

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female students' perceptions of interpersonal risk and protective factors for dating violence in a Nigerian university

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Abstract

Dating violence is a public health problem with severe implications for social, physical, mental/psychological and spiritual health of victims/survivors, families and the society at large. For female students, it can gravely affect their academic performance and thus affect gender equality in universities. This article identifies and described the interpersonal risk and protective factors associated with dating violence in a Nigerian University. Data were collected from a sample of 90 undergraduate female students in the university of Benin using nine (9) focus group discussions. Thematic content analysis, using the socio-ecological framework revealed interpersonal risk factors a theme with subthemes which are: negative childhood experiences, negative influence from other persons, and the clash in belief systems between partners. While the theme: protective factors have subthemes which are: having elders as good role models, trusting relationships, mutual respect between partners, open relationship and transparency between partners. This study identified that students should be given orientation in schools to avoid bad peer, friends, influence; Mentoring between older students and younger ones to be encouraged as they serve as elder and adviser to the young ones. In addition, Nigerian universities' management and stakeholders should develop evidence-based policies and programs. Including healthy relationship topics built into the school curriculum gear at having healthy relationship, prevent dating violence and respond to other forms of gender-based violence. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[3]: 84-95).

Keywords: Dating violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), University students, Nigeria, risk factors and protective factors

Résumé

La violence dans les fréquentations est un problème de santé publique qui a de graves répercussions sur la santé sociale, physique, mentale/psychologique et spirituelle des victimes/survivants, des familles et de la société dans son ensemble. Pour les étudiantes, cela peut gravement affecter leurs résultats scolaires et donc affecter l'égalité des sexes dans les universités. Cet article identifie et décrit les risques interpersonnels et les facteurs de protection associés à la violence dans les fréquentations dans une université nigériane. Les données ont été recueillies auprès d'un échantillon de 90 étudiantes de premier cycle à l'université du Bénin à l'aide de neuf (9) discussions de groupe. L'analyse du contenu thématique, utilisant le cadre socio-écologique, a révélé les facteurs de risque interpersonnels, un thème avec des sous-thèmes qui sont : les expériences négatives de l'enfance, l'influence négative des autres personnes et le conflit des systèmes de croyances entre les partenaires. Alors que le thème : les facteurs de protection ont des sous-thèmes qui sont : avoir des aînés comme bons modèles, relations de confiance, respect mutuel entre partenaires, relation ouverte et transparence entre partenaires. Cette étude a identifié que les élèves devraient être orientés dans les écoles pour éviter les mauvais pairs, les amis, l'influence ; Le mentorat entre les élèves plus âgés et les plus jeunes doit être encouragé car ils servent d'aînés et de conseillers aux plus jeunes. En outre, la direction et les parties prenantes des universités nigérianes devraient élaborer des politiques et des programmes fondés sur des données probantes. Inclure des sujets sur les relations saines intégrés dans le programme scolaire pour avoir des relations saines, prévenir la violence dans les fréquentations et répondre à d'autres formes de violence sexiste. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[3]: 84-95).

Mots-clés: Violence dans les fréquentations, violence conjugale (VPI), étudiants universitaires, Nigéria, facteurs de risque et facteurs de protection

Introduction

Dating violence is a form of intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender-based violence (GBV)

that is a global public health and socio-cultural issue affecting millions of female University students in dating relationships¹⁻³. Dating violence is controlling, abusive and aggressive behaviour

that occurs between two persons who share a passionate, romantic, and/or sexual connection beyond friendship, but are not married, nor engaged, have unresolved disagreements and end up fighting and abusing each other⁴. It is an actual threat of violence with exhibition of domineering power and control by one partner over the other, or a combination of these by a current or formal dating partner⁴ and the abuser intentionally behaving in a way that causes fear, degradation and humiliation to control the other person⁴. It is a form of conduct used to deprive partner from his or her freedom, which may occur either in public or private life^{4,5} and can be in the form of physical abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, digital abuse and electronic technology such as hidden cameras to track the victim's whereabouts^{6,7}. Apart from physical violence, there are other types of dating violence which are abusive behaviours, including stalking and harassment, bullying and psychological abuse, kidnapping and even far worse abuse leading to homicide^{4,8,9}. It affect both male and female regardless of age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, class, culture, race, educational background, and occurs in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships⁴.

