

Availability and Challenges of Guidance and Counseling Services for Female Postgraduate Students at the University of Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the availability and challenges of guidance and counselling services provided to female postgraduate students at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. The sample size was twenty-two participants consisting of 14 female postgraduate students, six counselors and two officials from the Dean of Student's office. Interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used to gather qualitative data. According to the findings, the majority of the female postgraduate students face numerous obstacles in achieving their educational goals. Thus, more awareness ought to be raised on how to access the available counselling services within the campus.

Keywords: *guidance, counseling, female postgraduate students*

Introduction

Various researchers report that female postgraduate students have a higher dropout rate than their male counterparts. Gender gaps in universities especially in Tanzania are seen in the processes related to application, admission, enrollment and completion of studies. Johnson (2011) studied women's access to higher education in Tanzania and identified that cultural and social influences hinged on traditional notions that women are responsible for caring, whereby such practices have reduced women's role to merely reproductive labour which require little formal or non-formal education. Female postgraduate students are aiming at upgrading their skills, knowledge and aptitude for the ultimate sake of knowledge mastery. Some are pursuing postgraduate education due to influence from their employers and significant others. However, in that endeavour female postgraduates are low in number than their male counterparts. As UNESCO (2017) proved that, despite universal recognition of the right to education for everyone, boys are still more likely to attend school than girls.

De Sousa, Moreira and Telles-Correia (2018) assessed the prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms to students and reported that a higher number of female university students seem to have more symptoms of anxiety and depression than males. Hence, to help female postgraduate students, universities were

advised to establish guidance and counselling services especially in dealing with different issues like stress, anxiety, depression, economic hardship, sexual relationship, divorce, health issues as well as academic challenges. The primary target was to help students attain their educational goals while they remained mentally fit.

Generally, any individual is self-insufficient and hence needs directives, help as well as verbal therapies for the socio-economic, cultural and political breakthroughs. It was reported by De Sousa et al. (2018) that high levels of anxiety and depression symptoms to female students in academic performance led to lack of psychological follow-up. This led to the urgent need to develop adequate means of support to improve students' well-being and mental health. In that vein, Mengistu (2020) provided that, guidance and counselling is sufficient and helpful when it helps clients effectively in issues related to academic, career and personal/social issues in the university platform. Hence, it is vital in minimizing students' problems by being preventive and proactive and focusing on the students' potential growth.

Although higher learning students generally have low utilization of the guidance and counseling, still the programme has paramount significance to students' academic achievements (Getachew, 2020). However, availability of counsellors as machinery that provides the pertinent services is still a problem. Even though, the government insists provision of guidance and counselling services. The situation is different in universities where there is a low number of counsellors in comparison to the number of students enrolled in universities, hence impacting the provision of effective counselling services (Rushahu, 2017). Despite the government's initiatives to avail guidance and counselling for universities, yet only minorities seek counselling from university professional counsellors. Literature suggest that the reasons behind this situation are related to lack of awareness, gender, age, culture, social mistrust, lack of confidence in counsellors, confidentiality issues, lack of immediate solutions and perception of the students (Kamunyu et al, 2016; Mengistu, 2020).

According to Khan et al. (2019) females in higher educational institutions face discrimination, aggravation and discouragement by their male counterparts. Moreover, women suffer a lot of losses of sexual and vocal harassment during studies. Additionally, experience shows that having many responsibilities attracts many psychological difficulties necessarily affecting educational arena for female postgraduate students (Frick et al., 2016). Female postgraduate students are mothers, wives, guardians and at the same time they possess other work responsibilities in their working places. Understood this way, Aluko (2005) argued that traditional responsibilities placed on women as wives and

mothers limit their chances of attaining higher education despite their struggle to attain educational goals.

