

## **Gender Preference of Counsellors Among University Students Seeking Counselling Services**

Dr. Ruth Kamunyu<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Catherine Ndungo<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Geoffrey Wango<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Psychology, Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya)

<sup>2</sup>(Gender and Development, Kenyatta University, Kenya)

<sup>3</sup>(Psychology, University of Nairobi, Kenya)

Corresponding Author: Dr. Ruth Kamunyu

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**Abstract:** Due to changes in traditional social set up, individuals have been estranged from their kin and community that provided the necessary support system, thus an increase in the number of individuals, both males and females looking for professional therapy. University students who mainly comprise of young adults encounter emotional and psychological issues that require therapy. The objective of this study was to look into the gender preference of students seeking therapeutic help. The study is guided by Person Centred and Social Learning Theories. The study applied descriptive survey research design using quantitative and qualitative data. Simple stratified, random and purposive sampling techniques were used to sample three universities, 310 students and seven student counsellors. Data was gathered using in-depth interview schedules, questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions. Quantitative data was examined using descriptive statistics and then presented in Tables, Pie charts and Bar graphs. For qualitative data, emerging patterns of the content analysis is presented thematically according to research objectives. The findings reveal huge gender discrepancies among university counsellors where 57% are women compared to 43% men. The study reveals gender discrepancy among students seeking counselling in the universities where more female students than males seek counselling services according to 86% counsellors and 97% students. The study findings reveals that 54% of students prefer female counsellors as compared to 27% that prefer male counsellors. Female counsellors are preferred for being caring, nurturing and understanding. The study advocates for intake counsellors to be gender sensitive and allocate the preferred gender according to problems presented.

**Key Word:** Gender; Preference; Discrepancy;

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Counselling is an acceptable form of aid for various personal issues for instance, depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; McLeod, 2003a; Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). It mainly dedicated to improving or re-establishing client's own self-understanding, decision making resources, personal growth and risk-taking. Counselling in different forms and interpretations has existed in societies for long (Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan, 2004; Wango 2014). People in all societies and at all times have undergone emotional or psychological anguish and behaviour problems. Efficacy of counselling is determined by the compatibility between the counsellor and client and gender plays a great role in this compatibility (McLeod, 2003a; Palmer, 2010).

Gender is an important variable in the diagnosis and treatment of a variety of psychological symptoms and mental disorders, for example, depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; McLeod, 2013; Nadelson and Notman, 2005). Scholars in counselling, psychotherapy and gender place emphasis on gender as an important component in therapy (American Psychological Association, 2013; Wango, 2014). Gender is also mediated by psychosocial factors, the physiological and metabolic differences between men and women (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and thus an important aspect of therapy. Gender, as a notion, fringes on "culturally determined perceptions, attitudes and belief systems about females and males; varies across cultures, changes through historical times and differs in terms of who makes the observations and judgments" (Worell and Remer, 1992:58). Therefore, gender influences the client's choice of counsellor as well as the sequence and content of the clinical material shared in counselling. It also affects the diagnosis, treatment selection, and length of treatment and ultimately the outcome of therapy (Nadelson and Notman, 2005). This study endeavours to investigate the gender preference of students seeking counselling services in universities. Stevens and Smith (1995) and Unger (2001) assert that essential differences exist between males and females based upon decades of research and documentation. Men and women perceive, process, and behave differently

and regardless of whether those experiences are innate or learned, gender is one-way individuals frame their world and society at large. Stevens and Smith further point out that a counsellor's belief about gender impacts on their approach when working with men and women, regardless of sexual orientation and that counsellors should examine their own point of view, not only as cultural beings, but as gendered beings. Understanding human development from a gender perspective is an important conceptual window to consider in order to provide accurate assessments and counselling approaches to various clients.