University life plays a vital role during adolescence romantic relationships where dating can occur. Dating relationships are a normal occurrence, but when there is abnormality due to violence it will disturb the partners' normal developmental process¹⁰. It is often overlooked and regarded as a normal way of life by most students, who are ignorant of the associated consequences. Since the first research conducted by Makepeace on dating violence, considerable effort has been made to understand the magnitude of this problem with severe implications for social, mental, psychological and spiritual health. With physical and sexual assaults leading to severe injuries, complications, suicides or even death^{11,12}. For example, in South Africa, alone, cases of murder of girlfriends by their boyfriends has been reported¹³⁻¹⁵ currently, there are ongoing court cases of boyfriends who killed their girlfriends and similar cases have been reported in Nigeria^{12,16,17}. In addition, the media reporting horrifying site of girlfriends whose boyfriends poured acid and are beyond recognition¹⁸⁻²⁰. The male partners may also

be a victim/survivor of similar problem or vice-versa. For female students, it can gravely affect their academic performance, academic achievements and thus affect gender equality in universities. The danger is that the victim/survivors safety, total health family as well as the society is affected adversely.

Globally, studies have indicated alarming rate of dating violence among students and youths in dating relationships^{12,21-25}. Reports indicated that victims/survivors reported being two times more victimised than those who are not in relationships^{12,23,26}. In addition, they reported being involved in at least with one form of abuse, and two out of three have witness physical fight among family members^{27,28}.

In sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, studies have found similar reports^{2,7,10,11,29-32}. Literature reviewed showed estimated prevalence of 20% to 87% of students who are affected by either physical, sexual, psychological and/or emotional violence while in dating relationship^{33,6}. This shows an increasing rate of intimate partner violence (IPV), among Nigerian youths and students who are more prone to dating violence due to exposure to face to face contact with partners affecting age group 18-28 years. Females are at high risk of being victims of the various forms of dating violence while males continue to be the perpetrators⁵. In particular, female students at the Nigeria university also face these problems with dating partners⁶. There is, however, need to understand the interpersonal risk factors and protective factors from the students' viewpoint so that solutions to eradicate this scourge can be achieved.

The interpersonal risk factors for dating violence among students identified in the literature includes: personal attitudes, beliefs perceptions, behaviour, peer influences, use of drugs and alcohol, psychological and emotional factors such as low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, high level of jealousy and anger^{30,34,35}. Others risk factors include multiple partners, and domineering power of males over females – which is a general problem in Africa where males assume the leadership role over females⁵. In addition, violence experienced in early life may be linked with physical violence later in life³⁶. Also, relationships with social links such

as family, religion and school may influence an individual either positively or negatively³⁵. For example, Lehrer *et al*³⁷ confirmed that students from a stable home were less likely to perpetrate dating violence, while the opposite was the case with those from unstable homes. They concluded that a Christian student who is religiously inclined is not likely to perpetrate dating violence, while those who do not associate with church activities are most likely to engage in violence³⁷. Furthermore, experts have identified unskilled parenting and family instability as a cause of antisocial behaviour, which plays a substantial role in dating violence relationships^{5,38,39}. Lutwak *et al*.⁴⁰ also supported this when they reported that dating violence females were more likely to report that, their parents were less concerned about their lives, whereabouts and wellbeing than non-violent females.

Interpersonal level protective factors for dating violence in higher education include good parenting, good home training, respect for others opinion, non-violent communication and believing and trusting in others, as well as understanding that we have our rights which must be mutually respected⁴⁰. In addition, families dynamics which involve shared decision making, respect and learning to adjust to stress and appropriate plans are important in reducing aggressive behaviours⁴⁰.

The scourge is eating deeper into institutions of higher learning⁴¹⁻⁴³. While the problem of dating violence among students in tertiary institutions has received considerable attention in high-income countries like America, Europe, Asia, Germany and Australia, very little has been done to address the problem in Africa Universities including Nigeria. A contributing factor to this lack of attention is the near absence of policies on dating violence in higher education institutions in most African countries^{44,45} and requires special attention by university stakeholders. In order to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030, everyone need to understand these factors which can assist University stakeholders throughout Nigeria and other developing countries globally, on how to respond to survivors. In addition, intervention strategies for eradicating dating violence on campuses can be developed so that the

disruptive effects on the survivors, their families, the university communities and the wider society are prevented.

Methods

Study design

A descriptive qualitative case study using the socio-ecological framework of violence was conducted at the University of Benin, Nigeria. A large university with a total number of student enrolments at over 40,000 annually⁴⁶.

