

# “Semester Marriages” and the Unintended Psycho-Social Challenges within Institutions of Higher Learning: Implications for Social Work Practice

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**Abstract:** The sexual economy prevalent within universities, as well as how young people perceive, interpret, and experience their sexuality, present complex dynamics, which, if not handled with great emotional intelligence, may disrupt their educational aspirations. This paper investigates the psycho-social implications of “semester marriages” within institutions of higher learning. Guided by principles of the qualitative approach and the theory of planned action, the paper disinterred that students experienced intense regret and guilt as a result of backstreet abortions. Soul-tie complications emanating from sharing the “wife-husband” bond also made it difficult for some students to move on after a breakup, leading to disruptions in their educational focus. In extreme cases, such an inability to deal with the adverse effects of “semester marriages” culminated in crimes of passion. The paper desists from pathologizing the “semester marriages” phenomenon and advocates for the strengthening of psycho-social support modalities within university settings to increase the accessibility and visibility of therapeutic services through a school social work model. Furthermore, universities, in partnership with other relevant stakeholders, are urged to prioritize sexual and reproductive education and services among the youth as provided for in the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 to impart life skills that can equip students to make informed sexual and reproductive decisions.

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## Introduction and Background

When young people leave home for university, they look forward to an independent life where the spying eyes of their parents and guardians cannot reach (Gukurume 2011; Quinlivan 2018; Naser et al. 2022). University life offers such a liberal environment with unlimited freedom, unlike in high school, where teachers are also *in loco parentis*. In the institutions of higher learning, students are treated as adults responsible for their welfare with minimum supervision on issues such as dressing, behavior, and relational interactions. That is a period characterized by great freedom of expression, experimentation, and trial and error endeavors. In an African nation such as Zimbabwe, where the grip of parental control is still tight (Mapuranga 2010; Makhubele, Malesa, and Shika 2018), transitioning to university can be perceived by young people as a period of living life. Life at “uni” or “varsity,” as the youth often call it,

can thus be a bitter-sweet moment for the young people as the excitement of being free can also be coupled with fear of various responsibilities and the unknown. That is because the university environment offers various experiences that can enhance or hinder one’s academic aspirations, depending on how one perceives and experiences university life. Simbarashe Gukurume (2022) reveals that the university ecosystem provides a “sexual economy” for sexual transactions of different etiologies, making it a place of various experiences.

At the hierarchy of all the fantasies young people look forward to at varsity is the exploration of their sexuality and romantic relationships (Adam and Mutongi 2007; Gukurume 2011; Quinlivan 2018; Naser et al. 2022). That is in line with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe (2013), which allows the youth to enjoy their sexual and reproductive rights. Freedom from parents,

teachers, and other authoritarian figures allows the youth in a university setting to experiment with their romantic relationships. That has seen the prevalence of a phenomenon known as “semester marriages” within institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. While that living arrangement greatly resembles cohabitation, “semester marriage” is between a student and another student, often limited to time and space (Gumbo 2020). It also diverts from the sex-for-marks phenomenon, which aligns more with the sexual harassment of disadvantaged students, mostly females, by authority figures within the university system (Mafa and Simango 2021; Gukurume 2022). “Semester marriages” borrow some characteristics from what Victor Muzvidziwa (2002) termed *kuchaya mapoto*, which is a loosely structured transactional living arrangement characterized by urgency. On the other hand, the relevance of “semester marriages” is contextualized to the semester and also confined within university models of accommodation. It is a form of transactional and temporary living arrangement where the currency goes beyond cash to include other non-monetary benefits such as accommodation, sex, domestic benefits (cooking and laundry), as well as assistance with academic assignments. Therefore, a “semester marriage” will be defined here as a temporary living arrangement by students characterized by a sexual relationship and other mutual benefits but only relevant during the semester calendar. Thus, those specific characteristics bring about unique dynamics as different variables that influence this form of transactional arrangement.