Good and Dell (1990) point out that gender and counselling in the contemporary society will require counselling professionals to understand the impact of gender and the way in which society is defined, organized, socialized and functions. This argument is in agreement with McLeod (2003a and 2003b) who incorporates gender as an important component in therapy and in research respectively. Gender related belief systems influence therapeutic decisions and behaviour during counselling if gender schemas are salient for a counsellor. For example, display of emotions plays an important role for many counsellors. Past research on clients' preference for gender of the counsellor has indicated that women are more likely than men to state a preference (Landes, 2009). Therefore, this study investigates gender preference in counselling services among university students.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Every person has preferences for and opinions about most aspects of life including counselling and psychotherapy (Stigall, 2006). Many people have preferences for the particular therapists for a variety of reasons such as gender, class, race or ethnicity (McLeod, 2013). According to Stigall (2006), therapists, just like teachers and doctors, are not created equal. Stigall, emphasizes the need for clients to make their own choices. Preferences for specific characteristics can influence the relationship that clients have with their therapist. Such preferences can influence the outcomes of therapy. For example, a particular client or group of clients can have very definite expectations about what they need and whom they seek to offer assistance. Liddle (1996) found that many gay and lesbian clients placed a great deal of time and effort into finding an 'affirmative' therapist and this includes gender. Thus, this study sought to establish the importance of gender of counsellor in a counselling relationship.

Gender is an important factor which influences help-seeking behaviour (McLeod, 2003a; McLeod, 2013; Turner, 1981; Ussher and Nicolson, 1992). McLeod (2013) states that the counsellor invokes a key category in relation to the client, the gender of the therapist. There are other considerations. For example, women are likely more than men, to seek help and to show positive attitudes towards help seeking (Komiya, Good and Sherrod, 2000). Women are more open-minded about the stigma associated with seeking professional help, more willing to acknowledge their need for aid and more tolerant to disclosing their problems. This perhaps could explain why Kennel and Agrestic (1995) found a greater reluctance to report cases of sexual abuse among male than female clients. In this line, Russell, Thompson and Rosenthal (2008) report that most of the students who sought help from a counselling centre were females. Mahalik and Addis (2003) explain these gender differences in help seeking by the effect of masculine ideals obtained from society. According to such masculine ideals, men are supposed to be tough and strong enough to handle their problems and not to express their emotions (Mahalik and Addis, 2003). Expression of emotions is considered a sign of weakness.

Stevens and Smith (1995) asserts that differences exist between men and women based upon decades of research and documentation. Men and women perceive, process and behave differently and regardless of whether those experiences are inherent or learnt, gender is one way that individuals frame their world and society at large. Stevens and Smith (1995) points out that a counsellor's belief about gender impacts on his/her approach when working with men and women, regardless of gender and calls upon counsellors to examine their own world view, not only as cultural beings but as gendered beings. Understanding human development from a gender perspective is an important conceptual window to consider so as to provide assessments on accurate treatment approaches. Male and female therapists will view clients' life experiences differently particularly if the experiences are gender specific (Shapiro, 1993), thus the need to establish factors that influence client's preference for a specific gender.

Sneil (2002) carried out a study on the impact of counsellor and participant gender on inclination to discuss relational issues. The study examined people's inclination to divulge personal information about their personal relationship with counsellors. This was achieved by enquiring 431 students to stipulate how willing they would be to explore 25 relationship topics as measured by Relationship Disclosure Scale with female and male counsellors. Results indicated that people's inclination to converse about their personal relationships with counsellors relied upon their own gender, gender of the counsellor and the specific topics to be evaluated by the Relationship Disclosure Scale. Furthermore, several character variables associated with relational consciousness and esteem were found to be linked with women's inclination to take part in relationship divulgence with male and female counsellors. However, these findings underscore the impact of gender on counselling, thus the need for further investigation.

Hill (1987) carried a study to examine the impact of counsellor's gender and level of experience on the counselling relationship. Hill used these variables in actual counselling dyads for an analysis of the amount of verbal activity of the client. Taped portions of the early, middle and late sessions were analyzed noting the amount of verbal activity with 12 men and 12 women counsellors varying in the amount of professional experience and counselling 48 clients. The results suggested that women clients/counsellor pairings produced a significantly greater amount of verbal activity than other men pairings. At the conclusion of therapy, a client satisfaction instrument revealed that across the experience variable, women counsellors were rated highest. The inexperienced women and the experienced women counsellors were all rated higher than the experienced men showing that women preferred women counsellors, whether experienced or not. However, no reasons were given for this, a gap this study sought to bridge.