Sampling technique

Purposive sampling was employed to select 90 participants for the study which was determined by Data saturation. The inclusion criteria were female undergraduate students who had been in a heterosexual relationship registered for 2016/2017 academic session and are between 18-28 years of age. Other types of relationships such as homosexuals and Lesbians were excluded because homosexuals and interacting with homosexuals is illegal and prohibited in Nigeria^{47,48}.

The sample size was considered adequate to answer the research Questions:

What are female students' perceptions of Interpersonal risk for dating violence in the Nigeria university?

What are female students' perceptions of interpersonal protective factors for dating violence at the Nigeria university?

Data collection

Data were collected from May to July 2016 and initial data analysis occurred between June and August 2016. Nine FGDs were conducted on separate days, by the researcher with two research assistants. FGD sessions were scheduled during weekends (Saturdays) in each residence common room. Open-ended questions were used to collect the data and were audio-recorded. Field notes were taken by the research assistant. The FGDs were conducted in English.

Data management

The transcription and initial analysis of the data were carried out within 72 hours after each FGD.

To ensure participants responses were clearly noted, immediately after each FGDs, key points were summarised and participants were asked if they were a correct reflection of their opinions. Where there were disagreements, corrections and additions were made before the close of each session. The data were all carefully stored and shared with the research colleague.

Data analysis

We conducted preliminary data analysis concurrently with the data collection, but full data analysis started in August 2016 and was completed in February 2017. To validate the findings of the study, other experts in qualitative research were asked to review the raw and analysed data and commented on them. The transcripts; audio-recordings; raw data; analysed themes; and interpreted themes were provided for remarks on the data analysis and interpretations. Questions and constant communication with the expert colleagues were maintained throughout the study. The research colleagues initially disagreed with some of the emerged themes and interpretations, which were resolved by merging related themes, correcting interpretations and renaming themes until there was mutual agreement on all identified themes by all parties.

Trustworthiness

Discussion of interpersonal risk and protective factors for dating violence among female undergraduate students at the Nigeria University and extensive discussions about the data collection procedures was provided. These information was provided so as to share the lessons learnt with other researchers in order to permit satisfactory comparisons with other samples. All the processes of the study were documented in detail. This was done to enhance reproducibility of the same themes by other researchers if they have a similar sample and data. The four basic frameworks for ensuring rigour as described by Lincoln and Guba⁵⁰: credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability were used throughout the data collection and data analysis. While the six steps of Braun and Clarke⁵¹ thematic analysis method were

used to transcribe the data from all focus group discussions and to explain how the interpretations were derived. The steps includes familiarising with the data through reading and rereading of transcripts; initial codes were generated by working through the whole data set to identify codes with similar meaning and grouping them together accordingly; followed by identifying and reviewing themes from the initial code grouped together; and thereafter, naming the identified themes and arranged them into the socio-ecological framework for dating violence. Lastly, the review of narrative data word by word to support the developed themes in our research report.

Results

Findings on the interpersonal level risk and protective factors associated with dating violence in the Nigeria University were presented with extracts from participant which was used to develop these themes.

Interpersonal risk factors

Interpersonal risk factors, is the theme associated with relationship-related factors such as friends, peers, family and neighbours that predispose an individual to being susceptible to dating violence either as a perpetrator or victim. At this level, three subthemes emerged: childhood experiences, influence from others, and clash in belief systems between two partners.

Negative childhood experiences

Negative childhood exposure such as poor family upbringing, exposure to family violence and past self-exposure to violence emerged as interpersonal level risk factors that contribute to violence in dating relationships, these experiences increased the possibility of susceptibility of being victims or perpetrators of dating violence. As demonstrated by the following extracts from participants in the FDGs:

Violent home upbringing can cause violence in dating couples. The way the person was brought up, and the experience the person had. Like when the child is not brought up in a

proper way, like when the parents are always fighting, the child will tend to pick that character, because the family or parents are the first teacher to the child. So, when the parents are always fighting, this is how the child sees life. When the child grows up, he will want to show his actions and prove to everybody that he has power. And by doing this, he might even put it down to his girlfriend, and fight her over any little things. “[FDG1: 24 years old 400 level]

“A person who grows up in a violent family environment will also be violent in his or her own relationship. Why? Because when you remember how your mum and dad always quarrel and fight over every little thing, you too start acting like that because you take it as a normal way of life.” [FDG1:18 years old 100 level]

Maybe somebody abused them when they were younger and now, they want to abuse somebody else. It gives you power, you know, you have enough power to hold one person down and take advantage. [FDG6: 22 years 200 level]

Influence from others

This subtheme emerged from the data in relation to interaction with close relations or others that increased the possibility of a person’s susceptibility to becoming a victim or perpetrator of dating violence. These ‘others may include friends or family members with whom one associates: As shown in the extracts from the participants.

