

Defining and Awareness of Sexual Harassment among Selected University Students in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study focused on the definitions and awareness of sexual harassment among selected university students in Lagos metropolis. Their experience and reaction to being personally harassed were explored, leading to their proposed solution to the problem. A total of 400 respondents were randomly selected from the two faculties of education in the metropolis. An adapted questionnaire was used to collect relevant data. Simple percentage was used to analyse data. Some of the findings included gender difference in definitions of sexual harassment. Similarly, more females than males had experienced sexual harassment; while only females reported cases of physical assault such as rape. More female than male respondents reported that they would be upset if they experience sexually harassing behaviour. Based on the findings certain recommendations were made which included public education, promotion of anti-harassment attitudes and behaviour right from primary school; and the adoption of anti-harassment policies and grievance procedures by universities, among others.

Keywords: sexual harassment, university students, Lagos metropolis, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment has been an unfortunate part of educational experience, affecting students' emotional well-being and their ability to succeed academically. Sexual harassment was coined in the 1970s and became commonly used in the 1980s. The phrase itself originated in the United States, Canada and Europe to describe the kinds of gender-based derogation and violence that occur in public places, notably, workplaces and educational institutions. The emphasis was on forms of gender-based violence that were not readily codified in criminal law (Phyllis 1983), as such behaviour actually has damaging psychological and physical effects on the victims.

The U.S. Department of Education and Office For Civil Right (OCR) (1997), charged with interpreting and enforcing OCR guidelines on sexual harassment, recognised two types, quid pro quo and hostile environment harassment. Quid pro quo harassment involves requests for sexual favours, generally by a school employee to a student in exchange for educational participation or benefit. Hostile environment harassment entails harassing sexual conduct that is so severe, persistent or pervasive that it limits a student's ability to participate in or benefit from educational activities.

In Nigeria, sexual harassment was noted in official document in 1981, in the report of the Cookey commission. The commission, a presidential commission on Salary and conditions of service of university staff, was concerned over allegations of female students failing their examinations for reasons other than scholastic and felt that some machinery for

addressing the problem should be put in place (Cookey Report, 1981, p.11). Since then, nothing has been done to back up the expressed concern. Women in Nigerian (WIN), one of the first women centered national organisations took up the issue in early 1980s, also with no appreciable progress made. Again in 1989, the Minister of Education then, circulated to all heads of educational institutions to set up standing committees on sexual harassment. Victims, particularly students have been left to tackle the issue on individual basis.

Thus, it is only recently that attention is being paid to the problem in Nigeria. It appears to be pervasive particularly in the context of higher education. It is usually taken for granted and believed to be normal and not yet perceived as a serious problem that should be tackled and urgently too. Some institutions recently began to show some concern. For example the University of Lagos, in the 2003/2004 academic session, put in place a senate committee on sexual harassment. The report of the committee was the first official document on sexual harassment in the university. Subsequently, the Student Affairs division of the university, specifically its counselling unit charged with the responsibility of handling matters on the issue, including generating awareness and reporting procedure, organises seminars covering such topics as what constitutes sexual harassment, how to handle incidence of sexual harassment and how to prevent sexual harassment. Despite the above efforts and measured by various instruments, sexual harassment means different things to different people. However, before the problem can be addressed, one needs to understand its meaning, nature and scope.

Unfortunately, defining sexual harassment is not simple. Defining what is sufficiently severe, pervasive or objectively offensive can be complicated. People disagree on the severity of the problem. What is a laughing matter for one student, may be offensive to another; and traumatic to yet another, especially in a university community which teems with students and staff from diverse backgrounds. The problem of defining sexual harassment is likely to discourage victims from reporting incidents and make it difficult for institutions to draw the line between flirting, playful courtship and sexual harassment.

