends without telling him. Even though he was a bit abusive and possessive, I still loved him because he was a 'provider', on my birthdays he bought me nice things, and even the iPhone I'm using was bought by him..."

The above exclamations reveal a deep-seated norm common within African societies. Men are seen as providers within the family while women are supposed to be submissive. This cultural tradition embeds violence against women within everyday life, where violence is normalized and treated as a form of subservience. This shows that, despite progress in policy attention on gender equality, little awareness is known about cultural norms and transactional relationships that shape students' lived experiences of violence.

Transactional relationships and economic dependency

Existing structural inequalities in Eswatini has exposed students from depressed backgrounds into transactional relationships that are shaped by socio-economic dependency. Poverty and limited financial support for students force them to create situations where intimate relationships become economic survival strategies. As reported by another FS2 in an Ubuntu-based group dialogue, she said:

“...I am in the same class with my boyfriend, he stays with his parents and I’m renting a room near the school. When my groceries are finished, he usually borrows me some money, or sometimes he brings me food. I really appreciate his support, but the problem starts when he needs intimacy, he is always in the mood and myself sometimes I wouldn’t want to indulge, but he doesn’t accept that, he always force himself on me and I eventually give in...”

Female students from disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves in relationships, not primarily for affection but to secure some handouts. This dependency reduces women’s bargaining power, resulting in the violation of consent during intercourse. This exacerbates the prevalence of VAW in higher education because even if abuse occurs, one might not be prepared to leave the relationship due to costs incurred by walking away.

Institutional gaps and university policy blind spots

Universities in Eswatini lack accessible channels for students to report violence. This has reduced the number of cases reaching school authorities while the patriarchal norm entrenches the culture of silence. Some universities were found to lack even a tangible policy document on anti-violence and gender inclusion. One lecturer (L1) pointed out that:

“...as to my current knowledge, I do not know of any policy on gender-based violence at our institution. And most of the times, cases of violence against women are just kept as private matters rather than systemic issues...”

Universities sometimes prioritize reputation over student safety thereby treating cases of violence as private matters that shy away from required judicial procedures. This is deeply entrenched in Eswatini’s cultural norm of ‘*tibi tendlu*’ which translates to ‘hiding family dirty linen’. By keeping thorn issues of VAW secret as a way of preserving institutional integrity, universities further worsen the second pandemic by making it a normal action without repercussions to the perpetrator.

Resistance, agency and pathways to change

Despite the persistence of violence, participants articulated strategies of resilience and transformation. They demonstrated that women and communities are not passive victims but active agents of change. Key participants shared their insights on how to address the enduring effects of VAW within tertiary institutions.

Anonymous reporting channels

It has been revealed that the environment of Eswatini discourages disclosure of VAW cases especially through ‘*tibi tendlu*’ concept. This practice reinforces silence and stigma, thereby limiting institutional intervention in addressing VAW. As such, participants drew best practices from South Africa where Ubuntu-based anonymous reporting channels are used to curb gender-based violence. One nurse (N1) indicated that:

“...we need to have anonymous reporting channels that resist cultural norms by allowing our female students to speak without fear of exposure, retaliation or shame. In South Africa, universities use some accessible tools such as the Chomi App, which is a chatbot that provides secure, anonymous, and often offline-friendly reporting system to break the silence....”

The idea of embracing student-friendly digital technology in addressing VAW was welcomed by a number of participants. Another lecturer (L2) added that:

“...there are so many initiatives we can do as universities in order to break this culture of silence. We need to devise some digital reporting channels that protect the identity of the student, while allowing monitors to collect sufficient data for potential prosecution. At my former university in South Africa, there was a Kwanele App, which was free and confidential. It even allowed students to press a panic button with live audio streaming to a secure vault...these student friendly channels for reporting are needed in Eswatini if we really want to see changes and save a life...”

Ubuntu-based reporting channels that are anonymized help to allow survivors to break the cultural norms that perpetuate violence against women in schools. This creates a collective archive of voices that challenge the

normalization of violence within tertiary institutions.

Parental involvement in creating safe learning environments

The involvement of parents in designing safe learning environments for university students was reported to be very minimal. Parents often remain excluded from university-level interventions, yet they are central in shaping the values, relationships and support systems needed. One community leader (CL1) candidly reflected that:

“...we are the parents of these children you see at universities, but we do not have a say in whatever happens there, Why?...we need to be part of the university community, you must continue to host such events like these so that the university must come to us, and we share our opinions about the lives of your students, our children...”

Parents vowed for the need to have illuminating voices in university affairs that affect students. This is because parents are also co-guardians of dignity and their participation in school communities promote collective healing and prevention of VAW in the future.

Empowering female students through self-help projects

Ubuntu Feminism emphasizes more on mutual care and collective upliftment. It has been revealed that university students need empowerment projects that enable them to support one another and building resilience together. In a group discussion, many students shared the same sentiments arguing that:

“...of course, the government gives us stipends, which are for the upkeep, however, the money is not enough. We need more streams of income so that we become self-reliant. This serves us from unnecessary relationships...”

