

# MeToo movement and sexual violence in women: A qualitative study from Zambia

Choolwe Mphanza Muzyamba (✉ [muzyamba@merit.unu.edu](mailto:muzyamba@merit.unu.edu))

---

Research

**Keywords:** MeToo, Sexual-violence, Zambia

**Posted Date:** April 20th, 2020

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-22249/v1>

**License:**  This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

---

# Abstract

## Background

Despite the dominance of the #MeToo movement in the fight against sexual violence around the world, the experiences of most vulnerable women in countries like Zambia have been generally ignored in literature. Little is known about how useful this movement is to these women. Thus the aim of this study is to fill this gap by investigating the usefulness of the #MeToo movement as a tool for handling sexual violence among women in Zambia.

## Methods

The study makes use of Focus Group Discussion. It involves a sample size of 80 participants. All participants had indicated that they had suffered sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. In the recruitment process, we ensured diversity in terms of age, marital status, employment status, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

## Results

There is no doubt that the MeToo movement is a useful catalysts for highlighting the severity of sexual violence and creating opportunities of redress in Zambia. However, currently its adoption and implementation seems to be blind to the ways privilege and subordination interact with race, gender, class, and other characteristics to sustain sexual violence. The movement also seems to pay little attention to the various ways the problematic patriarchal norms in Zambia are interwoven with women's economic survival strategies.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that rather than definitively establishing the MeToo movement as an incontestable good (as has been the case in most feminist literature) or as useless because it ignores economic and cultural realities as argued by its critics our findings instead demonstrate the diversity of how this movement is locally viewed by marginalized women in Zambia and also illustrates the nuance, complexity and multidimensionality of how the movement is characterized. In this regard, our findings speak to the folly of a 'one-size-fits-all' standardized universalization of the MeToo movement.

## Plain English Summary

By using a qualitative study, the aim of this study is to investigate the usefulness of the #MeToo movement as a tool for handling sexual violence among women in Zambia. Our findings suggest that rather than definitively establishing the MeToo movement as an incontestable good or as useless because it ignores cultural realities as argued by its critics, our findings demonstrate the diversity of how this movement is locally viewed and also illustrates the complexity and multidimensionality of how it is

characterized in Zambia. Our findings thus speak to the folly of a 'one-size-fits-all' standardized universalization of the MeToo move.

## Background

Zambia has been cited as one of the countries with high rates of sexual violence against women [2, 3]. The World Health Organization (2002) defines Sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion" [3, p. 149, 4]. In 2017, almost 90% of women in Zambia stated that they had at one time or the other experienced sexual violence [4, 2]. Scholars have shown that the wide-spread sexual violence in Zambia is rooted in persistent cultural, religious and historical institutions of oppression against women [5, 1, 4, 6]. To respond to such rampant sexual violence against women, there has been calls to embrace the #MeToo movement against sexual violence which has been popularized around the world. The movement is said to have been started by a US-based feminist named Tarana Burke in 2006 as a means of giving voice to survivors of sexual violence. The movement is centered around consciousness-raising among survivors of sexual violence in order to allow them identify, discuss, heal, report and seek justice for their suffering. It is also seen as a platform for preventing potential sexual violence, dismantling oppressive patriarchal institutions and promoting equality between men and women [6, 7].

The #MeToo movement has divided scholars with one strand arguing for and another against it. Those who call for the adoption and embracement of the movement hold that the movement is an important safe platform within harmful misogynistic spaces for survivors to shape, articulate and combat sexual violence [7, 6, 8]. The movement is also credited for raising awareness on a previously-silent subject of sexual violence, and for catalyzing the reformulation of several workplace policies regarding sexual harassment management [6]. On the other hand, there are other scholars who are critical of the #MeToo movement [9, 10]. Particularly, they posit that the #MeToo movement has been applied in a simplistic and neocolonial manner which is devoid of non-western experiences and realities [10]. The movement has been accused of perpetuating a narrow version of how and why sexual violence persists. It is not alive to the fact that sexual violence doesn't just persist because of patriarchy but also because of various structural factors linked to race, poverty, conflict, area of residence, and sexual orientation [10, 11]. Some of these realities are alien to middle and upper class white women in the west who have been the biggest champions and beneficiaries of the movement [10]. Thus the movement is essentially seen as serving and mostly articulating western, middle class and white women's experiences of sexual violence and in the process ignoring historical accounts of black African women's systemic experiences with sexual violence [10]. Experiences of sexual violence are often experienced and interpreted in context-specific ways; mostly inextricably linked to a victim's social network, networks of survival, cultural norms, history, and existing law enforcement institutions, factors which are context-specific [12]. Thus scholars from this school of thought argue that a one-size-fits-all application of the #MeToo movement is incapable of achieving its intended goals in non-western settings [12].

