

Sexual Harassment among University Students in Nigeria: Prevalence, Psychosocial Factors and Prevention

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Abstract

This study explores the prevalence, underlying social factors of sexual harassment and its prevention in the University of Benin, Nigeria. The main objective is to ascertain whether psychosocial factors are perceived as correlates of sexual harassment by university undergraduates. The study adopted the descriptive survey research method. The sample of 380 undergraduate students was drawn from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Engineering, Arts and Basic Medical Sciences of the University of Benin, Benin City. Using the non-proportionate stratified random sampling procedure, 95 undergraduate students were randomly selected from each of the faculties.

The instrument for the study is a 30-item questionnaire with a four-point Likert-type scale. The instrument was developed to ascertain the perception of respondents about prevalence, underlying psychosocial factors and prevention of sexual harassment. Three experts determined the content validity of the instrument, which was then subjected to internal consistency test using the Cronbach alpha method. It yielded a coefficient of 0.88 indicating a high level of internal consistency. The mean, standard deviation and t-test statistics were calculated for the study.

Results show the prevalence of sexual harassment of university students as moderate. The psychosocial factors influencing sexual harassment of students include financial insufficiency, moral deficit, lust and a weak system of redress. Result showed that occurrence of sexual harassment tended to be directed more towards females than males; and females were more negatively affected than males. The study identified awareness, propriety in dress and punishment for offences as necessary institutional responses to prevent sexual harassment. It is recommended that awareness-raising programs for students, lecturers and all university staff be incorporated into the programs of universities to encourage effective institutional responses towards addressing sexual harassment.

Keywords: *Sexual harassment, sexual abuse, psychosocial factors, university, institutional response*

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1. Introduction

In every society, there is social interaction between the sexes. In such interaction, mutual interest and reciprocal response define a civilized and socially acceptable sexual behavior (Aluede, 2000). The increasing manifestation of some social vices in higher institutions in Nigeria has been a matter of concern and may be affecting the quality of graduates being produced. One such problem is sexual harassment that has attracted the attention of researchers and the media as a common phenomenon in Nigerian Universities (Gaba, 2010). Sexual harassment is a global issue that has permeated the fabrics of society including University communities and workplaces. (Aluede, 2000; Oswald & Wyatt, 2007; Wilson & Krans, 2014; Taiwo, Omole & Omole, 2014; Long & Hubble, 2018). The phenomenon of sexual harassment among undergraduates is, therefore, not limited to Nigeria or Africa. The incidence of sexual harassment and the causative factors need to be understood and what could be done to reduce vulnerability of students need to be investigated. (Okeke, 2012).

The term sexual harassment was coined in the 1960s by feminists on the contention that the legal system, being male-dominated, lack understanding of how women feel after they have been sexually harassed (Oswald & Wyatt, 2007). Sexual harassment is defined as an unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated sexual overture from a person to elicit unwanted sexual relations from another person (Schuffer, 2000). This includes any inappropriate sexual overture, unwelcomed sexual advances, requests for sexual favors' and subtle and unsubtle persistent behavior (Amadu, 2009; Aditi, Sangeetha & Binu, 2016). It also includes assault and actual sexual abuse that may be expressed physically, verbally or non-verbally, usually from someone with a higher power or at an advantageous position to a less privileged person (Willness, 2007). Sexual harassment in schools has also been described as an unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that makes the victims feel uncomfortable, fearful or powerless, and interferes with their schoolwork (Magley, 2011).

There is a high level of sexual harassment occurrence between male perpetrators and female victims among university students (Aluede, 2000). The pertinent literature suggests that many of the cases of sexual harassment go unpunished and the victims are left to deal with the trauma, which stays with many of them for a long time and sometimes turns into psychological condition and mental health challenges. According to Quaicoe-Duco (2010) and Long and Hubble (2018), sexual harassment has a destabilizing effect on the education of female students, as the effects of sexual harassment for them are more negative than for their male counterparts (Gaba, 2010). Silva and Hill (2005) noted that female students are more traumatized by sexual harassment especially when it involves rape. Unwanted sexual behaviors that annoy or make other people feel uncomfortable can be in the form of verbal, non-verbal, physical harassment and sexual coercion, which is considered an extreme form of sexual harassment (Comer, 2013).