Harris (2001) points out that both male and female children are bisexual. Either can choose a male or female therapist. Both begin with a strong sexual attraction to their mother. This attraction typically persists in males and results in heterosexual development. However, because of this strong attraction to his mother, the male young one also envisions his mother as an object of love and has erotic fantasies about her. Likewise although penis envy cause the female child to turn from the mother to the father, the strong positive feelings she has toward her mother are not completely neglected because male and female children identify with both their mothers and fathers, thus possess both masculine and feminine characteristics and can choose either therapist (Olson, 2000). This study investigates whether clients still prefer the male therapists as Brown (1956) put it.

Palmer and Gladeana (2000) carried out a research on children and concluded that during early development in all cultures, the mother remains the primary care giver of young children. Therefore, the earliest bond is more likely to be made with her. The mother becomes the primary identification figure in early childhood for boys and girls. As girls grow up the same identification will not change in order to conform to the feminine gender identity. They learn maternal identification. But for the boy to consolidate masculine identity, he must shift himself from primary identification with the female figure. This is a complex process of separation from either attachment but necessary in development of masculine identity disorder in American males (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These findings contradict Mezzano's (1989) findings but agree with Fabricant's (1988) research, an area that this study investigates

Atkinson and Poston (1998) found that female clients favour seeking aid from counsellors of their own gender. In their study, they deduced that female participants sought counsellors of their own gender whereas male participants preferred counsellors of the opposite gendered. However, a person's counsellor gender preference may shift with regard to the problem type for which the person seeks aid (Atkinson, 1998). Boulware and Holmes (1970) asserted that both client genders preferred male counsellors. But Atkinson and Poston (1998) found that both genders preferred seeking help from counsellors of their own gender for career problems, an area that this study sought to clarify.

Banikiotes and Merluzzi (1981) examined the impact that gender role of counsellors had on female participants in regard to their preferences and feelings of comfort in seeking counselling for certain problems. Female participants were asked to review descriptions of four types of counsellors: traditional female, traditional male, egalitarian female and egalitarian male (Banikiotes and Merluzzi, 1981). The description of the traditional counsellors indicated that they participated in activities that were considered typical for their gender, enjoyed activities with their same-gender child, and met their spouse in an "unequal status situation" (Banikiotes and Merluzzi, 1981). However, the description of the egalitarian counsellors stated that they participated in activities that were not considered to be typical for their gender, enjoyed activities with their children of both genders, and met their spouse in an "equal status situation" (Banikiotes and Merluzzi, 1981). Further, the participants were asked to rate their level of comfort in discussing a variety of listed problems with each of the types of counsellors described and to complete a measure to assess their perceptions of the counsellors described (Banikiotes and Merluzzi 1981). The results indicated that participants felt more comfortable discussing various problems with female counsellors and egalitarian counsellors. Moreover, participants perceived female egalitarian counsellors as experts and viewed female traditional counsellors as least expert.

Sue and Lam (2002), studied how gender preference affected treatment process and outcome. In their study, 203 clients with major depressive disorder were selected and were asked which gender of counsellor they preferred. Then, they all received 14-15 sessions of treatment as an opportunity to interact with their counsellors. Some of them had counsellors of their preferred gender and others had counsellors whose gender was different from their preference. The researchers did not find significant difference on therapy outcome between matched and mismatched groups. Clients who had counsellors of their preferred gender were not more significantly different than clients who did not have counsellors of their preferred gender in therapy process and outcome. In addition, the matched and mismatched groups did not differ in client-rated counsellor empathy. However, in the said study all clients were volunteers and were eager to participate. Thus, the results might be applicable only to clients who are volunteers and eager to engage in treatment thus this study.