The notion of cohabitation and “semester marriages” may not be an area of interest and contention in the Global North due to a different cultural orientation (Quinlivan 2018). Emily McCave (2007) highlights that the subject of sexuality in Western

countries is embraced early through comprehensive sexual education. Jenny Higgins and colleagues (2022) further clarify that in the US, parents openly discuss sexuality issues, which helps in desensitizing the subject, as well as providing young people, including those within institutions of higher learning, with the knowledge they require to enjoy their sexual rights. However, in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, the phenomenon of sexuality is shrouded by embarrassing comments and normlessness where pre-marital sexual relations are somewhat considered a taboo (Mapuranga 2010; Gesinde, Adejumo, and Ariyo 2013). Through the processes of cultural erosion, westernization, and modernization thought, liberal sexual relations are slowly filtering into African societies, which once subscribed to a conservative approach to sexuality and sexual relations (Muzvidziwa 2002; Kang’ethe and Mafa 2014). Zimbabwean communities are not immune to that infiltration as the world is becoming a global village, borrowing behavioral traits from one cultural orientation to the other. Universities as subsets of the larger society have also resembled those characteristics through the prevalence of “semester marriages” arrangements.

Many studies on the cohabitation of students have identified some push factors such as lack of university accommodation (Kang’ethe and Mafa 2014; Svodziwa and Kurete 2017), poverty (Bhatasara 2011; Gumbo 2020), and a materialistic mindset (Masvawure 2010; Gukurume 2011), among others. In agreement, Ezebumwa Nwokocha (2007) states that sex has, for a long time, been used as a transacting currency to propel people ahead in various endeavors. Sex has been used to secure a job, a promotion, and to access other advantages. It is, therefore, not strange that “semester marriages” can be used to somehow facilitate educational aspirations.

Simbarashe Gukurume’s (2022) findings reveal that students struggling with their assignments may engage in transactional relations with senior students to get academic assistance. A participant reveals, “When she needs help, like with assignments and all, after finishing her assignment, I hit that thing” (Gukurume 2022). It validates that the money factor alone is inadequate to explain the existence of other non-monetary forms of benefits enjoyed in some forms of transactional relationships, such as “semester marriages.” Since various pull and push factors influence human behavior, there are also various reasons why such living arrangements may be adopted by students.

Other studies have also explored risky factors such as heightened susceptibility to HIV/AIDS infections (Makhubele et al. 2018; Gumbo 2020) and social aftermaths such as unintended pregnancies (Masvawure 2010; Svodziwa and Kurete 2017). Numerous attempts have been made at micro, meso, and macro levels of intervention to respond to those challenges. Some NGOs, such as SAYWHAT, have registered their presence within institutions of higher learning to provide sexual and reproductive health services. However, most of those interventions rely on the peer-to-peer model, which means that students are the main actors in providing the services. While that is a welcome and much-needed development because the model has its merits, the evidence on the ground suggests the presence of loopholes and gaps that need strengthening to instill a sense of responsibility as the youth enjoy their sexual rights (Muchabaiwa and Mbonigaba 2019; Mafa and Simango 2021). That may be attributed to the fact that the students lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and time to adequately offer counseling services, as well as sexual and reproductive health services.

In as much as social deviancy theorists may focus on the morality of “semester marriages” (Kamerman and Kahn 1988), it is critical to underscore that the paper does not intend to debate the moral and cultural appropriateness of the phenomenon. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe (2013), everybody over the age of 18 years, inclusive of the youth, has the right to decide whether to engage in sexual activities or not and also to select a sexual partner, among other rights. Therefore, the researchers believe that an outright pathological view of that living arrangement can only hinder the needed progressive discussions that can contribute to the formulation of modalities and interventions that can cushion youngsters from the unintended consequences of “semester marriages.” That is with the understanding and conviction that a decision to enter such a living arrangement is usually underpinned by multi-factorial etiologies, which may manifest as pull and push factors. Therefore, a shift from a pathological fixation point of view is necessary for sustainable and inclusive solutions.