Despite their number of enrolment being low compared to the male counterparts they struggle to accomplish their studies on the timeline. The University of Dar es Salaam [UDSM] (2021) points out that, only 28% out of 58 female doctoral students graduated their studies in November 2021 and only 47% out of 218 female master's degree students graduated their studies. On the basis of that, only 16% of the female doctoral graduates succeeded to finish on time, and only 2.2% of female master's students finished their studies on time. In that regard, Johnson (2011) maintained that female postgraduate students are aligning with the cultural norms and traditions which are impediments to women's educational success. On the other hand, cultural and social influences hinged on traditional notions that women are responsible for caring. Most societies across Africa are patriarchal and this implies that it is generally believed that a major woman's role is domestic chores and such requires little or no formal education (Alabi et al., 2019).

Moreover, the intermingling of different people and cultures creates various psychological problems like gender violence, sexual harassment and relationship break-ups. Furthermore, it may create poor academic performance, anxiety, depression, examination fever or fear and sense of giving up following bad academic results to mention but a few (De Sousa et al., (2018). All these and other non-mentioned psychological constraints are happening in university communities. Thus, the availability of guidance and counselling services not only helps clients to prevent and cure but also cope with those psychosocial challenges simply because there is no health without good mental health.

From this background, this paper explores the availability and challenges of guidance and counselling services provided to female postgraduate students at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. The study was guided by two research questions, which are:

- (i) How do female postgraduate students view the existence and accessibility of guidance and counselling services at the university?
- (ii) What are the challenges that hinder effective provision of guidance and counselling services to female postgraduate students at the university?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenology research design which relied on the lived experiences of female postgraduate students. A phenomenological study involves the investigation of lived

experiences of participants. Thus a phenomenological study limits the possibility of a researcher's presuppositions towards a certain phenomenon just because the researcher studies the phenomenon that he or she has knowledge about.

The study was conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam Mwl Nyerere Campus where besides the presence of the Dean of Students' Office, there is a well-established students' counselling services unit which provides formal counselling services for staff and students who are in need (UDSM, 2018). Given the complexity of this large institution, the presence of this counseling unit is expected to provide significant relief to potential customers.

The sample comprised 22 participants of whom 14 were female postgraduate students who had failed to complete their degree programmes within the university stipulated timeframe, 06 counsellors and 02 university management personnel. Purposeful and snowballing sampling techniques were used. Data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations and analyzed by content analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Availability of Guidance and Counselling Services at the University

The findings reported that female postgraduate students are aware of the existence of counselling and guidance services provided at the University of Dar es Salaam. However, postgraduate students expressed their opinion that they thought the available guidance and counselling services were meant for undergraduate students. They justified their opinion by associating it with the fact that most undergraduate students are very young, hence a need to guide and counsel them as opined by one female postgraduate student:

Actually, I think the services being provided by Dean of Students' Office are meant for undergraduate students like me and not for postgraduate students. Although I have some challenges, it is difficult to attend the counseling sessions as a postgraduate student.

It was noted that the student counselling services which were provided by the Dean of Students' Office were provided by paraprofessional counsellors as well as administrators. As with them, postgraduate students are adults and most of them are workers but currently students. These students needed a master's degree because it was either a requirement in their working institutions or needed to upgrade their education. It is widely documented that guidance and counselling is an integral part of academic success following socio-economic, cultural and psychological complications facing students (Sima, 2010). Thus, the

government of Tanzania through ministry responsible for education introduced guidance and counselling services at all levels of education for the sake of assisting students in their academic path and personal competencies. Thomas and Dey (2020) suggested that counsellors are accountable for individual counselling, advocacy, systemic improvements, the delivery of preventive education programmes, and career development. However, Broglia et al. (2021) maintained that most students access guidance and counselling services once they are subjected to a low level of well-being and function, high level of anxiety and depression, academic distress and trauma.

Awareness of the Need for Guidance and Counselling Services

Even though there is a provision of guidance and counselling services, still majority of female postgraduate students are not aware of their needs in relation to the counselling services provided at the university. Such a situation leads to various difficulties while they are at the university campus and some of them are misguided by their peers, and others are looking for motivational speakers in search of relief from the psychological constraints they face. Eventually, this may lead to dropping out, discontinuation from studies, freezing studies or spending more years to finalize their studies.