Bernstein and Hofmann (1987) carried out an exploration of male and female clients' conveyed preferences for gender of their counsellor. The study attended to two major comparisons: clients who prefer a certain gender versus those without a preference, and clients preferring a male therapist versus those preferring a female therapist. Results indicates significant relationships among gender of the client, gender of the intake counsellor, whether or not clients express a preference, and whether they express a preference for a male or female counsellor. Results also suggested an influence of the gender of the intake counsellor. With a focus on the importance of gender roles in counselling, feminist counselling purports the same gender counselling dyads. Giving a rationale for this approach, Koile and Bird (1970) noted that women counsellors should be able to understand and empathize with women clients far better than men counsellors. In terms of preferences, women clients who were aware of the dynamics of gender role stereotyping and were against the oppressive role of the men dominated society would prefer to seek a relationship with a feminist-oriented female counsellor. However, no specific reasons were given for this preference thus this study.

Palmer and Gladeana (2000) points out that one of the most important issues in therapy is the gender of the counsellor vis-à-vis the client. Many female counsellors will not take on male clients for fear of male mental or physical violence but also because they feel that women have been doing men's emotional 'work' for them for centuries and would rather concentrate their energies on women who have usually been giving rather than getting emotional support. Many female clients will choose to have a female counsellor who will also have grown up as a female in a male oriented society with whom they would feel comfortable in opening up (palmer and Gladeana, 2000).

Gelso and Fretz (1992) contend that preferences are dynamic and work at different cognitive levels. However, because of this multidimensionality of preference, a person can opt for a number of characteristics at the same time. A time factor is also related to both deciding and preferences. Persons repeat the act of deciding again and again as they get new information and new experiences. As a result of this, preferences evolve, mature and change as time progresses. Therefore, knowing a person's preferences at one point in time is not enough to fully understand their preferences hence this study.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a descriptive survey design that used mixed methodology that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. As maintained by Kerlinger (1973), a survey may be used to examine large or small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population, such as the large number of university students involved in this study. This in turn enables one to determine 'what is', and the state of affairs as they exist, for instance, the frequency of counselling service provision among university students (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). Kothari (2004) posits that a survey can be utilized to study large or small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population, such as the large number of university students involved in this study. A survey enables one to determine state of affairs as they exist, (Gall, Borg, &Gall, 2007). In this study, the target population were the 65 universities in Kenya by 2015 (Commission of University Education, 2015). The accessible population were three universities; Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology; Kenya Methodist University and Mount Kenya University. Stratified, simple random and purposive sampling methods were used to sample the participants in the three universities. The sample size was 310 students and seven student counsellors. Research instruments included questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussion Guide. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was used to supplement interpretation of quantitative data. The instruments were piloted at one private and one public university. Reliability of questionnaires was determined using test-retest method. Pearson's Product Moment Formula was used to calculate the correlation coefficient between the tests. The test-retest scores showed a correlation coefficient of 0.93 for counsellors and 0.89 for students which indicates that the instruments were highly reliable. A major limitation of this study was that some of the research participants had never sought counselling services and were therefore not real clients in a practical counselling session. However, responses were and compared with data obtained through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students who had attended counselling. In addition, information obtained from the students was compared with data from university students' counsellors who had been involved in practical counselling of students. Data from university counsellors consisted of information on the prevalence of counselling services among university, gender of those who sought counselling and their frequency. This was important to harmonise the data from students seeking services, as well as those who could have failed to seek help. Suggestions from the study could enhance interventions and promotion of students of counselling services in the Kenyan Public and Private universities.

**IV. RESULTS**

**Gender of the Counsellor**

There was disproportional female counsellors’ domination in the public university with four female and three male counsellors. An almost equal sample of counsellors was drawn from the university Schools / Faculties where 3 (42 %) were drawn from the School/Faculty of Science, 2 (29 %) from Faculty/School of Education; and 2 (29%) from School/Faculty of Business Studies and Economics. Chi-square test of independence between gender of the counsellors and the university Schools/Faculties shows no significant relation at .05 levels between the variables ( $\chi^2=1.283$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.526$ ).