Ubuntu’s emphasis on shared responsibility filled the above narration, stressing that empowerment is not individualistic, rather it is a collective ideology of ‘I rise because we rise’. Female students urged the government and organizations to compliment tertiary scholarships with some form of livelihood that promote independency.

DISCUSSION

Historically, literature on violence against women often highlight prevalence rates and took a Euro-centric analysis of the problem. However, this paper contributes by foregrounding lived narratives through storytelling from people with a history of marginalization. This methodological choice reflects Chilisa’s (2012) call for indigenous research approaches that privilege oral traditions and communal dialogue, thereby producing knowledge that is culturally resonant and transformative. This paper highlights the paradox of women’s growing participation in Eswatini’s higher education institutions alongside the persistence of violence they endure in the process. While enrolment and leadership representation has expanded, patriarchal structures and socio-economic vulnerabilities continue to undermine women’s safety and wellbeing. These findings resonate with global trends reported by UNESCO (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2024), which emphasize increased female enrolment but caution that structural inequalities remain entrenched. However, by adopting Ubuntu Feminism, this paper moves beyond Western paradigms to situate violence within African cultural realities, offering a decolonized lens for analysis and intervention.

Women’s presence in higher education must be understood within communal contexts where patriarchal norms are reproduced, such as the *umuzi/musha* concept. In Swazi terms, the phenomenon of *tibi tendlu* was reported to have serious implications on reporting cases of VAW. This underscores the need for interventions that deconstruct *tibi tendlu* by introducing digital reporting channels that are anonymized, secure and student-friendly. This shifts the narrative from viewing violence as a family or institutional business to a broader macro or national issue that require persecution. This brings together a sense of community in the healing process, along with Ubuntu values of collective responsibility.

The persistence of socio-economic vulnerabilities expose women to coercive relationships and transactional sex (Muzingili et al., 2024; Keller, 2023). Ubuntu Feminism provides a critical framework to interpret these dynamics, emphasizing that violence cannot be understood solely as individual acts but as systemic patterns embedded in African communal and institutional life. This calls for the direct involvement of parents in demystifying cultural ethos that put women at the receiving end of transactional relationships. Ubuntu reframes parental involvement as communal healing, where parents are not just gatekeepers of silence, but stakeholders in dismantling harmful traditions.

Ubuntu provides the resistance, agency, and pathways that is required to change the narratives of women in higher education sector. The approach views women as active agents of transformation, who have the capability to contribute towards a just and equitable society. This reflects Ubuntu Feminism’s emphasis on agency through solidarity, where female students build networks as tools of patriarchal resistance.

IMPLICATIONS

This paper has demonstrated that while women's participation in Eswatini's higher education institutions has expanded significantly, violence against women remains a pervasive challenge that undermines gender equality and academic success. By adopting Ubuntu feminism, storytelling and Ubuntu-based participatory methods, the research situates violence within African cultural realities, highlighting how patriarchal traditions, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and institutional structures intersect to perpetuate harm. The findings underscore that addressing violence requires not only legal and policy reforms but also culturally grounded interventions that resonate with communal values and indigenous knowledge systems.

Contributions to knowledge

The paper advances scholarship by integrating Afrocentric Feminism into the analysis of violence against women in higher education. This fills the gap in existing literature that often relies on Western frameworks. Methodologically, the use of storytelling and Ubuntu group dialogue demonstrates the value of decolonized approaches that privilege lived experiences and knowledge co-creation. This contributes to a growing body of African feminist research that emphasizes relationality, cultural accountability, and community-driven solutions.

Implications for policy

- Strengthen institutional frameworks by embedding Afrocentric feminist principles into university policies, ensuring that gender justice is contextualized within African realities.
- Expand reporting mechanisms through anonymous and culturally sensitive digital channels that encourage survivors to seek support without fear or stigma.
- Integrate parental and community involvement into higher education strategies, recognizing the communal nature of African societies and the role of families in shaping safe learning environments.

Implications for practice

- Empower female students through mentorship, leadership training, and economic support to reduce vulnerabilities linked to financial instability.
- Promote restorative justice approaches rooted in Ubuntu, emphasizing dialogue, empathy, and collective healing rather than punitive measures alone.
- Enhance awareness campaigns that challenge harmful cultural stereotypes and normalize consent as a continuous, mutual process.

Implications for future research

- Further studies should explore comparative Afrocentric feminist approaches across different African countries to deepen understanding of how cultural contexts shape violence in higher education.
- Research should investigate longitudinal impacts of violence on women's academic trajectories, mental health, and career progression.
- Future work could expand on indigenous methodologies, such as narrative analysis and community consensus approaches, to strengthen culturally resonant knowledge production.

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