Female postgraduate students like any other human beings face psychological difficulties which affect their mental health. The difficulties may include grief/loss of their loved ones, break ups, divorces, socio-cultural issues, poor economic conditions, difficult working conditions, poor study habits, distress, anxiety, depression and unhappiness to mention but a few. The findings reported that the services are provided at the university but there is lack of awareness of the availability of services a phenomenon which leads to poor utilization of counselling services. The observations concurred with the study done by Browning et al. (2021) who reported that there are unknown numbers of students who have awareness, admire and significantly follow guidance and counselling services. Similarly, Wako (2016) maintained that university students have a low percentage of utilizing prevention and reduction of mental health services being provided regardless of the existence of the services at the university.

Low utilization of counselling services

It was further found that majority of female postgraduate students reported low utilization of guidance and counselling services at the university because most of them lacked knowledge and had negative perception towards guidance and counselling services. In addition, it was noted that students did not recognize that counselling is a professional field which needed experts to practice it. Students' interview showed that they viewed that every person could provide

counselling services which is why they preferred to seek help from people whom they believed would keep confidentiality of their issues instead of seeking help from professional counsellors. Based on this, Kamunyu, Ndungo and Wango (2016) provide that many university students keep their problems hidden and that some have other non-formal platforms such as peers as well as family members for expressing their problems. This is the scenario The results revealed that those who were aware of the university counselling services sought help primarily for academic, psychosocial, health, economic and financial concerns.

Lack of information about the accessibility of guidance and counselling services

From this study, it was revealed that students have little information about the accessibility of counselling services in the institution. This information is obtained during university orientation week, a period during which some students may have not yet reported or despite having reported they are not attending the orientation session for some reasons. The situation of missing further detailed and regular information about counselling services suggests that students had heard about counselling services but failed to connect how counselling services functioned normally. Findings from some interviews with students revealed that postgraduate students viewed counselling service as a special programme designed by higher learning institutions to help students get directives about what to do if they encountered academic problems which might lead to a student being discontinued, freeze studies and the like. A counselor attested that:

Many students who visit our office get detailed information that makes them become ambassadors to their fellow students about the usefulness of the counselling services we offer. We also go beyond by using students' union leaders and halls of residence wardens to encourage students to visit our counselling offices when they encounter problems.

As long as information is a powerful tool, universities should consider promoting the services through different channels for female postgraduate students to be aware of the services. It was thought that counselling information and materials being provided during orientation weeks were insufficient, and that regular information campaigns, training and workshops ought to be held to inform female postgraduate students about the availability of counselling services. This is in line with what Rushahu (2017) suggested that one key factor for encouraging students to utilize counselling services is the provision of information about the details of counselling services which may raise understanding of counselling services. Also in a study which was conducted

by Chen, Akpanudo and Hasler (2020), it was revealed that awareness of on-campus counselling services was found to be a mediating factor in attitude toward seeking mental health services. Therefore, guidance and counselling services help students to overcome different challenges that may result in severe psychosocial and mental health challenges.

Challenges Hindering Effective Provision of Guidance and Counseling Services for Female Postgraduate Students

Inadequacy of female counsellors

Female postgraduate students complained about the inadequacy of female counsellors at the university. The gender preference of the therapist is regarded as a major factor why female postgraduate students do not seek counseling services. Female students, for example, do not seek help from male counsellors for feminine concerns for fear of being labelled when they deal with the situation. As reported by one female postgraduate student that:

I would prefer to get counselling services from a female counsellor on feminine issues that require the attention of a woman. From my cultural background, there are issues which are difficult to expose to a man. So, I prefer a female counsellor to deal with my issues.