There have been studies and reports on gender violence in the form of sexual harassment in higher education for at least the past three decades (Morley, 2011). Such misconduct affects female students' psychological well-being tremendously, owing to their socio-economic vulnerability in general and how they are perceived from political and socio-cultural perspectives.

Schuffer (2000) indicates that the most common trend of sexual harassment in the Nigerian universities is sexual advances from male lecturers to female students confirming the unequal power relations where the perpetrator occupies a higher and influential position of authority over the victim. There are also incidences of sexual harassment from male students to female students, and in some extreme cases, of rape when the female student refuses to respond to male advances (Taiwo et al., 2014; Aditi et al., 2016).). Some of the causes of sexual harassment according to Imonikhe, Idogho and Aluede (2011) arise from moral deficit and lust, especially in cases where some female students engaged in sexual harassment by seducing male lecturers, or are lured by their male lecturers expecting to be awarded unmerited grades in the examination.

2. Statement of the problem, research questions, hypotheses and methodology

In developing countries like Nigeria, poverty has been found to be a key reason for many females yielding to sexual advances even when they dislike such actions. (Ogunbameru, 2006; Taiwo, et al, 2014). A related factor is that parents, busy in livelihood pursuits, do not find enough time to guide and groom their children (Amadu, 2009; Luke, 2011).

On the whole, research indicates that functional and formal institutional structures must be sufficiently equipped and directed to address issues relating to sexual harassment (Morley & Lussier, 2009). The institutional structures are required to control or forestall the occurrence as well as to discipline perpetrators (Wilson & Krans, 2014). The effects of these phenomena manifest in increased school drop-out, low skills of graduates, low productivity, aggression, and mal-adjustment among young adults who are not capable of contributing to socio-economic development of the country (Obodo, 2009). This study seeks to contribute to the analysis of sexual harassment by establishing evidences on the occurrence of sexual harassment among university undergraduates in the University of Benin. The research objectives that guided this study are;

- To determine the level of occurrence of sexual harassment among university students.
- To ascertain whether psychosocial factors are correlates of sexual harassment as perceived by university undergraduates
- To determine whether male and female students differ on how they experience sexual harassment.
- To recommend possible institutional responses to addressing the occurrence of sexual harassment in universities.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of occurrence of sexual harassment among university students?
2. What are the psychosocial factors responsible for sexual harassment among university students?
3. What are the institutional responses to address sexual harassment?

Hypotheses

The study seeks to test the hypotheses that;

1. There is no significant difference in the occurrence of sexual harassment between male and female students.
2. There is no significant difference in the effect of sexual harassment on male and female students.

Methodology

The descriptive survey design adopted for this study enabled the researcher to collect data using a 30-item questionnaire constructed on four-point Likert-type scale titled “Psychosocial factors as correlates of sexual harassment Questionnaire” (PFCSHQ). Three lecturers in the Departments of Sociology and Social Work in the University of Benin assisted and advised on ensuring the validity of the instrument. The instrument was administered on 380 students of the University and the data obtained were analyzed using the Cronbach alpha formulae for internal consistency and reliability with coefficient of 0.88 obtained. The sample of undergraduate students was selected from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Engineering, Arts and Basic Medical Sciences of the University of Benin, Benin City. Using the disproportionate stratified random sampling procedure, 95 undergraduate students were randomly selected from each of the faculties. The data collected were subjected to descriptive statistics treatment of mean and standard deviation.