To facilitate a frontal attack on the problem, there is the need for some agreement on what constitutes sexual harassment. The paper, therefore, focuses on the challenge of defining sexual harassment. It is assumed that the victims and potential victims are in a good position to provide information on those acts/gestures that they have experienced or perceived as constituting sexual harassment. As real/vicarious and witnesses of sexual harassment, respondents were expected to express their reaction and suggest possible solutions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It appears that sexual harassment in educational institutions and workplace can be understood and defined in many different ways making it all the more complicated to prevent and address the issue. Its definition is problematic, with no consensus as to what constitutes sexual harassment, particularly in Nigeria where little national attention has been paid to the problem. Students are likely to be at a loss when a professor's friendly concern starts to feel like a demand for a sexual relationship that they do not want but are afraid to reject. Sexual harassment is all too familiar and yet, defies a simple definition. It is therefore thought expedient to identify and define what constitutes sexual harassment and evolve the definitions from among the targets of sexual harassment in educational institutions. As real and vicarious victims of sexual harassment, and as a way of validating their definitions, it is necessary to determine their reaction to the harassing behaviours as defined by them. As real, vicarious and potential targets, they were likely to suggest solutions to the problem. The study therefore addresses the challenge of defining sexual harassment by requesting selected undergraduates to define and respond to a range of sexually harassing behaviours, including their reaction to such and also to proffer solutions.

A REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Around the world, attempts have been made to characterise sexual harassment. Haslet and Lipman (1997) suggest that images of women that men hold in their gender schema tend to strongly emphasize women's support roles and their dependence on the

agenda of men. To many, the roles also include sexual gratification, affecting seven out of every ten women at some point in their lives, and women at colleges and universities are among those who confront the problems.

A variety of definitions have been given (American Association of University Women (1992, 2001; Keliery and Passers 2000). Benokrarts (1997) suggests that the types of behaviour that are ordinarily described as friendly but are sexually suggestive should properly be labelled as sexual harassment. These include profane humour or sexual jokes because they cause embarrassment to the object of the jokes. Much work has been done in Canada, the United States of America (USA) and among members of the European Union (EU), particularly on sexual harassment in the workplace (European Commission, 1998, the Irish Presidency of the EU, 2004, Department of US Defence 1995). The field appears problematic and suffers from ambiguity, because as stated earlier, there is a thin line between what constitutes acceptable, normal behaviours of courtship, flirting and sexual harassment. For instance, when a man induces a particular women to voluntarily interact with him, harassment is not present, even though improper institutional/unethical practices is (Benokratis 1997). It is only when individuals use their institutional power to force another individual to recognise or reward them sexually that harassment occurs.

Benokratis (1997), among others, defined sexual harassment as those forms of behaviour sexualizing persons without their consent, such as sexual touching, teasing or bullying, threats, insults and practical jokes. World Bank (1994) viewed sexual harassment as unsolicited and unwelcome verbal conduct such as sexually suggestive comment, while the non-verbal sexual harassment includes gestures or unwanted physical contact including leering looks, touching, pestering as well as the request for a date or sex. Such behaviour ultimately places the harassed at a disadvantage.

Sandler and Shoop (1997) conceptualize sexual harassment as unwelcome advances, request for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, and submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment or academic decisions affecting the person. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with the person's work or academic performance or creating an intimidating hostile or offensive work, learning or social environment. Their definitions include a range of behaviours, from sexual comments, jokes, looks to sexual pictures, web-pages, sexual messages, touches, grabs and so on.

Mackinnon (1979) similarly identified two types-*quid pro quo* harassment involving an exchange of sex for employment and educational benefits. The harasser is an employer, a supervisor or a teacher, who has power to punish the victim for non-compliance or to reward for acquiescence. The other type is hostile environment, that is, intimidating sexual advances (OCR, 1997). Webb (1995) conceives of sexual harassment as a deliberate or a repeated sexual or sex-related behaviour, that is unwelcome, not asked for and not returned, such as forced fondling, attempted or actual rape, sexual assault.