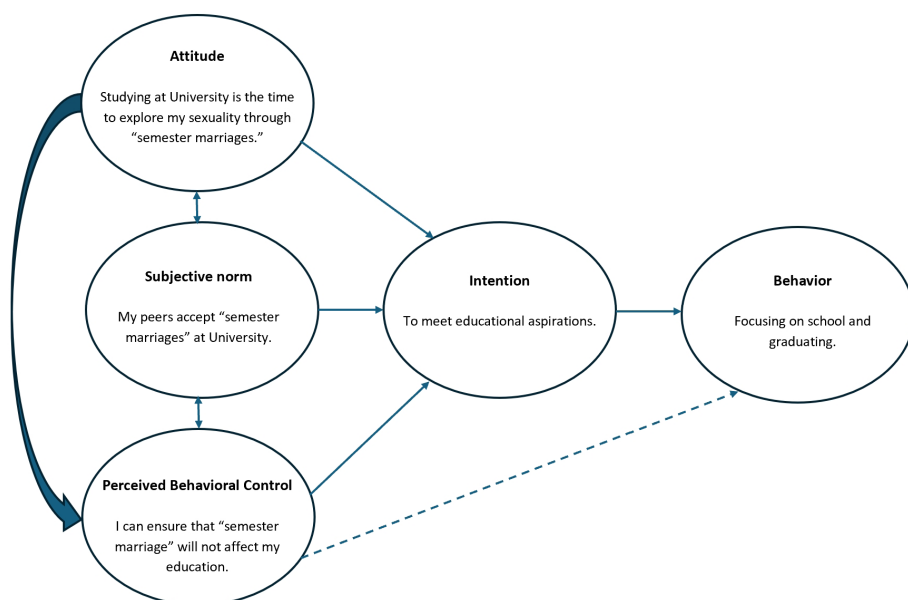
While it is salient to look at various interlocking variables underpinning “semester marriages” for sustainable solutions and intervention, there seems to be an informational gap regarding the psycho-emotional consequences associated with that living arrangement among university students. From a social work perspective, mental health and emotional tenacity are vital to safeguard the advancement of students’ academic pursuits as the person is always viewed through holistic lenses (Mele, Pels, and Polese 2010). That justifies the interrogation of the “semester marriages” phenomenon through social work lenses to suggest modalities that will strengthen students’ emotional and mental muscles as vehicles and catalysts to the realization of their academic prospects.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

The study was informed by Icek Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior. The theory postulates that behavioral attainment can be predicted by analyzing personal attitudes, perceived behavioral control, social norms, as well as behavioral intention (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). It means that an individual’s decision to engage in specific behavior, such as a “semester marriage” arrangement, is influenced by their intentions in doing so, for example, the desire to meet their educational aspirations. Also, if the perceived subjective norms are regarded as positive, for instance, if the peers accept a “semester marriage” living arrangement, students are likely to engage in the behavior. Therefore, various behaviors meant to facilitate and translate to the planned outcome lie in planning to achieve educational as-

pirations. For example, a “semester marriage” will become a route leading to a desired outcome. In this study, the school social work model is proposed as a modality to equip university students to navigate through possible existential difficulties that are resident within the university environment, including their sexual experiences that may be through “semester marriages.” Perceived behavioral control and self-efficacy, that is, the extent to which a person engaging in “semester marriages” believes they have control over their sexual experiences and the consequences thereof, also determine whether they continue or not. However, it is critical to note that, due to varying psychological, social, economic, and biological differences, the said theory may not fully capture the complexity of human behavior. An illustrative example of the utility of the planned action theory is shown below.

Figure 1. Theory of planned behavior



Source: Self-elaboration based on Ajzen (1985).

## Methodology

This section offers details of the research design and the approach used in the study. The methods of data collection, tools, and analysis are also explored.

### Specific Research Question

What are the psycho-social challenges associated with “semester marriages” within public universities in Zimbabwe?

### Research Approach and Design

The paper employed a qualitative approach because of its exploratory and exhaustive strength (Creswell 2014). A narrative research design was preferred, for it allowed the researchers to obtain in-depth views and perceptions regarding the psycho-social experiences of students engaging in “semester marriages” from various data sources. Data were collected using three focus group discussions with peer educators picked from three purposefully selected universities using focus group guides. According to Lokanath Mishra (2016) and John Creswell (2014), the strengths of focus group discussions are that participants influence each other, allowing for snowballing and corroboration of contributions during the discussion. Data were then triangulated using interviews with relevant stakeholders through interview schedules. The study was conducted in three different cities where public universities are located (the names of the cities have been withheld because by naming them, it will be easy to identify the names of the public universities,

thereby violating confidentiality and anonymity ethics).