3. Presentation of Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of occurrence of sexual harassment among university students

Table 1: The occurrence of sexual harassment among university students

S/N	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level of prevalence
1	Some lecturers make sexual advances to my classmates	2.63	0.85	Moderate
2	Some of my classmates have been deprived of a grade before because of refusal to consent to lecturers' sexual advances	2.80	0.52	Moderate
3	Some students make sexual advances at lecturers for better grades	2.61	0.83	Moderate
4	Some of my classmates have been sexually harassed by a fellow coursemate in the past	2.86	0.60	Moderate
	The level of occurrence of sexual harassment	2.72	0.70	Moderate

N= 380; key: 1.00 – 1.99 = Low; 2.00 – 2.99 = Moderate; 3.00 – 4.00 = High

Table 1 shows a calculated mean value of 2.72 and a standard deviation of 0.70 ; the mean falls within 2.00 and 2.99; so, the level of occurrence of sexual harassment among university students can be described as moderate.

Research Question 2: What are the psychosocial factors responsible for sexual harassment among university students?

Table 2: The psychosocial factors affecting sexual harassment among university students

S/N	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level of prevalence
1	Students from poor families yield more easily to sexual advances	2.76	0.77	Accepted
2	Moral deficit is responsible for sexual harassment	2.83	0.81	Accepted
3	Weak institutional redress is linked to sexual harassment.	2.60	0.10	Accepted
4	Lust from male lecturers or students leads to sexual harassment	2.90	0.82	Accepted
	Psychosocial factors responsible for sexual harassment	2.77	0.62	Accepted

N= 380

Test mean = 2.5

Table 2 shows a calculated mean value of 2.76; 2.83; 2.60; 2.90 for poverty; moral deficit; weak institutional redress; and lust of male lecturers and students, respectively with a test value of 2.5. The mean values of all listed factors are higher than the test value;, so, it can be concluded that all listed psychosocial factors influence sexual harassment among university students.

Research Question 3: What are the institutional responses to address sexual harassment?

Table 3: Institutional responses to sexual harassment

S/N	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Acceptance of response
1	The need for modesty and propriety in dress	2.45	0.33	Accepted
2	Awareness raising of students and lecturers on the consequences of sexual harassment	2.66	0.62	Accepted
3	Enforcement of institutional rules and regulations to punish offenders	2.83	0.81	Accepted
4	Institutional support for students with financial inadequacy	2.43	0.45	Rejected
	Institutional responses to sexual harassment	2.64	0.55	Accepted

N= 380

Test mean = 2.5

Table 3 shows a calculated mean value of 2.45; 2.46; 2.83 for propriety of dress; awareness and punishment for offenders respectively with a test value of 2.5. The mean value is higher than the test value. So, institutional responses such as proper dressing, awareness and punishing offenders' would help in addressing the issue of sexual harassment among university students. Institutional support for financial inadequacy of poor students, with a mean value of 2.43 and less than the test value of 2.5, is not considered to be a necessary institutional response.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the occurrence of sexual harassment between male and female students

Table 4: t-test of independent samples of the occurrence of sexual harassment between male and female students

Sex	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Male	113	12.59	4.97	-21.23	0.000
Female	267	21.29	2.93		

$\alpha = 0.05$

Table 4 shows a t value of -21.23 and a p value of 0.000, testing at an alpha level of 0.05, the p value is less than the alpha level. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant difference in the occurrence of sexual harassment between male and female students, is rejected. Consequently there is a significant difference in the occurrence of sexual harassment between male and female students. Since the mean value of females is higher than that of males the result shows that female students experience sexual harassment more often than male students.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference on the effect of sexual harassment on male and female students.

Table 5: t-test of independent samples of the effect of sexual harassment on male and female students

Sex	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Male	113	12.96	5.69	-20.24	0.000
Female	267	22.82	3.63		

$\alpha = 0.05$

Table 5 shows a t value of -20.24 and a p value of 0.000, testing at alpha level of 0.05, the p value is less than the alpha level. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant difference of the effect of sexual harassment between male and female students, is rejected. So, there is a significant difference of the effect of sexual harassment between on

male and female students. Since the mean value of females is higher than that of males the result shows that female students tended to be affected by sexual harassment more than male students.

