

Gender Differences in Perception of Sexual Harassment among University Students

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Abstract

The investigation of gender differences in perception of sexual harassment among students was necessitated by the need to address interpersonal violence as a psychosocial problem. Though it has attracted much attention by universities in developed countries, it is not the case in Nigeria where the level of awareness among students and staff is low while the problem exists.

The survey utilized a 12- item sexual harassment scale designed for the research. Data collection involved a sample of 420 respondents (both male and females) who are students in various faculties in the University of Ibadan.

Findings revealed a high perception of sexual harassment on all the items, and females were higher than the males on all the sexual harassment items ($t=2.57$, $df=418$, $p<.05$). This confirmed the predicted hypothesis that male and females differ in their perception of what constitute sexual harassment in the university. The need to establish a center to handle sensitization of the university community about the contents and consequences of sexual harassment on one hand, and its prevention and control on the other was recommended.

Introduction

Sexual harassment as a psychosocial problem, constitute violence against the victim. As an organizational problem, it is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature which an individual considers offensive. Such dispositions constitute sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly as a term or condition for an individual to attain a goal, (2) submission to or rejection of such goal decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creating an

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intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment. A major element in sexual harassment is the perception that it challenges the victim's psychological well-being.

A sensational case was reported in 1992, when eight female students from the University of New Hampshire charged J. Donald Silva, a writing and communication professor, with sexual harassment (WAGE,1993). The charge was filed after Dr. Silva made in class comments that the students perceived to be a form of sexual harassment. As a result of his comment, Dr. Silva was suspended from his teaching position. In response, Dr. Silva took legal action and successfully returned to his position two years later (Honan, 1994; UNH,1993-1994). Although cases of sexual harassment in academia are becoming more frequent, majority of research on sexual harassment have been conducted in settings outside academia (Gutek, 1985; Murell, Olson, & Frieze, 1995). Despite the known consequences of sexual harassment on the victim, the attention it has enjoyed comes largely from researches that focus on workers in organizations. Not much has been done to consider the degree of its prevalence among university students, especially in sub-saharan Africa where there policies that address students' sexual harassment problems are rarely made. The Nigerian legal system provides little respite for victims of sexual harassment unlike developed countries where the legal system is more effective (Gregorio, 2002). Reported cases of sexual harassment in Nigeria are treated with levity. This is largely reinforced by cultural practices across sub-saharan Africa which encourages subtle aggression in negotiating sexual decisions. It is a situation that favours a more powerful individual as perpetrator over the victim. Yet it is a problem that silently isolates the victim psychologically.

The issue of sexual harassment and the associated impact on the target has been examined in a number of studies (Fitzgerald, 1998; Murrell, 1995). Results from previous studies have shown that 19-60% of the females surveyed reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment. Findings have shown clearly that sexual harassment in social settings does have negative impact on victims. Fitzgerald et al (1988) produced data revealing that when sexual harassment is experienced as intense and frequent, the victim reported feeling depressed, anxious, and exhibited physical problems. It is estimated that over 50% of all women have experienced sexual harassment in workplaces, and 20-30% of all university females have been sexually harassed (Gervasio & Ruckdeschel, 1992). However, this statistic does not include universities in sub-saharan Africa where there are almost no data on the issue.

Sexual harassment has been found by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as occurring in two forms: "quid pro quo," the solicitation of sexual acts in return for advances in career (Baird, Bell, Bensko, Viney, & Woody, 1995), and "hostile environment" the environment that exist as a result of unwelcome sexual advances, sexist or degrading statements and behaviours (Perry, 1993). In the past, quid pro quo sexual harassment cases were more likely to be successfully prosecuted in the court system than hostile environment sexual harassment cases. Most people find it easier to interpret the quid pro quo sexual harassment because it coincides with societal norms, which stress that advancement in career should be based on merit alone. Hostile environment sexual harassment appears to be less clear to people due to discrepancies about what constitute a hostile environment.

For instance, some people find jokes with a sexual content to be sexually harassing, while others see sexual jokes to be part of normal interaction in the work or school setting (Baird, et al., 1995). Therefore, a compelling research area is to examine individual's perceptions of what constitutes hostile environment sexual harassment. It is also important to explore perceptions of male and female students considering whether or not an incident is sexual harassment by using items that meet the standards identified in literature. In other words, would male and female students find an incident to be sexually harassing at the same degree?

In a study by Goodchild & Zelman (1984), it was found that behavioural implication of gender differences exist in perception of sexual interest. Many then find it difficult to understand why women see sexual advances on the job upsetting. On the other hand, men often see behavior that women characterized as harassment, as just good fun or even complimentary. It can be inferred from the above finding that a difference might exist in perception of sexual harassment between male and female students in the University.