The definitions of Phyllis (1983) stressed three elements. It includes a wide range of sexual behaviour, repeatedly sustained behaviour with connotations of sexual relations, imposed by another. It also covers sexual coercion, a situation where someone is offered employment, resources or other favours if s/he is agreeable to sexual relations with the person doing the offering. It includes bribes or threats which may or may not be explicitly stated. The third type includes verbal, written or physical behaviour patterns that are degrading, ridiculous, insulting, hostile or harsh. It is gender harassment followed by unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion. Gelfand's definition appears quite comprehensive, covering many facets of the problem. He defined it as unreciprocal male behaviour that asserts a woman's sex role over her functioning as a student or worker.

Aryeetey, (2004) in a study of sexual harassment in Ghana stated that the concept suffers from ambiguity and is often confused with courting or playful flirting. Similarly, Effah and Osarenren (2001) undertook a national survey of the prevalence of violence against woman; of which sexual harassment is apart. Their depositions also covered the areas of concern in the study. Although the concept has been defined by many scholars, there is still the need to investigate students' perception of the problem of sexual harassment and their response to harassing behaviour as a starting point for generating awareness among students, leading to suggestions about institutional arrangements designed to tackle the problem. This is the focus of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive survey design to investigate what constitutes sexual harassment among selected university students in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria. Specifically the study was conducted using a total of four hundred respondents, randomly selected from the final year students in the Faculties of Education of the University of Lagos and Lagos State University, both situated in Lagos metropolis. The sample consisted of equal number of males and females with a mean age of twenty years. It was assumed that they were mature enough, have spent at

least three years in the university, and were likely to have some ideas/experiences about sexual harassment, as direct victims, witnesses and as a subject of discussion among them.

The research instrument was adapted from Bastian, Lancaster and Reyst (1995). It was in three parts. The first section focused on the bio-data of respondents. The second part requested respondents to give five definitions of sexual harassment, while the third presented a list of 40 examples of sexual harassment as defined by respondents, requesting samples to state how upset they would be if they encountered each of the conduct. They were requested to respond to the questions only in the context of college-related activities and events, such as in lecturers' office, in class, library and so on. The validity of the instrument had been established by the authors. However, the modified instrument was critiqued by two colleagues. Their comments and suggestions led to a refined version as used in the study.

The following assumptions guided the conduct of the study.

- i. Respondents were likely to perceive and therefore define sexual harassment differently, thus providing students' perspectives on the issue;
- ii. Female and male respondents would differ on what constitutes sexual harassment;
- iii. Respondents' experience of sexual harassment would vary across gender;
- iv. There will be gender difference in getting upset if respondents encounter any of the behaviours defined as sexual harassment;
- v. Respondents would suggest solutions to the problem of sexual harassment.

DATA ANALYSIS

Simple percentage was the main tool of data analysis. For ease of analysis respondents' definitions were categorised into six, listing examples of the specific behaviour that were deemed sexually harassing by respondents. The data are illustrated in the table below.

The below data clearly indicate that respondents perceived and defined sexual harassment in different ways, ranging from insinuations, innuendos to unwanted pressures that could be verbal, physical and even the most serious of sexual harassment, rape. In almost all the categories of definition, except the last one, that is indecent sexual dressing, a greater number of female than male respondents, defined sexual harassment under these categories. There appears to be a subtle form of harassment in terms of indecent sexual dressing. More males, 78 percent, than female respondents defined sexual harassment as indecent sexual dressing. For many of the male participants, dress styles such as 'see, through', low

cut necklines, long slits and bare back are labelled sexually provocative. Female respondents were in the majority in other categories, perhaps, because they

are usually at the receiving end of the behaviours listed.