### Sampling Procedure and Techniques

Non-probability techniques were chosen to select the study participants to satisfy the requirements of qualitative studies. While convenience sampling was used to choose peer educators by their availability, purposive sampling was employed to pick various key informants according to the researchers’ judgment (Doody and Noonan 2013). That ensured that only participants with the requisite knowledge and experience were chosen.

### Study Selection Criteria and Sample Size

The cumulative sample for the study was 40 participants inclusive of 28 peer educators selected from the three (3) universities, four (4) Student Representative Committee (SRC) members, three (3) deans of students representing the selected institutions, three (3) health professionals, each picked from the three (3) universities, and two (2) representatives from NGOs offering sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services to students within institutions of higher learning. To justify the inclusion and exclusion criteria—peer educators and SRC members were selected as they handle students’ affairs, including those related to sexual and reproductive concerns. The deans of students and health personnel also handle students’ health and social matters. Likewise, selected NGOs giving counseling and SRHR services to the students provided rich information on the psycho-social implications of their cohabitation.

**Table1. Summary of the Study Sample**

Category of Participants	Distribution of Participants			Total
	University 1	University 2	University 3	
<b>Primary Data Sources</b>				
Peer educators (female and male)	9	8	11	28
<b>Key Informants (Participants)</b>				
Deans of students	1	1	1	3
SRC members	1	2	1	4
Health professionals	1	1	1	3
NGOs offering SRHR services	-	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>40</b>

Source: Self-elaboration.

### Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis technique was used for this study. Firstly, the researchers transcribed the data to enable the familiarization process (Creswell 2014). The researchers then went through the transcripts of three focus group discussions and key informants’ transcripts. Themes were then identified by looking at data patterns and frequency. Finally, data from all sources were integrated to develop themes and sub-themes, as shown in the presentation of findings section.

### Ethical Consideration

The research process was guided by research ethics. According to the informed consent, all participants agreed to be part of the study after the researchers

had explained its purpose and what was expected from them. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured—by not revealing identifying information for the universities and the participants concerned. Also, the study obtained ethical clearance from the university’s research ethics committee in honor of the legality of research ethics.

### Limitations of the Study and Its Findings

The study focused on public institutions in Zimbabwe. Thus, due to psycho-social and economic differences, the findings have limitations concerning their transferability to private institutions. Therefore, there is a need to carry out a study incorporating private institutions, possibly a comparative study, to have a holistic appreciation of “semester marriages.” Still, the study used a qualitative par-

adigm and operated on a small sample. A quantitative or sequential explanatory study may be critical to providing data on the prevalence of “semester marriages” and the severity of the phenomenon. However, the findings of this study can be credited for disinterring the challenges through its exploratory strengths.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings have established the guilt and regret of street abortion, soul-tie complications, emotional outbursts leading to crimes of passion, and disruption of educational focus as the unintended psycho-social consequences related to “semester marriages.” Although the findings from this study may not be exclusive to students engaging in “semester marriages,” the verbatim testify that live-in arrangements by students expose them to conditions that increase the likelihood of these stressful experiences.

### The Guilt and Regret of Street Abortion

The study participants attested to the presence of guilt and regret in female students who commit abortions. Those intense emotions were also associated with sadness, isolation, and the fact that very few students sought psycho-emotional support. While both the male and female students in “semester marriages” do indulge and enjoy the sexual activity, there seemed to be feelings of unfairness arising from the realization by participants that there is an expectation that the female student in the relationship should ensure the prevention of any unplanned pregnancies. The findings established that, in the event of such an unforeseen incident, the female student also bears the liability of carrying out an abortion and enduring the emotional burden

that comes from it. The results further showed that students find themselves contemplating between risking the end of their educational aspirations and terminating their pregnancy, with the latter being the subsequent resolve. The testimonies are given in the verbatim below:

To add to the issue of unwanted pregnancy, there is a certain student who reluctantly came for counseling. She was in bad shape. She said she was cohabiting because all her other three friends were also cohabiting. She ended up getting pregnant, and when she told her boyfriend, he blamed her for not using contraceptives. He said he was not ready for such a responsibility, and she decided to have an abortion. She said she felt empty and very bad after the abortion, and she would isolate herself. She said she regretted having the abortion because she never had peace from that day. [focus group discussion, 3]