I think bad influence from your girlfriends can actually---make a guy to fight their girl. Maybe there is a friend instigating her and when the girl talks to her friend [about] what the guy is doing to her, the friend will advise her, you must slap him, if I were you I would do this or that. Then you now go and slap him as your friend advised, this will result to serious fight that may lead to physical injuries and emotional trauma. This can also happen with the guy, and vice versa. “[FDG4: 23 years’ final year]

My girlfriend advised me to stop talking to my boyfriend because of certain unresolved issues and I ended up destroying my own relationship by yielding to her advice. My guy beat me up like a baby and said next time you will not try that with me again. My boyfriend has never hit me before but just because I acted according to my girlfriend’s advice. I have learnt my lesson. “[FDG9: 24 years 500 level]

A participant from FDG2 narrated how family could be a contributor to dating violence in a relationship:

“The family can also influence people to be violent in relationships. For example, when you take any issues that come between you and your partner and then you take it to your mum, and she will say ‘For what! I never did this to your dad, why will he do that to you?’ You understand. Some mothers are like that. They will now prompt you, they will put words into your head, they will feed in things that will make you angry and then when you get back to your partner, you have no other choice than to beat her up.” [FDG8: 26 years 400 level]

Clash in belief systems between two partners

Clash in belief systems between two partners, such as differences in religion, background and beliefs emerged as interpersonal level risk factors that contribute to dating violence. These clash in belief systems increases the possibility of exposure to being victims or perpetrators of dating violence as revealed by the following extracts from participants:

“I believe that if you are from different background you may see things from different perspectives. Like if a Muslim guy is now dating a Christian sister. There might be some difference among them. The guy will be listing things that are supposed to be done this way, the girl will be listing the things that are supposed to be done that way and that will make them to disagree. And at times, if the girl proves to be stubborn it might lead to violence

where the guy beats up the girlfriend and they start fighting.” [FDG2: 20 years 200 level]

“Maybe what this guy believes is that a girl is supposed to respect a guy and he holds strongly to that belief. The girl believes we are equal, you can respect me also and she too holds strongly to that, now who is going to let go and surrender? So, most of the times this causes quarrelling and violence among dating partners.” [FDG8: 23 years’ final year]

Again, for the environment, as some girls are being raised in public yard while some are being trained in a flat, and the character of the one who grew up in a public yard differs from that who grew up in a flat. So, it will actually clash because you two do things differently. The guy believes that his opinion is the final whether the girlfriend like it or not and this often leads to quarrel and fighting among them. “[FDG1: 22 years’ final year]

Interpersonal level protective factors

Interpersonal protective factors are described as those relationship-related factors such as friends, peers, family and neighbours that an individual interacts with, that help to reduce risk or protect the individual from dating violence. At this level, four subthemes emerged: having elders as good role models, trusting relationships, mutual respect between dating partners, and finally, open relationship and transparency between partners.

Having elders as good role models

Elders were identified as role models. They include parents, family members, friends, religious leaders and other persons such as school teachers. The role-modelled behaviors that were identified as protective were giving advice, admonishing, teaching and counselling the dating partners. As highlighted in the extracts from the participants.

It is better to go to those adults who have positive experience or relationships that you admire to ask for advice. So, when they give you advice, using their own relationship success

stories, maybe that can have more effect on young partners. [FDG5: 18 years 100 level]

“There is little or nothing we can do to change our parents if they are violent, we know that violence is bad, so, we will be the ones that will effect that change. Maybe we can go for counselling as a couple, perhaps that can help.” [FDG4: 24 years 200 level]

“The girls will like to look onto the elder sister while the guys will look onto the elder brother. Elder sisters and brothers can give advice to dating couple on how to treat each other nicely and thus avoid dating violence.” [FDG8: 28 years 500 level]

“Then consult people who can give you good advice because at the end of the day, you want a safe and loving relationship.” [FDG2: 27 years 500 level]