Table 1: Respondents' definitions of sexual harassment

Behaviour	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Physical/sexual advances (touching, pinching, cornering, brushing up against grabbed, cornered, etc.	100 (25.0)	300 (75.0)	400 (100.0)
Persistent unwanted pressure (letters, phone calls, materials, pornographic/offensive sexual display.	99 (25.0)	30 (75.0)	400 (100.0)
Sexual advances that become a condition for grades/employment.	119 (30.0)	281 (70.0)	400 (100.0)
Repeated/unwanted verbal sexual advance (whistling, cat-calling, teasing, sexually derogatory statements/remarks.	139 (35.0)	261 (65.0)	400 (100.0)
Rape, attempted rape, sexual assault.	120 (30.0)	280 (70.0)	400 (100.0)
Indecent sexual dressing.	313 (78.0)	87 (22.0)	400 (100.0)

Table 1 also illustrates the finding in relation to the second assumption – that female and male respondents would differ on what constitutes sexual harassment. Data on table 1 indicate that while more female than male respondents perceive sexual harassment as persistent unwanted pressure, sexual advances that become a condition for grades/employment, as repeated/unwanted verbal sexual advances, rape, attempted rape, sexual assault and physical sexual advances, only between 25 – 35 percent of males conceived of sexual harassment under the above categories.

The third assumption was that respondents' experience of sexual harassment would vary across gender. Behaviours defined by respondents were categorised into three, namely physical sexual harassment, verbal and sexual assault. The data are shown on table 2 below:

Table 2: Respondents' Experience of Sexual Harassment by Gender

Behaviour	Male n = 200		Female n = 200		Total n = 400	
	No	(%)	No	(%)	No	(%)
Physically harassed (e.g. touched, pinched, pulling off/down clothes, brushed up against grabbed, cornered, etc.).	45	(23.0)	170	(85.0)	215	(54.0)
Verbally harassed (e.g. cat-calls, whistling derogatory remarks, phone-calls, etc.	8	(4.0)	162	(87.0)	170	(43.0)
Physically assaulted (e.g. attempted rape, rape, sexually assaulted.	0	(0.0)	18	(9.0)	18	(5.0)

As expected, the above data indicate gender difference in the experience of sexual harassment among sample. A greater number and percentage of females indicated that they had experienced sexually harassing behaviour in the three categories; 85 percent, 81 percent and 9 percent in physical, verbal

and sexual assault respectively. Fewer males than females 23.0 percent and 4.0 indicated that they have experienced physical and verbal harassment, while none reported sexual assault.

The fourth postulation was that female respondents would be more upset than their male counterparts if they encountered any of the behaviours they had defined as sexual harassment. The table below illustrates the finding.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents who indicated they would be upset by the behaviours defined as sexual harassment were directed at them

Behaviour	Male n = 200		Female n = 200		Total n = 400	
	No	(%)	No	(%)	No	(%)
Physically harassed (e.g. touched, pinched, pulling off/down clothes, brushed up against grabbed, cornered, etc.).	120	(60.0)	200	(100.0)	320	(80.0)
Verbally harassed (e.g. cat-calls, whistling derogatory remarks, phone-calls, etc.	80	(40.0)	180	(90.0)	260	(65.0)
Physically assaulted (e.g. attempted rape, rape, sexually assaulted.	190	(95.0)	200	(100.0)	390	(98.0)

Data on the above table seem to confirm the assumption. Almost all the female respondents indicated that they would be upset if they were victims of the above forms of sexual harassment, ranging from 100.0, 90.0 and 100.0 percent on the three categories of sexual harassment respectively, with 60.0, 40.0 and 95.0 percent for males. On the more serious violent form of harassment, almost all

male and female respondents, indicated they would be indignant if they were targets of sexual assault, rape or attempted rape in the percentage of 95 – 100.0 for males and females respectively.

Respondents were asked to suggest one solution each to the problem of sexual harassment. Their suggestions are summarized on table 4 below.

Solutions	Male	Female	Total
Creation of awareness/public anti-harassment campaign.	200 (100.0)	200 (100.0)	400 (100.0)
Universities should formulate appropriate policy and grievances procedures to deal with cases of harassment.	135 (68.0)	160 (80.0)	295 (74.0)
Civil society organisations should influence public opinion and action.	150 (75.0)	170 (85.0)	320 (80.0)
Laws against domestic violence will take care of sexual harassment.	147 (74.0)	182 (91.0)	182 (91.0)
Religious institutions to appeal to moral uprightness.	135 (68.0)	157 (79.0)	292 (73.0)
Students should comport themselves decently and respectably and face their studies to minimize unwarranted interactions with potential harassers	200 (100.0)	200 (100.0)	400 (100.0)

Respondents' suggestions seem to cover important segments of society that can lead to concerted effort at fighting sexual harassment, from the students themselves, university authority, government, civil society organisations, religious institutions and the general public.