4. Discussion of Findings

This study found that there is a moderate level of the occurrence of sexual harassment among University of Benin students. The findings of this study are consistent with earlier research findings (Aluede, 2000; Aditi, et al., 2016) that there is a high occurrence of sexual harassment among university students with males as perpetrators and females as victims. This is also in line with Schuffer (2000), which indicates that the most common type of sexual harassment in the Nigerian universities is improper advances from male lecturers towards female students and from male students towards female students. The finding revealed that the psychological and social factors linked to sexual harassment in universities include poverty, weak institutional redress, moral deficit and lust. The present study appears to be consistent with other research findings, indicating that sexual harassment of students often occur due to different psychosocial factors (Taiwo, et al., 2014), which expose students to harm. The findings also revealed that low socio-economic contexts of female students correlate with sexual harassment among university students. This is indicative of the influence of the economic status of students' households as a factor in their susceptibility to sexual harassment. This finding supports the work of Ogunbameru (2006) that suggests the link between poverty and sexual harassment to be strong.

The study also found that weak institutional system of redress is associated with sexual harassment in universities. This is thus in line with the findings of Taiwo et al. (2014, p. 17), which recognized "the weak system of redress in the higher institutions" as a reason for the increasing perpetration of sexual harassment among university students. This study found that most victims do not report the occurrence as they lack confidence in the institutional redress structures. Moreover, the findings of the study revealed that moral deficit and lust influence sexual harassment of female university students. This is in agreement with the work of Imonikhe et al., (2011) that a number of female students experienced sexual harassment by lecherous male lecturers, or were lured by their lecturers expecting to be awarded unmerited grades in the examination. In the same vein, Imonikhe et al., (2011) found that lecturers attested that as a result of revealing attire worn by female students made it hard for them to concentrate, and led them to make sexual advances.

The results of the present research confirmed that female students are more prone to be subjected to sexual harassment than male students. The finding agreed with earlier research findings such as that of Okeke (2012).. In addition, this study found that the effects of sexual harassment on students differ from female to male students. This implies that female students experience more negative effects, in part because they are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse. This is supported by Quaicoe-Duco (2010) that sexual harassment has a destabilizing effect on the education of female students more than on their male counterparts, especially when the girl students are victims of rape (Silva and Hill,2005).

In addition, this study found that the strong institutional efforts and responses are likely to help in addressing the phenomenon of sexual harassment. This finding thus concurs with the

findings of Morley and Lussier (2009) to the effect that institutional structures must be sufficiently equipped and directed to address issues relating to sexual harassment. Wilson and Krans (2014) also confirm that the problem of sexual harassment requires formal institutional structures, including the right to control or forestall the occurrence as well as to discipline perpetrators. The findings related to all the variables jointly explain the influence of psychosocial correlates of sexual harassment among University of Benin students.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study, having highlighted the phenomenon of sexual harassment with specific focus on the students of University of Benin and concentrating on the prevailing psychosocial factors in the university environment, suggests that there are significant concerns which require remedial action. Nevertheless, there is room for additional research. Based on the present findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Awareness programs for students, lecturers and all university staff should be incorporated as a key approach in the academic programs a part of effective institutional response towards addressing sexual harassment in universities.
- The psychosocial factors with regard to sexual harassment should be subject of research and such research should be encouraged in the field of social and psychological protection to better recognize and understand the phenomenon.
- Institutional vigilance regarding sexual violence or harassment and the defense of the rights of the victims' are of critical importance to improving students' well-being, and in the prevention of sexual harassment.
- Strategic measures that can be taken by institutions of higher learning should be considered and instituted to promote better attitudes and morals in society, starting from upbringing of the young at home.
- I Institutions of higher learning need to discourage seeming tolerance of sexual harassment in the institution through enforcement of rules, policies and strategies for the prevention of sexual harassment.

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