In the U.S for instance, lower court cases offered the "reasonable woman" standard that has been used in determining if indeed an incident could legally be classified as sexual harassment. The reasonable woman standard takes into account the gender of the victim because research has established the existence of large gender differences in perceptions of hostile environment sexual harassment situations (Baird, et al., 1995). Therefore, studies of perception of sexual harassment may serve to further establish reasonable woman standards. Past research indicates that women are more likely to label various behaviours as sexual harassment than men are. For instance, women are more likely than men to consider sexual teasing, jokes, looks, and

gestures, as well as remarks from co-workers, to be sexual harassment (Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; Powell, 1986). Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1992) found that males felt more strongly than females that "people should not be so quick to take offense when a person expresses sexual interest in them." In their study, men were also more likely than women to believe that sexual harassment is overblown in today's society and that it takes place in business settings more often than in school settings. Although research tends to focus on harassment where the perpetrator is male and the victim is female, some studies have reported that males are frequent victims of sexual harassment. Mazer and Percival (1989) found that 89% of women and 85.1% of men reported at least one incident of sexual harassment. In addition, males reported an average of 5.6 incidents of sexual harassment in college, and females reported an average of 6.2 incidents of sexual harassment in college. Nevertheless, the number of sexual harassment complaints filed by men constitutes only a small percentage of the total number of sexual harassment complaints filed each year. Although sexual harassment is experienced by working men, the laws and guidelines are often written as if sexual harassment were a crime perpetrated solely by men toward women (Clay, 1993) – largely because this has historically been understood to be the nature of the problem, and continues to be evidenced disproportionately as such even to this day. These statistics merit the need for further investigation regarding male and female victimization in sexual harassment, especially in Nigeria where data are scarce on the topic.

Most of the past researches on hostile environment sexual harassment in university settings have focused on faculty-student sexual harassment. However, while 27% of participants reported receiving seductive remarks about their appearance, body, or sexual activities from professors, 44% of participants reported experiencing these types of remarks from fellow students (Daun, Hellenbran, Limberg, Oyster, & Wolfgram, 1993). This justifies the need to consider both male and female students on the degree of difference in assessing sexual harassment items. High incidence of lecturer-student's sexual harassment suggests that universities need to be more concerned with sexual harassment as a major psychosocial problem. There are no known policies in most sub-saharan African universities that address the problem.

Research suggests that most women avoid disclosing harassment for fear of losing their jobs and sabotaging their careers. For example, Gutek (1985) reported that 60% of the women in her sample who were sexually harassed, but chose not to report the incident(s) believed they would be blamed for the incident if they filed a formal complaint. Interestingly, another 60% of the women in her sample believed reporting sexual

harassment would be ineffective- primarily because they believed nothing would be done to correct the problem. Studies investigating victims of sexual harassment continually find that victims are afraid of being humiliated, not deemed credible, and hurting their chances of professional advancement in their organisation or career (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Gutek, 1985). These findings reflect a tip of the iceberg when Nigeria is considered. There are some cultural practices that prevent women from complaining about such issues, which are highly tolerable across sub-saharan Africa. Among universities in the region too, students do not evaluate their instructors/faculty members. This further create obstacle in addressing the problem when it occur. Therefore, a similar study in an African country become necessary because it might reveal a much higher percentage than what have been established in western countries where previous studies were conducted.

Another common criticism of women who claim to be victims of sexual harassment is often voiced thus: "Why didn't she just tell him the harasser to stop?" In fact, victims of sexual harassment often tell their harassers to stop, but their efforts usually do not reduce or terminate the harassing behaviour (e.g., Fiske & Glick, 1995; Kidder, Lafleur, & Wells, 1995). For example, one victim of sexual harassment at the University of New Hampshire reported: In addition, victims' refusals have often been reported to spur further harassment or threats of punishment from the harasser, which, in turn, tends to further compound negative impacts on the victim (Fiske & Glick, 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Kidder et al., 1995). Findings have consistently indicates that the degree of psychological damage experienced by female victims of sexual harassment was the same, regardless of subsequent punishment for the harasser.

While the incidence of sexual harassment in the corporate workplace has begun receiving more attention in Africa, up till now the incidence of sexual harassment in the academic workplace has been virtually ignored. The purpose of this investigation is twofold: (a) to examine the incidence of sexual harassment in an academic setting, that is, among students in a sub-saharan African university, and (b) to examine perceptions toward sexual harassment by both male and female students. This explains why the current study investigating differences in perceptions of sexual harassment based on gender among university of Ibadan students become important. Thus, it can be hypothesised that male and female participants will differ significantly in their degree of perceived sexual harassment. They would also differ in their view of sexual harassment items as highly negative. Finally, a high rate would be reported on each of the items measuring sexual harassment.

Methods

Participants: The study was designed as a survey. It had a sample size of 420 purposively drawn among students in the hostels across faculties in the University of Ibadan. There were 170 (40.5%) males and 250 (59.5%) females in the sample. Their mean age was 26 years (Sd= 3.71). All the participants have spent more than one semester in the University of Ibadan as at the time of data collection in this study.

Instrument: Data collection was done through the use of questionnaires that were designed and standardized for the study. Each questionnaire contained two sections of A and B. Section A solicited information concerning respondents age, sex, course and level of study. Section B of the questionnaire contained 12 items that measures student's perceived sexual harassment on the scale. It was found that eight of the original 20 items which were generated from literature and expert knowledge loaded at coefficient level of less than 0.20 when they were subjected to item analysis. Twelve of the items loaded between 0.43 and 0.71. They were then retained and used for the final analysis. The 12-item sexual harassment scale yielded a validity coefficient of 0.69 and a reliability coefficient of 0.65.