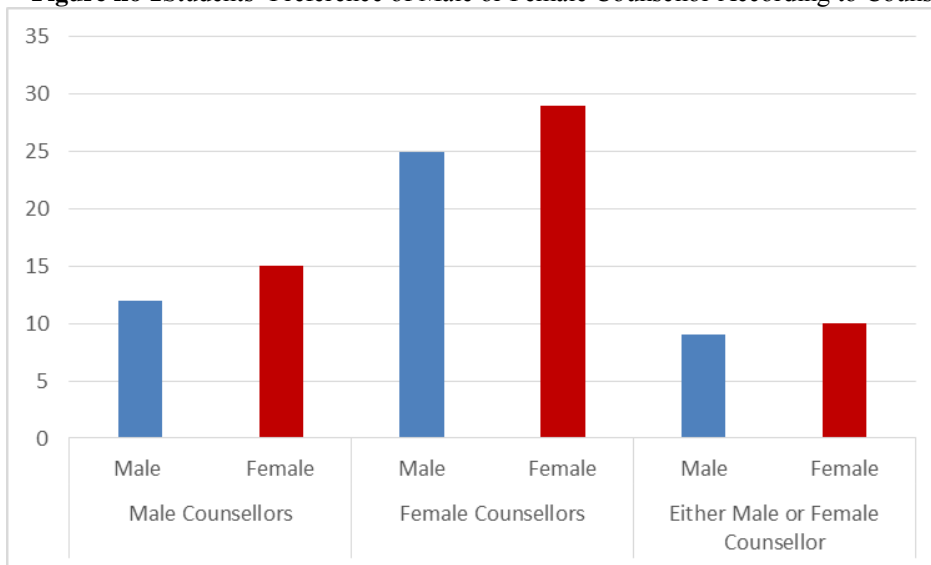
There were 7 female counsellors as compared to four male counsellors. This is an indication of lack of gender consideration in appointments and/or involvement among males in counselling in both the private and public universities. This gender disparity was also noted by Wango (2006) among counsellors in secondary schools. The participation of more female counsellors and corresponding involvement of less male counsellors could imply that gender factor has an influence in counselling services in both private and public universities.

**Students Preference of Male or Female Counsellors or any One of Them**

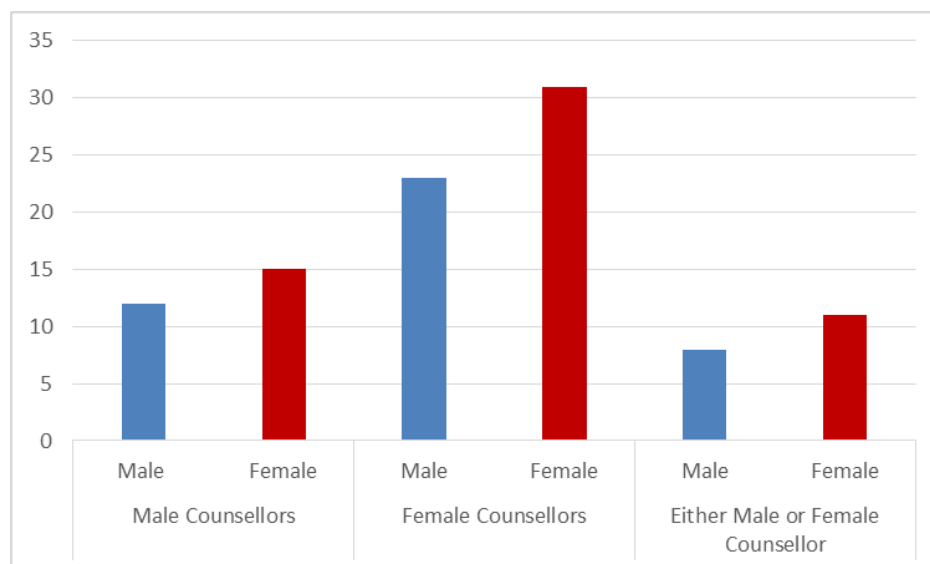
The second research question sought information on the extent to which students seeking counselling services from the university counselling departments were influenced by the gender of the counsellor. Every person has preferences for and opinions about most aspects of life, including psychotherapy (Stigall, 2006). Many people have preferences for the therapist from whom they seek therapy. According to Stigall (2006), therapists just like teachers and doctors are not created equal. Stigall (2006) emphasizes the need for clients to choose the right therapist including gender of therapist. One of the first theories of gender preferences for counsellors was proposed by Brown (1956). Brown believed that clients’ preferences for counsellors were entirely based on both gender preferences for the masculine over the feminine sex role.