In sum, the findings of the study include the following:

- Respondents gave different definitions of sexual harassment, ranging from physical, verbal to the more serious forms of sexual harassment.
- There was gender difference in samples' definitions.
- Respondents' experience of sexual harassment varies across gender.
- There was gender difference in feeling bad if they encountered sexual harassment; a greater percentage of female than male participants indicated that they would be upset.
- Respondents offered some solutions to the problem of sexual harassment.

From the findings respondents were able to define sexual harassment, some of them had experienced it in different forms; expressed their displeasure if confronted and finally provided some solutions thus indicating that they were quite aware of sexual harassment.

DISCUSSION

The first assumption of the study that respondents would perceive and therefore define sexual harassment in different ways, was confirmed. Their

definitions included physical sexual behaviours such as unwanted/offensive physical contact, such as touching, teasing grabbing, bullying, gestures, leering looks, pestering and so on (Phyllis 1983, Sadler and Shoop 1997; to verbally sexual suggestive behaviours such as profane humour, sexual jokes, derogatory remarks, cat-calls, whistling and so on (Benokraitis 1977; Bastian et al 1997; and Aryeetey (1998); 2004) to violent forms of sexual harassment, such as rape, attempted rape and sexual assault. For most of the respondents, several forms rather than one form of behaviour could be described as sexual harassment. It was also observed that sexual harassment was defined to include indecent sexy dressing by 78.0 percent of males and 22.0 percent of females, thus indicating sharper differences between the sexes in relation to more subtle forms of harassment such as indecent exposure (Aryeetey 2004). Dress styles such as 'see-throughs', low cut neck-lines, mini skirts, strapless tops, are in this category. All these were considered sexually provocative by 78.0 percent of males and 22.0 percent of females. Conversely, female respondents were in the majority in other categories of definitions.

As to whether respondents have been sexually harassed, as expected, a greater percentage of females than males, indicated that they have experienced the behaviours defined as sexual harassment in the three categories. For example, 85 percent and 81 percent of females have experienced physical and verbal harassment, such as being touched, grabbed, brushed-up against, or as objects of cat-calls, whistling, derogatory remarks and the like (Bastian et al 1995). Of course, more often than not, females are usually the object of sexual harassment, 23 percent of male respondents indicated that they have experienced physical harassment while 4.0 percent have been verbally harassed.

Similar to the findings of Bastian et al (1995) and Aryeetey (2004), majority of the samples, male and female indicated that they would be upset if they experienced any of sexually harassing behaviours. The reaction of respondents appear normal because to be sexually harassed is humiliating, eroding one's privacy, respect and self-worth, with consequences for one's psychological well-being (Benokraitis 1997). In the case of students, it is also most likely to affect academic work with implications for the quality of university education in Nigeria.

As stated earlier, Nigeria does not have official policy or action on the issue of sexual harassment, particularly in educational institutions except in the form of a general circular referred to earlier. However, the constitution guarantees individual freedom and rights, including human rights, particularly for females which sexual harassment usually challenges. Many other countries – the United

States, European Union countries, Canada and recently, Ghana have put in place policy statements on the issue. Part of the study therefore, requested respondents to suggest solutions to the problem of sexual harassment. Their responses form part of the recommendations below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations emanating from the study on sexual harassment among university students should lead to public education about harassment and the promotion of anti-harassment attitudes and behaviours which would pave the way to formulating policies and strategies to deal with the problem. There should be creation of awareness, public anti-harassment campaigns and sensitization, to draw attention to the abuse of women's rights by such acts. Public campaign can be at many levels – by government's appropriate agencies, such as National Orientation Agency, Youth Development Unit, Civil Societies, Women Organisations such as the National Council of Women Societies and its affiliates, which would pave the way to formulating policies and strategies to deal with the problem. Universities themselves should go beyond brochures, and be in the forefront, starting with orientation programmes for new students. The Students Affairs Departments should be strengthened for the job. Experienced and well-trained counsellors should be available in the right number to educate, train and counsel students on sexual harassment issues.