Counsellors admitted to feel the power of gender in counselling and strongly believed that for a client's condition to improve therapists should be warm, genuine and understanding. Currently, the researcher witnessed a shortage of female counsellors at the university such that sometimes female students who needed female counsellors had to access counselling services provided by male counsellors. In spite of that, it is important to consider the needs of clients in order for the client to be free and comfortable to discuss the issues during the session. Thus, while competence of counselors is of paramount importance, gender seems to be equally an important aspect of consideration.

In addition to that, it was observed that lack of female counsellors at the university led to lack of readiness to seek for counselling services for female postgraduate students. Kamunyu et al. (2016) provided that the gender preference of a counsellor is a key reason that makes students fail to seek for counselling services. Similarly, male students do not seek help for masculine-related issues from female counsellors lest they are seen as weak or unable to cope with issues. Furthermore, Ndungo and Wango (2020) found that 54% of students irrespective of their sex prefer female counsellors as compared to 27% that prefer male counsellors. Female counsellors are preferred for being caring,

nurturing and understanding. In addition, Maiyo and Owiye (2009) argued that it is common in educational institutions if the counsellor is of a different sex from the client's students to find it difficult to open up. The study advocates for the intake of counsellors to be gender-sensitive and to allocate the preferred gender according to the nature of problems existing. As a result, the client's choice of counsellor, as well as the order and content of therapeutic material provided in counseling is influenced by gender.

Inadequacy of elderly counsellors with more working experience

Some female postgraduate students insisted on the need for counsellors who are aged and experienced in counselling services in order for the client to trust them and thus, many students will access counselling services without much doubt. For example, one female postgraduate student argued that:

It is challenging, to attend the session with a counsellor who is younger than you and has never experienced any serious life challenge. For example, I am a married woman and I have some challenges in my marriage. I need a counsellor who is also aged and married; this is the one I will trust that she is aware of similar marriage challenges.

A similar claim was raised by another female postgraduate student:

Hey! look at me, I am more than 45 years and I want to complete my Master's dissertation before my retirement. It is difficult for me to be counselled by a counsellor as young as 25 years. I would prefer an old female counsellor who has rich life experiences.

It was noted that the most important aspect of counselling the postgraduate students is that counsellors need to be knowledgeable and expertised in counselling services. However, other issues such as gender, age, race, culture, ethnicity and religion can affect the outlook of a client seeking the services. It was thus observed that, elderly postgraduate students were reluctant to be counselled by young counsellors and were less ready to accept them as competent counsellors. Viewed slightly similarly, Rosen, Miller, Nakash, Halpern and Alegría (2012) reported that clients whose age were closely equal to that of the therapists developed a stronger bond at intake and this could be because people of the same age view life events with a similar perspective and have similar ideals. Moreover, while age can affect the counselling process the fact that counsellors are capable and experts in the field some students trusted their services.

Shortage of professional counsellors

It was revealed that the provision of guidance and counselling services to female postgraduate students at the university was inadequate. The insufficiency in the provision of guidance and counselling stems from various factors including: having few counsellors compared to the number of students, counsellors being paraprofessionals, lack of conducive rooms for counselling sessions, gender differences, religious or faith factors and age of the counselors. The findings reported that there were inadequate professional counsellors compared to the number of students such that provision of counselling services at the university is rendered ineffective. Guidance and counselling services are regarded as reputable services since they carry the fate of socio-economic and cultural lives of the clients. In consideration of the respectability of the services, it is supposed to be provided by specialized practitioners who are knowledgeable and abide by ethical considerations and the professional code of conduct that is governing the services. In recognition of the significance of the services, the university has currently employed counsellors who have expertise in counselling psychology and mental health issues, and concurrently established a unit that is specifically dedicated for counselling services with professional counsellors.

Inadequate physical resources

Inadequacy of physical facilities such as counseling rooms, waiting rooms, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities and education and training materials affects the efficacy of provision of guidance and counselling services at the university. The researcher witnessed absence of rooms for counselling services like a private office, waiting rooms for clients, absence of ICT facilities, and brochures. Inadequate physical facilities are among the barriers for female postgraduate students to access counselling services. The findings are aligned with those from Boitt (2016) who observed that lack of physical facilities brought challenges to the provision of quality guidance and counselling services. Counselling is a discipline that requires a higher level of privacy and confidentiality, thus having good and conducive physical facilities results in the provision of effective services.