As students’ counselors, we know that there are a lot of students who are aborting, especially those who are cohabiting. Just a few of them do come to us, and they open up because of the confidentiality we offer. Most of them regret committing an abortion. [key informant, SRHR organization]

When a couple stays together for long, they tend to stop using protection, leading to pregnancy. Such an unwanted pregnancy normally leads to abortion because students know their parents expect them to bring a degree. So, making a decision between keeping the baby and risking not having a degree and the regret after the abortion can be very stressful. [key informant, health professional]

Despite the availability of birth control methods for both men and women, the testimonials seem to reflect the presence of gender-biased opinions on the



use of contraceptives, with male students putting that burden on their female partners. That suggests exploitation of the biological disadvantage as supported by a patriarchal orientation, which puts the responsibility on women in general because, by becoming pregnant, they are the ones who bear the result of the sexual experience. As such, female students are more susceptible to emotional liability as they are the ones to navigate through the dilemma between pregnancy termination and ending their educational advancement. That corroborates the findings by Itai Hlonie Mafa, Simon Kang'ethe, and Victor Chikadzi (2020), who argue that the patriarchal society, which has double standards on sexuality expectations for men and women, inevitably creates a breeding ground that exposes women to emotional burdens as they are often left to nurse the wounds of sexual activities. The verbatim also suggests the presence of a seemingly self-evoked pressure to cohabit simply because others are doing it. That also corroborates the subjective norms (Ajzen 1985) in those students' circles manifested through peer pressure. Whether verbalized or perceived, peer pressure can push someone, especially the youth still in the exploratory stage of life, to engage in behavior without fully appreciating the outcomes. It is, however, interesting that the perceived control over sexual experiences conflicts with the intent. In that case, harboring "semester marriages" for the completion of their education is sometimes met with complexities such as unwanted pregnancy, which contradicts the ultimate goal of graduating. Clinical social work inference suggests that there is evidence of irrational thought that is not aligned with the best outcomes for those students. Hence, the theory of planned behavior can be infused into student orientation programs to shape their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control toward attaining the intent (education) through

rational and safe choices. Apart from that, the verbatim alludes to the fact that guilt and regret are exacerbated by the secrecy, shame, and illegality that characterize abortion, especially in Zimbabwe. That also points to the fact that subjective norms are not only confined to university culture, where "semester marriages" are normalized. They are also part of the broader societal accepted values and norms on issues of morality, in that case, abortion. That may explain why some students may coil inwards or adopt maladaptive behaviors in dealing with the guilt of abortion as they feel judged and misunderstood. Further still, buttressing the fluidity of the sources that inform subjective norms at university, it can be inferred that guilt and shame posit the centrality of Zimbabwean culture, which is pro-strict moral values.

### **Soul-Tie Complications**

Besides the guilt from illegal abortions, the research participants also explained that some students in "semester marriages" struggled to move on after a breakup. The "marital" bond created through this living arrangement contributed to emotional complications, which led to intense psycho-emotional entanglements. The key informants further revealed that female students in those relationships were the ones who struggled more, such that some of them failed to attend classes. The findings showed that only a few sought psycho-social support to manage emotions and regain their functioning. Below are direct quotes supporting those findings:

There are some female students who have come to talk to me, seeking my help on how to move on after a breakup. They will be saying, "How do I move on and forget about him now? We stayed together and shared everything and had sex, so how do I just for-

get about him like nothing happened?” [focus group discussion, 1]

Students on campus do change partners during the period they are here on campus. In the corridors there, you always hear of girls who are not going to class because they had a breakup, especially if the whole school knew that you were staying with a guy. It is hard. The shame, stigma, and feeling used. All that can really make it hard to just forget. [key informant, SRC member]

Getting over someone may depend on the type of relationship you are in. If it is sexual and people are staying together as husband and wife, it’s very difficult, especially when you see that person often and with another person. This is why it is hard for cohabiting students to move on. There are just too many emotions involved. [key informant, SRHR organization]