“When you are dating especially when you guys are going into marriage you want to ensure that you try as much as possible to use preventive measures like marriage counselling so that violence will not be part of the relationship.” [FDG1: 20 years 300 level]

Trusting relationship

Being trustworthy, and faithful were identified as essential to protect dating partners from dating violence. Participants in all focus groups referred to this:

“We should learn to trust our partners. When we have trust for one another then we will be happy and safe in our relationships.” [FDG3:20 years 100 level]

“Dating partners should have trust for one another no matter the situation so that they will be happy and safe in their relationships.” [FDG7:18 years 200 level]

“Okay I will say trust and truth. Just be truthful.” [FDG4:23 years 200 level]

“When they are faithful to each other, the relationship will be happy and safe.” [FDG9:22 years 400 level]

Mutual respect between dating partners

Respect for one another emerged as an interpersonal level protective factor for dating violence. As stressed in the participant's extracts:

“Respect each other because this is one thing I know that will bring happiness in a relationship and other aspects. I will say we should always be truthful to each other.” [FDG6: 18 years 100 level]

“If you really have respect for the other partner, you will not want to violate another person. I don't think he will want to abuse you or fight you.” [FDG9:25 years 200 level]

“There should be mutual understanding between partners.” [FDG4:20 years 300 level]

“Partners should understand themselves when dating because when you understand each other, I don't think there will be violence in that relationship.” [FDG 7: 21 years' final year]

“Give each other spaces to do whatever you want while in a relationship and always trust your partner no matter the distance between you two. You understand.” [FDG7: 22 years' final year]

Open relationship and transparency between partners

Participants identified and agreed that having an open relationship and being truthful and transparent to one another as important elements that will protect dating partner from dating violence. As emphasised in these extracts:

“The relationship between two people should be open, no matter how ugly it is. So, keeping secret is not really idea in a relationship.” [FDG9: 19 years 200 level]

“When there is transparency with someone, you know when you are open, that is, you say everything, you don't have to hide anything. You make sure that he knows your whereabouts not that his friends will call him and say, I saw your babe in club oh! Your guy will let his

friends know. she told me, okay, he will even vow for you.” [FDG8:22 years 100 level]

“Open relationships. It means the relationship should be known to all around you such as your family, friends so that if, for example, anything is going wrong they can help partners to resolve such issues.” [FDG5:24 years' final year]

“When they are faithful to each other, the relationship will be happy and safe.” [FDG8:19 years 200 level]

“There should be support and good communication among the partners. Like me now, I am in a relationship and both of us are in a University environment, he calls me every day to find out how I am doing and what happened to me. With that I always respect him because I know he cares about me and this good communication has been helping us. So, I think continuous communication among dating partners is vital for a healthy relationship”. [FDG 2:24 year 200 level]

The study participants recommended that the above protective factors can help to reduce violence and bring about healthy relationship among partners.

Discussion

Childhood experiences, influences from others and clash in belief systems between two partners were identified by the student at the Nigeria University as interpersonal risk factors for dating violence. This is supported by findings of Forke *et al.*³⁶, Ogboghodo and Obarisiagbon²⁹ and Turan and Duy^{52,53} who reported that poor childhood experience as a risk factor for dating violence and indicated that individuals who experience violence or grow up in a violent relationship tend to accept violence as a norm and are more likely to use violence in their own relationship than those who experienced little or no violence. Studies suggest that having friends who are victims of dating violence may also predict dating violence^{4,54}. This is true to an extent, and conforms to the accepted adage which states “show me your friends and I will

tell you who you are” A review of peer relationships found that students who associated with peers who have personality problems also find themselves becoming more aggressive and more likely to have increased aggression towards others⁵⁵. These kind of partners with personality defects are most likely going to end up with dating violence.

Violence and abuse in the family of origin was also identified as a contributing factor to dating violence. Turan and Duy⁵² highlighted how exposure to family violence increases dating violence and suggested that in view of social cognitive theory, where the individual experiences family violence such partners are more likely to copy and use such habits in their own relationships, because this theory states that children learn by imitation. Thus influence from others could lead to risk factors for dating violence.

Advice from other people around them was identified as a risk factor which could influence partners' behaviours in their relationship. This is supported by Oluwatosin and Akindale⁴ who reported that lack of close and supportive parental relationships as a risk factor for male and female teen dating violence perpetration. Contrary *et al.*'s study in USA, reported that friends and social support is not significantly related to dating violence and males victimisation. Parental social support does not significantly relate to male or female dating violence.