Lack of online counselling services

Due to fear of being labelled when attending counselling services, other students suggested using online counselling services for them to be comfortably accessing the services as echoed by one student:

Due to the culture of silence and taboos, I think the university, as well as the Counselling Unit, could think of using online counselling services to serve the majority of clients who fear being identified and labelled for attending services.

However, few female postgraduate students indicated to be aware of the existing counselling services and they admitted of being counselled for various challenges facing them at the university. Others attended services provided by significant others such as friends, family members and faith-based leaders. It was noted that at first, it was difficult for them to attend the counselling services due to fear of breaching confidentiality and being labelled. The finding is supported by Myers (2012) who advocates for using e-counselling which is an electronic version of counselling in which a qualified and experienced counsellor can work with clients from any distance as long as the clients have access to the internet and they are motivated to engage in the counseling process.

Fear of being labelled

The findings revealed that some female postgraduate students were hesitant to access guidance and counselling services for fear of being labelled by their colleagues. They have the perception that once one accesses counselling services they could be labelled by peers as possessing many psychological problems as complained by one student:

Currently, issues of mental health in Tanzania have become more serious and many people think if you have a psychological issue you become labelled as a mentally ill person. That is why I am afraid of attending counselling sessions for fear of simply being labelled.

Due to that situation, female postgraduate students keep silent about many psychological problems that actually need therapies. On the other hand, Wango (2018) pointed out that, labelling and categorization are almost done by the time the client seeks therapy. The finding also concurs with Mugai et al. (2019) who pointed out that, perceived counsellors' knowledge power to effect counselling sessions is an influence applicable in changing values, opinions, behaviours, skills, perceptions, emotional judgment, feeling better, reduced anxiety and life adjustments with expected outcomes to the potential clients.

Socio-cultural setbacks

Female postgraduate students fail to seek guidance and counselling services due to the cultural setbacks rooted in their traditional norms. Some traditions view that females are not obliged to reveal their secrets to counsellors unless they are family members. Some believe that the challenges they faced are associated with traditional beliefs which are called witchcraft. Hence, they are regarded as requiring traditional approaches for solving them rather than

opting for counselling services. It was complained by one female postgraduate student as follows:

As you know, sometimes our culture affects our families. For example, I was forced by my husband to bear a child while pursuing my studies. This was a challenging to me and sometimes I feel frustrated by either academic or family matters. I sometimes feel certain signs of facing death. There was a time I went to discuss this challenge with my family, but they simply told me, that I am a woman and my role is to take care of my husband and family.

Due to the culture of silence, some people believe that going to a professional counsellor means they are weak-minded and incapable of dealing with life challenges. They hesitate being labelled as insane or crazy. But some people fear being regarded as weak among their peers if they choose to talk to someone like a counselor about their challenges. The socio-cultural principles hamper females' success in postgraduate studies in higher learning institutions. So, there is a high need for awareness campaigns on mental health issues for students to access confidently the counselling services at the university. The finding is supported by Sima (2010) who revealed that cultural barriers in terms of openness imply a need for community sensitization on guidance and counselling services and how it works.

Conclusions

The study concludes that female postgraduate students are generally aware of the counselling services being provided at the university but have negative perceptions when it comes to the utilization of such services. Inadequate utilization of counselling services at the university is attributed to various factors such as a lack of regular in-depth information on the provision of the services, inadequate professional counsellors' especially female counsellors, inadequate physical resources and the pervasiveness of the culture of silence. Further, it is therefore imperative for all stakeholders within the educational sector, other institutions, families and society at large to strategize on how to increase access of female postgraduate students to the available guidance and counselling services by sensitively taking care of the diverse needs of the female postgraduate students.

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