Despite the dominance of the #MeToo movement in the fight against sexual violence around the world, the experiences of most vulnerable women in countries like Zambia have been generally ignored in literature. Little is known about how useful this movement is to these women. Thus the aim of this study is to fill this gap by investigating the usefulness of the #MeToo movement as a tool for handling sexual violence among women in Zambia.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is incurred on the Social Representation Theory (SRT). The SRT is a social psychological theory that postulates that across time and space, a new phenomenon or intervention derives its relevance in a given society through its assimilation, acceptance and appropriation within society. More specifically, the new phenomenon is given meaning and embraced through shared experiences among constitutes of that society [9]. The new social phenomenon finds its footing in society through interaction and sharing of experiences among society members. This process allows it to be assimilated and cemented into society as part of social reality [9]. If people find it to lack social relevance in their context, they normally reject it and brand it as foreign. It is for this reason that the SRT has become a useful tool to understand the usefulness of new interventions from the perspectives of the people they are meant to serve. The tool helps to explicate the different ways society either accepts or rejects a new social phenomenon. The STR further indicates that in order to understand the impact, experience and relevance of a given social phenomenon (in our case the #MeToo movement), it is important to investigate local people's interpretation and characterization of this phenomenon [13, 14, 15]. Given the foregoing, we thus use this theory heuristically to guide our investigation, interpretation and presentation of findings. In this sense, the SRT allows us to investigate in what ways local women in Zambia find the #MeToo useful including its limitations in the fight against sexual violence.

## Methods

### Ethical clearance

A written ethical clearance was sort before the start of the study from two ethical clearance institutions in Zambia, namely; the National Health Research Authority of Zambia (NHRAZ), and the Zambian *ERES CONVERGE IRB*. We also obtained written informed consent from participants before the start of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In this regard, our participants were fully informed of the objective of the study and their right to opt out at any time of the study should they feel the need to do so.

### Study site

We conducted the study in Lusaka city which is the political and economic capital of Zambia. Lusaka has a population of around 1.7 million people and also retains some of the highest sexual violence rates in the country [16]. It is also the most ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse city in Zambia, which allows us to draw participants with a diverse background to enrich our findings. It is for this reason that we selected Lusaka as a case study.

## Sampling

Our participants were recruited by use of convenient and purposive sampling techniques. In total, 80 women were selected to take part in this study. All participants had indicated that they had suffered sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. In the recruitment process, we ensured diversity in terms of age, marital status, employment status, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

## Data collection

A total of 8 different FGDs were held separately in different parts of Lusaka (in the following suburbs: Woodlands, Chaisa, Misisi, Kanayama, Matero, Kabwata, Mtendere, Chilenje). A total of 8 FGDs each containing 10 participants in each of the suburbs were conducted. The FGDs were conducted in the local language of Chinyanja and English was used where possible. An FGD guide was used to guide the discussions. As guided by the SRT framework, the guide included about 12 general questions ranging from experience with sexual violence, knowledge of the #MeToo movement, opinions on its relevance to their cause, including limitations. Follow-up questions were also asked ensure thorough discussions.

## Analysis

As guided by the SRT framework, we conducted thematic analysis technique with the help of NVivo software to analyze the data. Thematic analysis technique is a system of analysis used to examine and describe various phenomenon by magnifying emerging themes arising from the data [10]. In this sense, similar opinions expressed by participants were clustered together to form global themes. The summary of the results arising from our data analysis are presented in table 1.

## Results

Our participants highlighted the complex interplay of the usefulness of the MeToo movement as a tool for fighting sexual violence in Zambia. In general, results are divided into two broad categories; positive and negative characterization of the usefulness of the movement.