This section presents the results of an investigation of male and female students’ expressed preferences for gender of their counsellor. Both counsellors and students were asked to state whether students would prefer a male or female counsellor, or any one of them in a counselling session. Summary of the findings from the questionnaires is presented in **Figure no 1** and **2**

**Figure no 1** Students’ Preference of Male or Female Counsellor According to Counsellors



**Figure no 2** Students' Preference of Male or Female Counsellor According to Students



This study addressed one major comparison: students with an expressed preference for female versus those with a preference for a male counsellor. Data of students who did not prefer the gender of the counsellor were also collected and analysed.

Majority of students (n=104, 31% female , 23% male) and counsellors (n=5, 25% male, 29% female) in this study noted that both male and female students preferred female counsellors, and that this preference appeared to be based on the belief that female counsellors are more competent, nurturing, caring and empathic than male counsellors. However, these empirical findings in the current study seem to contradict the findings of Brown (1956) who stated that regardless of the gender of the client, the male was the preferred gender due to the discerned merits of the male role in the culture at that time. This was concurred by 14% counsellors and 27% students who indicated that students prefer male counsellors. The non-influence of the gender of the counsellor is also interesting to consider. Some students (n=38, 19%) and counsellors (n=1, 14%) were of the opinion that students have no preference of gender during the counselling process. They claimed that all counsellors with counselling skills can offer services to both males and females.

Students expressed a higher preference for and anticipated comfort with female counsellors as compared with male counsellors. This supports Turner's (1981) idea that there is tendency for more effective therapists to be females. This is because a woman is more likely to listen supportively and understand men's emotions such as fear and self-doubt. However, female students demonstrated a definite same-sex preference for some counselling situations, while male students preferred male counsellors for personal/social counselling and had female gender preferences for other counselling situations. These findings are consistent with Koile and Bird (1970) who found out in their research that male students prefer male counsellors and females prefer female counsellors.

### Reasons Why University Students Prefer Male or Female Counsellors

The data on the reasons for preferences by students on the university counsellors are set out in **Table no 3**

**Table no 3** Students Preference of Male or Female Counsellor

Gender of Counsellor	Reasons	Counsellors		Students	
		M (%)	F	M (%)	F
Male	High Degree of Solving Problems	20	26	25	32
	Solve Masculine Issues Better	18	25	18	24
	Very Confident and Keeps Secret	33	44	37	24
Female	Solves more Problems than Males	39	39	28	36
	Genuine, Caring and Polite	12	17	31	40
	Females Offers Immediate Solutions	12	17	21	27
	Able to Solve Feminine Issues	18	25	38	50
	More Friendly and Understanding	31	74	23	31

	Handles both Feminine and Masculine Issues well	37	49	15	19
	More Trustworthy Than Male Counsellors	12	17	21	27
Any of Them	Both are Trained	24	33	29	38
	Both are Bound by Professional Ethics	6	8	32	42
	General Issues and One Who is Friendly	18	25	18	24
	Either Gender Can Solve Problems	37	49	14	19
	Gender will Not Affect the Quality of Counselling	37	49	10	12
	Students Preference and Level of Interaction	30	41	20	26
	One who Maintains Confidentiality	18	25	12	15
	Both Have a Role To Play in Counselling Clients	30	41	10	14

Students and counsellors had conflicting opinions on the preferences of students who seek counselling services from male and female university counsellors. However, as seen from Table 4.7 counselling services are dependent on a number of reasons. Some of the reasons cited by both counsellors and students to have significant impact on counselling were:

- Degree of confidentiality maintained by the counsellors (33% males,44% females)and students (37% males ,47% females)
- Level of friendship and understanding cultivated likewise by the counsellors towards the students (31%males, 41% females) and students (23% males ,31 %females)
- The counsellors’ proficiency in handling both feminine and masculine issues with perfection (37%males,49 %females) and students (15% males ,19% females).