In addition, universities should formulate appropriate policy and grievance procedures, with appropriate punishments listed for offenders. The line of reporting cases should be clearly stated, from course advisers, to heads of departments, hall masters/mistresses and so on. Usually, victims of sexual harassment shy away from reporting such cases out of a feeling of shame and humiliation. The universities should therefore establish an office for sexual harassment where professionalism and confidentiality should be entrenched to encourage victims to lodge complaints. A confidential web-based method of lodging complaints of sexual harassment will go a long way in removing those obstacles, such as shame, self-pity and anger which victims suffer, and thereby encouraging them to report cases of sexual harassment.

Religious leaders have been suggested as important agency in the fight against sexual harassment. They should influence public opinion and action, through moral preaching and examples. They should also engage their membership in discussions on sex abuse in general and sexual harassment in particular. Religious and civil society groups, popular music, theatre and literature, and artistes, through their many media, should educate appeal, and mould and

remould individual and public opinion about sexual harassment.

Above all, there is the need to educate young people about sexuality, human rights and those of women. Assertive training right from the primary school will go a long way in empowering young people particularly girls to handle sexual abuse including harassment later in life. In addition, adequate and appropriate information/knowledge would result in healthy attitude towards one's sexuality and therefore self-assertiveness in such matters. It is expected that positive and constructive attitude would lead to appropriate behaviour, self-respect and respect for others.

In addition, young people particularly girls should always comport themselves in a decent and responsible manner. They should always dress and behave responsibly and not provocatively, because they are likely to be addressed as they dress. Students should be serious and face their studies to minimize unnecessary interaction with potential harassers. There is the need for children to recognise that sexual harassment exists and are exposed to training from an early age, including training to respect self and each other.

CONCLUSION

The paper focused on the definition and awareness of sexual harassment among selected university students in Lagos metropolis. The study assumed that sexual harassment which appears to be part of the educational experience of some students, should be better understood from students' perspectives, and therefore solution to it should also include students' input, as indicated in the present study. Awareness and knowledge of sexual harassment among respondents in terms of the various definitions given included unwelcome/unwarranted/sexual advances which could be physical and verbal. Even the more serious forms of rape, attempted rape and sexual assault were included. Not only were they certain about what constitutes sexual harassment, many of them had experienced it in different forms and felt insulted, violated, humiliated and angry.

The consequences of sexual harassment in any environment, workplace, particularly in educational institutions should be of concern to all stakeholders because of its grave consequences not only to students but also for the system as a whole. For instance, most commonly, students avoid the person who harasses them. Female students are more likely than male ones to have their educational experience disrupted, skip classes, drop a course or make a lower grade. Sexual harassment will always have negative consequences for academic work and should therefore be dwelt with by all institutions adopting a

clear-cut policy and some of the other solutions suggested.

Moreover, institutions should be concerned because sexual harassment may be a precursor to more violent forms of sexual aggression. Sexual harassment on campus, as mentioned earlier, has serious implications for students and grave consequences that go beyond the campus community. Attitudes and behaviours that are established in college will find their way into all aspects of society, from the workplace to family life. As important components of human and gender rights, it is important for colleges and other institutions to recognise sexual harassment as an unavoidable aspect of the teaching and learning process on campus and put in place machinery to tackle the issue, using some of the solutions proposed. Accepting sexual harassment on campus is the first step to unravel the secrecy hitherto surrounding its operations, leading to an open attack by all in order to make campuses safe and result-oriented for all.

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