Those that praised the movement argued that it was the most effective platform thus far for exposing endemic sexual violence in Zambia. The movement was credited for shedding light on deep-rooted, normalized and mostly-tolerated forms of sexual violence within the Zambian society. Participants

highlighted how in many cases survivors of sexual violence were silenced by an oppressive culture that seeks to undermine and shame survivors and emasculate perpetrators of sexual violence who are usually males. The Zambian society is a breeding ground for various forms of sexual violence due to its patriarchal nature, and for a long time, it had concealed the actual rates and seriousness of the problem of sexual violence. The MeToo movement has thus been critical in exposing this vice and has in the process attracted long-over-due attention on the matter. This is highlighted by sentiments of one of our participants.

*"Look, women in this country have been either raped, cat-called, inappropriately touched in public spaces for too long. How many women do we know who have been exposed to these harmful acts and how many have spoken up? It's only now that we are having the voice to show and expose how rotten our society is and how it has concealed this harmful practice for too long"*

Our participants also revealed that the movement was key in opening up conversations of how society had historically and systematically oppressed women. They pointed out that the Zambian society was structured to benefit men both socially and economically, while women's needs and rights were systematically ignored from the country's social consciousness. The MeToo movement however provided an opportunity for the country to introspect, investigate and begin conversations on the rights and plight of women in society. The movement also highlighted and strengthened avenues for enforcement and reporting of any abuse cases.

*"We are now discussing the plight of women in Zambia, yet not long ago, it was taboo to even have such conversations. It was taken for granted that we are supposed to be second class citizens while men continue to enjoy all the privileges in this country. Things are changing now.."*

It was also clear that the MeToo movement had provided fertile ground to discuss the vulnerability of women vis-à-vis HIV transmission as well as various ways to enhance prevention thereof. Some of our participants pointed out that HIV was high among women because of high rates of within-family rape cases, and entrenched male-to-woman domination both sexually and socially. The movement thus helped to empower women, give them a voice to determine sexual terms including how to protect themselves against HIV.

*"HIV is high in this country. And we know that women have the highest rates. Don't you think the fact that we are not allowed to determine sexual terms culturally affects our ability to protect ourselves? If not for anything, maybe the MeToo can save us from dangerous sexual oppression"*

Despite the positive characterization of the MeToo movement by our participants, some of them raised some worries regarding the various ways it contradicted the Zambian realities. For example, some women contested that the movement was reminiscent of a 'whip' against black men in the hands of mostly white and elite women in society. By calling out and standing up to males, the movement was accused of endangering the survival mechanism and structures of vulnerable women who mostly depended on their male counterparts for their daily sustenance.

*"It is mostly women with money who are encouraging other vulnerable women to stand up to their husbands while forgetting that it is the same husbands who pay the bills, child care, buy food and send kids to school. So if my husband is jailed, who will take care of me and my kids"*

It was further contended that, the movement was unZambian, neocolonial and blind to the cultural and religious fabric present in the country. In its application, the movement was accused of contradicting and threatening the traditional and sacred male-to-female relational norms in a move they branded "hegemonic imposition of western ideals". Thus the movement struggled to find local buy-in among women who saw it as alien.

*"See, they have been doing this for a long time. They know it all and we are just supposed to follow whatever they say even when it contradicts our culture and traditions. We are fashioned to always embrace anything coming from the West. What about our culture?"*

While agreeing with the spirit behind the movement and its symbolic importance, other participants questioned its overly confrontational mode of application. They held that change in sexual violence could not be sustainably achieved by excluding the perpetrators of the vice from the conversation, especially that men still held a lot of power in society. They thus called for a type of change process that prioritized cooperation rather than confrontation, a type of change that created allies rather than enemies.

*"In the end we have to all work together; men and women. Men need to be part of the process so that they don't think this is the fight for women only. They have a role to play since they are known to be head of households. We don't have to fight, we need to work together"*

## **Discussion**

With the help of the SRT, our study has reviewed how complex, nuanced and multiplex the MeToo movement is in addressing sexual violence in Zambia.