From the quotes, it appears as though the youth in universities indulge in risky sexual relationships without a clear understanding of the psycho-emotional repercussions involved. Moreover, it shows that some of the young people who choose to live in “semester marriages” set-ups lack the emotional maturity needed to build on the agency that can safeguard their emotions in the event of a breakup. That can be interpreted as deficient perceived control where students’ capacity to handle the latent effects of an action is limited (Ajzen 1985). The level of emotional entanglement is heightened through live-in arrangements because of the intensity and frequency of interactions, weakening the tenacity of those youngsters to cope and focus on the school work after a breakup. When a couple spends much time together, the emotional bond built over time may lead to separation anxiety, which may be disruptive if psycho-social intervention is absent or de-

layed, as indicated in the findings. Moreover, the social judgments of “semester marriages” outside the university ecosystem seem to exacerbate feelings of shame, despondency, and possible regret, which further exposes cohabiting couples to emotional turmoil (Mapuranga 2010; Gesinde et al. 2013). Given the campus life where dating couples are not a secret, the emotional torture may be worsened when one sees their ex-partner with another lover. That may explain why some students fail to focus on their school work and, at times, commit suicide because of failure to fathom the repercussions of soul-tie implications.

### **Emotional Outbursts Leading to Crimes of Passion**

The study further revealed that an inability to control one’s emotions often leads to crimes of passion. The findings established that students in “semester marriage” arrangements sometimes find themselves in criminal activities such as domestic violence and even murder. Cheating and rumors of cheating were cited as triggers of such emotional explosions. Furthermore, the outbursts were, again, attributed to the emotional, financial, and social investments that characterize “semester marriages.” “Semester marriages” arrangements and the crimes of passion were said to be mainly associated with students living off-campus. Quotes from a focus group discussion and a key informant are given below to elucidate the gravity of the issue:

I remember there was a case of this guy who murdered her girlfriend because, during a holiday, there were rumors that the girl was cheating on him with an older guy. So the friends said that he was angry that how could she cheat on him with a “Blesser” after all he had done for her. He gives her shelter, food,

and everything he has when they are at university because they live together off-campus during the semester. [focus group discussion, 1]

We have cases of students who have these crazy moments and fight because their partner is cheating. When we investigate further, we find out that some of these cases come from students who will be cohabiting outside campus. Student Affairs has a couple of these on record. [key informant, dean of students]

The direct quotes show the rampant prevalence of domestic violence among students involved in “semester marriages.” The findings also present off-campus accommodation as a breeding ground for “semester marriages” arrangements and criminal activities. While “semester marriages” are normally confined to the semester calendar (Gumbo 2020), the verbatim above shows that sometimes it can be difficult to put boundaries or an expiry date to such an intense emotional relationship. When those students stay together and are committed to one another, the dynamism of “semester marriages” as an artificial arrangement leaves loose ends, which may make it difficult to manage as the other person may have another relationship outside the campus life. Where boundaries are unclear and loosely defined, there is a high possibility of emotional entanglement, which may lead to violent crimes, as depicted in the findings. Cheating rumors and feelings of being used may also trigger psycho-emotional apprehension that may translate to a grievous outcome such as murder. For example, when a male student perceives or feels that he was used by a female student as a to-go guy for food, accommodation, and educational advancement, that may trigger aggressive behaviors when one’s ego feels shattered. That finds resonance with Simbarashe Gukurume’s (2011) observations, who submits that students cohabit on

campus as a transactional relationship to cushion themselves from hunger. In such cases, one may not expect emotional loyalty in a pseudo-relationship anchored on self-serving and calculated motives. Hence the revelation that students may underestimate the possibilities of emotions proving hard to tame and contain.

### **Disrupted Educational Focus**

Finally, the participants revealed that “semester marriages” put much pressure on the students and can compromise their educational focus. The study findings showed that students in such living arrangements often mix up their priorities between their relationships and their academic pursuits. A key informant elucidated that sexual demands, household duties, and emotional expectations can push even the best-performing students to bunk, sometimes leading to low grades, forcing them to repeat their modules and even drop out. That is clarified below:

Being a student myself, when you are cohabiting, it’s a lot of pressure because you have to balance the school work and the relationship. It’s like playing “hubby” or “wifey” while studying, and many times the school suffers. [focus group discussion, 3]

There is a girl in our class. She used to be one of the best students, but when she moved in with her boyfriend, she was bunking school, and her grades started to fall. I think the live-in arrangement affected her focus on her degree. [focus group discussion, 1]