This study noted that female counsellors appear more trustworthy than male counsellors in the eyes of the students (21% males. 27%females) unlike their own impression that they were more trustworthy (12% male,17% female), especially taking into consideration that a majority of the respondents were females.

Further, male counsellors were rated as having high degree of solving students’ problems as indicated by counsellors (20%male, 26% female) and students (25% male, 32% female). However, female counsellors were more preferred by both gender of students since they possessed more qualities than males. For instance, a majority of counsellors (30% male, 39% female) stated that female counsellors appeared to offer more solutions, and this was acceptable to more than a half (28%males, 36% female) of the students. It was further noted that students of both gender were more willing to seek help from a counsellor of their own gender than from one of the other gender. Republic of Kenya (1999) document observed that for counselling services to be more effective, students needed to be attended to by counsellors of their own gender unless they made special requests to the contrary. According to Simon and Helms (1996), both men and women tend to prefer counsellors of their own gender.

In contrast, information gathered by the researcher from a sample of the students indicates that overall, a male counsellor is preferred to a female counsellor for masculine issues for example male dysfunction. However, both male and female students prefer same-gender counsellors. According to Howard and Orlinsky (1980), women clients who are aware of the dynamics of gender role stereotyping and are against the oppressive role of the male dominated society prefer to seek a relationship with a feminist-oriented female counsellor. One other argument advanced by the students in the study indicates that females would make better counsellors because the clients who have been counselled by them tend to report greater improvement and satisfaction.

It was also evident from both the counsellors and students involved in this study that some university students do not have definite preferences for male or female counsellors. Palmer and Gladeana (2000) point out that some clients have no particular preference regarding counsellor’s gender and can work equally well with either gender in therapy. Students sought counselling services from any of the counsellors because of the following reasons; both counsellors have been bound by professional ethics, both have a role to play in counselling clients, either gender can solve problems and gender should not affect the quality of counselling.

An interesting argument that arose from students was why males seek counselling from females. The reasons given for the preference are that female counsellors are caring, empathic, understanding, good listeners, give warm welcome and are generally soft spoken. This is in line with PCT adopted in this study. Mearns and Thornes (2000) found that counsellor friendliness, warmth and empathy contributed greatly to outcomes. In a meta-analysis on therapist variables, Howard and Orlinsky (1980) found that empathy and openness as well as communication skills, flexibility, and exploration in the therapy session have an impact on effective alliance, especially in the initial treatment phases. Counselling is mainly associated with females because these services

involve the kind of nurturing and sensitivity that are associated with femininity (Howard and Orlinsky, 1980). This is in line with the Social Learning theory adopted in this study.

This study also noted that some female students prefer male counsellors to handle their issues. These findings agree with Jocelyne (1999) who contend that most women growing up in a patriarchal society tend to perceive men as the experts, the all-knowing ones. But those female students who preferred male counsellors attributed this to the fact that women are perceived as 'enemies' of themselves. In addition, students who preferred a male counsellor mentioned that men are able to keep information. A number of the respondents indicated that they would prefer any counsellor, male or female, provided they were qualified for discussing personal concerns.

## V. CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that huge gender discrepancies exist among the university counsellors. In the target universities, there were more female counsellors (7) as compared to (4) male counsellors. Also huge gender discrepancy exist among the students with more female than male seeking counselling service. Students also express a preference for a female or male counsellor. However, both male and female students express a higher preference and comfort with female counsellors as compared with male counsellors.

## VI. RECOMMENDATION

The knowledge about clients' gender preferences of their counsellors is useful in determining counsellors' selection, appointment, deployment and development thus this study recommends that Universities in Kenya should tailor their services to meet the needs of both female and male students by acknowledging their preferences of the gender of the counsellor. The intake counsellors should also be gender sensitive and allot the preferred gender according to the problems presented.

Furthermore, client preferences for counsellor gender depends hugely on problem types. Thus, this study advocates that when allocating clients to counsellors, counselling centres should take into consideration clients' preference for a specific counsellor gender depending on the intimacy level of self-divulgence and the emotional level of tabling issues. Counsellors may also talk over with the clients to learn in what ways clients' potential preference in gender preference might affect the therapeutic relationship.

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