Firstly, our results indicate that the MeToo movement has exposed the severity and scope of sexual violence in Zambia. It has illuminated the hierarchical, male-dominated culture that has for a long time incubated and embraced sexual violence without holding perpetrators accountable. The movement has made visible women's articulation of their agency to resist both sexual violence on its own terms and via its consequences which can, if left unchecked cause transmission of HIV. The MeToo movement in Zambia seems to have played a huge role in raising consciousness among oppressed women and at the same time mobilized them into forming political and cultural cohorts which are now debating, confronting sexual violence including taking far-ranging actions to guarantee reproductive rights for women. This process has also helped open up response networks serving as preventative and punitive mechanisms within legal, political and social spaces in Zambia. The reporting mechanisms have been strengthened and so have the enforcement structures such as the police and courts of law in their response to sexual violence [18]. These findings are inline with the evidence coming from other parts of Africa. For example, in South Africa, the movement enabled the creation of safe spaces for women to

speak out, seek protection and justice against sexual violence [19]. The foregoing evidence solidifies claims of the catalyzing nature of the MeToo movement across marginalized women around the world. Within this context, the movement has established itself as unifying and useful weapon for marginalized women in Zambia to dislodge and destabilize patriarchy and systematic sexual violence against them.

While the MeToo movement returns a lot of support among our participants, they however criticized it for being blind to the intersection of race, class and sexual violence, for being overly-confrontational in its response and for lacking contextual-appropriation.

Specifically, while our participants remain opposed to sexual violence, they cautioned that the MeToo movement was reminiscent of an opportunistic 'whip' in the hands of mostly powerful middle class white women used to 'punish' black men. It seemed to lack genuine emancipatory power for black women whose susceptibility to sexual violence was not only tied to their gender, but also because of their race and social class. This also meant that the movement seemed unaware that in Zambia, traditionally-mandated relationships between men and women were usually the only source of economic survival available to these women [14]. Men in Zambia have privileged control and access to wealth[14] such that without them (be they oppressive), women would be destitute. This is similar to findings from other studies[12, 10, 19, 20] which argue that in most parts of Africa, the MeToo movement usually threatens the survival mechanisms of women without providing them with alternatives. Relatedly, the MeToo movement has been accused of being a neocolonial project bent on westernizing and 'teaching' the rest of the world how to resist and combat sexual violence despite the existence of different struggles and realities in different contexts. Our results, like many other findings elsewhere [21, 14, 19, 22] seem to suggest that locally-informed responses to sexual violence that fit the realities and needs of Zambian women would be more sustainable.

There is no doubt that the MeToo movement is a useful catalysts for highlighting the severity of sexual violence and creating opportunities of redress in Zambia. However, currently its adoption and implementation seems to be blind to the ways privilege and subordination interact with race, gender, class, and other characteristics to sustain sexual violence. The movement also seems to pay little attention to the various ways the problematic patriarchal norms in Zambia are interwoven with women's economic survival strategies. Thus in order to maximize the benefits of the MeToo movement, there is need for advocates of the movement to desist from universalizing and applying it as a one-size-fits-all approach. Our findings indicate that there is need for careful dialogue between advocates and intended beneficiaries of the movement; this means taking full cognizance of different intersectional and multidimensional barriers and opportunities in context-specific ways in order to develop more health-enhancing ways of 'being, seeing, and doing' within the continuum of sexual violence response.

## Limitations

Due to limited funds, our results are based only on findings from Lusaka alone. We could not conduct a country-wide study to have more representative responses. However, despite that, our findings provide

useful insights in understanding the usefulness of the MeToo movement in addressing sexual violence in countries like Zambia with high sexual violence cases.

## Conclusions

Our study set out to investigate the usefulness of the MeToo movement as a response to sexual violence in Zambia. With the help of the SRT, our findings indicate that the approach is a useful catalysts for highlighting the severity of sexual violence and for creating opportunities of redress among marginalized women. However, at the same time, it is blind to the varying context-specific reasons why sexual violence has been sustained in Zambia. Thus rather than definitively establishing the MeToo movement as an incontestable good (as has been the case in most feminist literature) [7, 6, 8], or as useless because it ignores economic and cultural realities as argued by its critics [10, 12, 21, 22], our findings instead demonstrate the diversity of how this movement is locally viewed by marginalized women in Zambia and also illustrates the nuance, complexity and multidimensionality of how the movement is characterized. In this regard, our findings speak to the folly of a 'one-size-fits-all' standardized universalization of the MeToo movement.