It happens to many young people when they fall in love. They are excited about being with each other, and they lose themselves. University cohabitation intensifies these emotions, and students end up for-

getting why they are here. Some end up getting pregnant, others drop out, and others repeat courses and all sorts of things. [key informant, dean of students]

Since students who may not be living with their partners do fail sometimes, the narratives prove that “semester marriages” are characterized by expectations that may compromise the educational focus and aspirations of students. That brings to perspective the default in students’ behavior whereby the means conflict with the intent (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Given the mental immaturity, lack of sexual experiences, and emotional unpreparedness of many university students, the pressure may culminate in misplaced priorities. Young love, if not handled with emotional and mental intelligence, may be likened to a veldfire that is easy to start but difficult to manage and stop. It will be as if they are in their honeymoon bubble, and such intense emotions may cloud the priority list. As shown, such mental and emotional disorientations can disrupt educational focus, leading to failure and possible dropout. That highlights how the youth in love may miscalculate and underestimate the emotional and mental maturity needed to navigate through the murky emotions surrounding “semester marriage” arrangements to ensure that educational aspirations remain a priority. In agreement, Simon Kang’ethe and Itai Hlonie Mafa (2014) identified loss of educational focus as one of the unintended consequences of students in live-in arrangements. Njoki Wane, Damaris Parsiatu, and Dorcas Nyokangi (2018) also revealed that university students engage in risky sexual and transactional relationships, which reduce their ability to negotiate for better life choices, such as their educational ambitions. The degree certificate can be the ultimate sacrifice, especially where psycho-social support is either unavailable or inaccessible and inadequate. That is also corroborated by the theo-

ry of planned behavior, where attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control are not mere abstracts or elements in a mathematical equation. Their interrelatedness and connections are too humane to employ “semester marriages” as a means for educational attainment.

## Implications of Findings and Recommendations

The findings from this study have highlighted a myriad of psycho-social consequences associated with the “semester marriages” phenomenon. Such findings have various implications for social work practice—a profession concerned with enhancing social functioning among individuals, families, groups, and communities (Chigondo 2019; Mafa and Simango 2021). Due to its values, skills, and clientele base, social work practice is strategically relevant to analyze the findings to strengthen the sexual and reproductive response within universities. From a critical social work perspective, it is important to look at “semester marriages” through diagnostic lenses to appreciate the various variables that cause and sustain the phenomenon. There is a need to ask the seemingly hard questions not in terms of the morality of the living arrangement or the lack thereof but to understand the phenomenon through the experiences of the university youths.

Such an analysis is salient as it brings to the fore the latent contributory and reinforcing factors surrounding the phenomenon. Failure to answer those critical questions may lead to shallow interventions and a bias toward a pathological view and a remedial approach to solving social ills. Thus, the paper proposes the introduction of school social work within institutions of higher learning to respond to the psycho-social challenges revealed in the find-

ings at both preventative and diagnostic levels of intervention. According to Martell Teasley (2004), school social work is a specialized form of practice that works within the school setting to assist with behavioral concerns and mental health interventions for academic advancement. School social workers are an integral link between school administrators, students, and families to foster academic success. They are, therefore, critical in creating a conducive environment that can incubate the educational intentions of students so that they can graduate and attain their educational aspirations (Chigondo 2019).

Firstly, the study concluded that female students mainly carried the emotional burden triggered by the guilt of backstreet abortion. Anchored on the social work principle of a non-judgmental attitude (Biestek 1963), the study does not seek to apportion blame or debate on the morality of abortion. Instead, the research wishes to tackle the reinforcers of psychological challenges to establish a holistic remedy. The university, as simply a semblance of society, mirrors the societal attitude that somewhat holds women responsible for the unintended consequences of sexual indulgence. The introduction of a school social work model would respond to such a psycho-social support gap by providing students with the psycho-emotional skills-sets that are needed to navigate through the emotional terrain triggered by “semester marriages” to ensure that the educational aspirations of learners are not derailed. Through the role of an educator, school social workers can further provide the needed awareness of the financial, emotional, health, psychological, as well as social consequences concomitant with “semester marriages” to regulate the unguarded attitude that a university is a place for sexual exploration. Such an attitude may lead to risky sexual behaviors, resulting in unintended consequences, as unearthed

by this study and many other scholars (Masvawure 2010; Gukurume 2011; 2022; Gesinde et al. 2013).