The findings on peer pressure as a risk factor for dating violence among the Nigeria university students is supported by Stephenson *et al.*⁵⁶, who reported an event in a narrative where peers instigated their friend against his girlfriend and them watched him beat her up without supporting the girl. In a meta-analysis study of the role of peer pressure in adolescent dating violence, Garthe *et al.*⁵⁷ found that across 27 studies of peer dating violence, peer aggression and antisocial behaviours are a reality that cannot be ignored. Having elders as good role models, a trusting relationship, mutual respect between dating partners, openness and transparency were shared by the students as important protective factors partners need to build and develop a healthy relationship, so as to live in harmony with one another. The family, parents and guardians must stand up to their responsibilities of good parenting, being good role

models worthy of emulation by their children and wards, and make them realise that relationships are a healthy adventure if they abide by the rule. This is supported by Oluwatosin and Akinwale⁴, who identified having elders as role models as a protective factors for dating violence among youths, Pengpid and Peltzer⁵⁸ further support this when they reported that peer and parental support including monitoring are vital for healthy dating relationship among partners. Parents should be able to supervise their children and guide them into making healthy relationship choices, and keep on encouraging them that others have done it and they too can do better⁵⁹.

Having mutual respect were supported by Peskin *et al.*⁶⁰ indicating that mutual respect can be encouraged through skills training in effective communication and conflict resolution, which are significant attributes that dating partners should possess to help them from dating violence. Debnam *et al.*⁶¹ in the USA concluded that respect for one another brings about healthy relationship among partners. Furthermore, Ekechukwu and Ateke⁶² in Nigeria suggest that “adolescents must be taught the sensitivities of dating violence as well as limitations that must be observed in dating relationships.

Trust and open, transparent relationships are important elements which dating partners require in order to have a peaceful and healthy dating relationship. This is supported by Debnam *et al.*⁶¹, which also recommended that partners should have trust for one another and build self-confidence.

Good interpersonal relationships among dating partners were an important protective factor against dating violence. In a similar study on honesty as a protective factor for dating violence in the USA, Debnam *et al.*⁶¹ found that good communication is a characteristic for a healthy relationship, and that this involves “openness” and transparency” They further stated that a healthy relationship is where the partner is always there to listen” to each other’s thoughts, feelings, and day-to-day concerns. This finding suggest that knowing these interpersonal risk and protective factors can assist partners, and university stakeholders achieve healthy relationships among dating partners and will help to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence by 2023, the United Nation global agenda.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cape Town Ethics and Research Committee (HREC REF:143/2016) prior to any communication with the Research and Publication Committee of the Nigerian University. Permission to gain access to students and student residences was obtained from the Dean of student's Affairs, and the highest executive Officers (HEOs) of the student's residences. Ethical principles and code of Declaration of Helsinki were adhered to⁴⁹. The importance of privacy and confidentiality of the information shared during the Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) were emphasised throughout the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study were given information sheets and asked to sign the informed consent indicating their voluntary agreement to participate in the study. They also signed the confidentiality statements confirming their agreement not to share information shared during the facilitated group discussion with others except for research purposes. All other ethical consideration for conducting qualitative research with students as vulnerable participants were maintained throughout the study. The researcher's role as a nurse researcher and student at the University of Cape town was explained to the participants to ensure their maximum cooperation and voluntarily decided to be part of the study group.

Conclusion

This study generated rich data, but because most researchers advocate that qualitative studies cannot be generalised, still, this study will inform university administrators and stakeholders in providing conducive environment for students on campus to have normal healthy relationships. Also, it can assist health personnel to provide care and support services for students at the Nigeria University and other universities elsewhere in the globe. And to develop appropriate University-based policies and programs to prevent and respond to dating violence and other gender-based violence.

Recommendations

Students should be given orientation in schools to avoid bad friends and peer influence but encourage positive friends as positive friendships can provide good foundation for successful adult relationships, as well as romantic relationships. Also, positive friendships provide support, companionship and sense of belonging.

Mentoring between older students and younger ones should be encouraged as they can serve as elders and adviser to younger ones.

Nigerian universities administrators and stakeholders to develop evidence-based policies and programs. Including subjects such as dating violence and gender equality built into the school curriculum of all educational levels to prevent dating violence and respond to other forms of gender-based violence. Thus help in supporting individuals develop healthy romantic relationship.

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