## Abbreviations

### **FGD**

focused group discussion

### **HIV**

human immunodeficiency virus

### **SSA**

Sub-Saharan Africa

### **STR**

Social Representation Theory

### **WHO**

World Health Organization

### **UN**

United Nations

## Declarations

### Availability of data and materials

The data generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the fact that they contain people's private information including their HIV status but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

We obtained written ethical clearance from the National Health Research Authority of Zambia. Other than that, during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), we collected written informed consent from the participants before participation, and at the same time, participants were made aware of their right to discontinue their participation at any point should they wish to.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests

Funding

The study was self-funded.

Authors' contributions

CM carried out all aspects of this study's design, data acquisition, analysis and interpretation, drafted the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements

We like to acknowledge the assistance by local organizers of focus group discussions.

## References

[1] J. Musune, F. Gadsen and T. Kusanthan, "Factors Influencing Intimate Partner Violence against Men in Lusaka, Zambia," Research Academy of Social Sciences, 2016.

[2] WHO, "Violence against women," WHO, Geneva, 2017.

[3] WHO, "World report on violence and health," WHO, Geneva, 2002.

[4] WHO, "Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence," WHO, Geneva, 2013.

[5] Lusaka-times, "Zambia has the highest cases of violence against women in Southern Africa," Lusaka Times , 2013.

[6] W. M. K. Fageeh, "Factors associated with domestic violence: a cross-sectional survey among women in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia," Health Policy, 2014.

[7] WLSA, "They are Destroying our Futures: Sexual Violence Against girls in Zambian schools," Cornell Law School, Ithaca, 2012.

[8] J. M. Holroyd-Leduc and S. E. Straus, "#MeToo and the medical profession," Canadian Medical Association Journal, vol. 190, no. 33, 2018.

- [9] E. Choo, C. Byington, N. Johnson and R. Jagsi, "From #MeToo to #TimesUp in health care: can a culture of accountability end inequity and harassment?," *Lancet*, vol. 9, no. 393, pp. 499-502, 2019.
- [10] C. Jewett, "Women in medicine shout #MeToo about sexual harassment at work," *The Washington Post*, 2018.
- [11] Y. Ram, "Metoo and tourism: a systematic review," *Current Issues in tourism* , 2019.
- [12] T. F. Ajayi, "#MeToo, Africa and the politics of transnational activism," *Africa is a country* , 2018.
- [13] *Harvard-Business-Review*, "The #MeToo Backlash," 2019 .
- [14] Y. Akinbobola, "Neoliberal feminism in Africa," *Eurozine*, 2019.
- [15] S. Moscovici, "the history and actuality of social representations," In U. Flick (Ed) *The psychology of the social*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- [16] C. Muzyamba, E. Broaddus and C. Campbell, "You cannot eat rights": a qualitative study of views by Zambian HIV-vulnerable women, youth and MSM on human rights as public health tools," *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 15, no. 26, 2015.
- [17] C. Muzyamba, W. Groot, S. Tomini and M. Pavlova, "Community mobilization and maternal Care of Women Living with HIV in poor settings: the case of Mfuwe, Zambia," *BMC Health Services*, vol. 18, no. 155, 2018.
- [18] ZDH, "Zambia Demographic Health Survey," United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Lusaka, 2013.
- [19] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative research in psycholog*, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 77–101, 2006.
- [20] UN-Africa-Rebawal, "Zambia: Fighting gender-based violence as fresh cases continue to emerge," United Nations, Lusaka, 2019.
- [21] A. Brajanac, "Addressing intersectionality in the #MeToo movement-A case study of women's mobilization under the #MeToo movement in the postcolonial context of South Africa," *Goterborgs Universitet: Department of Political Science, Goterborg*, 2019.
- [22] C. Hemmings, "Resisting popular feminisms: gender, sexuality and the lure of the modern," *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2018.
- [23] R. Lukose, "Decolonizing Feminism in the #MeToo Era," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 34-52, 2018.

[24] A. Onwuachi-Willig, "What About #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement," THE YALE LAW JOURNAL FORUM, 2018.

## Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [summaryofqualitativereults.docx](#)