While it has been established that some NGOs have been providing such services within tertiary institutions (Mafa and Simango 2021), there may be a need to augment the acceptability of the information and service through social workers’ roles as educators and facilitators. Edutainment activities that may help to demystify and weaken the resistance to the use of contraceptives, such as condoms and morning-after pills, may go a long way in curbing the prevalence of unintended pregnancies, which ultimately leads to secret abortions and related emotional challenges. Such information may also challenge unprogressive attitudinal tendencies that promote sexual irresponsibility among male students. When the contraceptive responsibility is shared between the couple, it may minimize unintended consequences, such as unplanned pregnancies. Again, school social workers are best positioned to facilitate such discussions to dilute gendered and complex power dynamics based on the possession of scarce resources. Shared responsibility has the potential to lower the prevalence of unintended pregnancies and the prevalence of street abortions. Research shows that abortions have long-term effects such as complicated pregnancies, poor mental health, premature births, and other complications that may disrupt educational aspirations (Thorp, Hartmann, and Shadigan 2005).

Again, the paper has concluded that the possibility of soul ties among cohabiting students contributed to emotional turmoil in the case of a breakup. While the study acknowledged the presence of intense emotional attachment in any intimate relationship, the psycho-emotional immaturity of many university youths and the continued interactions after the breakup compromised the emotional

back-borne. There is a need to sensitize the youths on the emotional, physical, and health-related risks that are related to “semester marriages.” During the orientation period, NGOs providing sexual and reproductive health services may seek an opportunity to inform, especially the first-year students, about such services. Again, social workers. Given that most of those services are driven by the peer-to-peer counseling model (students without proper training) (Mafa and Simango 2021), it is vital to have at least one social worker to strengthen the quality of services. Social workers are bound by the principles of acceptance, a non-judgmental attitude, and confidentiality, as well as the values of service and competence (Biestek 1963), which makes them instrumental for effective intervention.

Since the psycho-social challenges are experienced at personal and relational levels, sustainable solutions that can effectively offset the implications of those on the educational and sexual rights of university youths are sought to address their causes. Some push factors, such as limited accommodation and poverty, may sprout from structural flaws within the university system and perhaps the macro and economic challenges (Gukurume 2022). A remedial approach to addressing the unintended psycho-social ramifications of “semester marriages” may not yield long-lasting solutions. While the youth may have general information regarding STIs and sex, there might be a need to empower them on how to enjoy their sexual reproductive rights responsibly without compromising on their grades or pursuit of educational qualifications, as that is their intention from the planned behavior theory’s lenses (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Through their role as advocates and policy implementers, school social workers can also spearhead the crafting and implementation of friendly policies that can respond to the needs of

young people within institutions of higher learning. Thus, there is a need to strengthen harm-reduction policies and comprehensive sexuality education of a positive nature, recognizing that sexual expression is an essential aspect of one’s sexuality.

Apart from that, modalities that strengthen the financial capacity of university students, such as food banks and student loans, may play a role in curtailing the prevalence of transactional “semester marriages.” Social workers as brokers, together with other stakeholders, may spearhead those discussions to get a lasting solution, which would strengthen the financial capacity of the youth while simultaneously upholding their sexual and reproductive health and rights (Teasley 2004; Chigondo 2019). Thus, mitigation should be focused on all levels of interaction—individual, relational, institutional, and the macro level. Interventions should also address the differences in time (chronosystem). What worked for past generations might not be effective for this generation. Without that, the youth’s future may continue being derailed as they adopt modalities to survive in universities, which may later cost them their educational aspirations.

## Conclusion

The paper explored the unwelcome psycho-social challenges underpinning the “semester marriages” phenomenon. It has been concluded that although various etiological variables may push university students to such a living arrangement, many unintended adverse consequences may ultimately compromise their educational pursuits. The authors have, therefore, proffered for the introduction of social workers within university settings to strengthen the already existing modalities offering comprehensive sexual education, psycho-social support,

as well as sexual and reproductive health services. School social workers have been credited for that because of the many hats they wear as educators, facilitators, brokers, advocates, and counselors. That

means they can work with university administrators, academics, students, as well as parents to ensure the realization of students' educational aspirations.

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