The scale was designed with a likert scoring format from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagreed (1). The higher the score the more the respondent perceive sexual harassment.

All the questionnaires were administered to the respondents in the halls of residence. Out of the initial 500 questionnaires that were distributed, 426 were returned and 6 were not completely filled. Hence, the remaining 420 were used analysed.

Results

The data collected were analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS-8) with descriptive statistics to show the characteristics of respondents. The descriptive statistics was also applied in analyzing the responses to each of the items in the sexual harassment scale.

The first item which stated that some female students in this school are blocked from passing exams for refusing sexual advances showed 79 of female respondents agreeing as against 34 of males in same direction representing (18.8%) and (8.1%) of the entire sample respectively.

The second item showed 223 females and 122 male respondents strongly disagreeing with the statement that there is nothing wrong in using position power to get sexual cooperation from students. This showed 82.1% of the entire sample disagreeing with the finding.

The third item which stated that female students are usually pressured to use what they have to get what they want

had 152 (36.2%) of the entire sample agreeing. With the fourth item, a total of 269 (64.0%) of the respondents strongly agreed that it is inappropriate for academic reward to be contingent upon sexual cooperation.

On item five, 179 (42.6%) respondents agreed that workers do harass female students for sexual favours to assist them. While 20.5% of the females agreed that complimenting female student about the shape of her body could be embarrassing, only 11.4% of the males agreed.

The seventh item identified winking at a female student by a worker is not an appropriate behavior. In the sample, 188 (44.7%) females agreed with the statement while 106 males representing 25.2% agreed.

Similarly, 117 (27.9%) females agreed that frequent and unsolicited visit to female student by a worker is a form of sexual harassment. There were 53 (12.6%) male respondents that agreed.

In the sample, 83 (19.8%) female respondents disagreed with the ninth item that touching and hugging of female students by male workers are normal. Another 75 (17.9%) females strongly disagreed. The males however, had only 15 (3.6%) and 46(11%) strongly disagree and disagreeing respectively.

The tenth item stated that repeated unsolicited and unwanted offer to help a female student would be termed sexual harassment. While a total of 108 (26.7%) females agreed that the statement can be termed sexual harassment, 67 (15.7%) male respondents agreed in same direction.

Telling vulgar and crude jokes was regarded as constituting sexual harassment by 202(48.1%) of the female respondents as against 90 (21.4%) males that perceive it in same perspective. Results based on analysis of the responses to item twelve indicated that starring at a female student by a worker was perceived as sexual harassment by 75 (17.8%) females. On the other hand, only 30 (7.1%) male respondents in the sample perceive it as sexual harassment. A look at the entire results of responses to each item shows that females reported higher scores than males on the perception of the twelve items as constituting sexual harassment. Scores on each item are presented in the Bar chart at the appendix section (see appendix 2-13).

Finally, an independent t-test was done to compare male and female respondents on the entire sexual harassment scale. The result is presented in the table 1:

A summary table of independent t-test result comparing male and females on perception of sexual harassment

Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	t	df	P
Perception of sexual harassment	Male	170	38.1	5.59	-2.57	418	<.05
	Female	250	39.6	5.54			

As shown in the table above, results confirmed the hypothesis that a significant difference will exist between male and females in their perception of sexual harassment ($t = -2.57$, $df = 418$, $P < .05$). The results showed that female respondents with a mean score of 39.6 perceived sexual harassment more than their male counterpart with a mean of 38.1. This indicates a significant gender difference in perception of sexual harassment.

Discussion

In line with previous studies, there are gender differences in male and females’ overall ratings of actions that constitute sexual harassment. This was the position among university of Ibadan students who assessed behavioural dispositions contained in the sexual harassment scale used in this study. Though much of the research on sexual harassment has largely focused on workplaces, the outcome of the present study shows that it exists in a sub-Saharan Africa university that was covered in the study. The present finding is in agreement with past research reported by Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; Powell (1986); Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1992) which showed that women are more likely to label various behaviours as sexual harassment than men are. For instance, women are more likely than men to consider sexual teasing, jokes, looks, and gestures, as well as remarks from lecturers, to be sexual harassment. As previously reported, males felt more strongly than females that “people should not be so quick to take offense when a person expresses sexual interest in them.” In the Padgitt study, men were also more likely than women to believe that sexual harassment is overblown and that it takes place in business settings more often than in school settings.

The present finding is similar to the above position, especially when a look at the responses showed female students identifying items in the scale to constitute sexual harassment more than their male counterparts on all the twelve items listed. The significant difference between both male and female students reported in the t-test result is an indication that there is a cross-cultural perception of sexual harassment by male and females, even among university students. The finding should not be surprising, especially when males’ attitude toward sexual relationship is considered in Africa. Despite the traditional held beliefs about males sexual domination of females in Nigeria, the

responses by the students that participated in this study showed a prevalence of sexual harassment. This is an indication that universities are as vulnerable to sexual harassment as work settings that have enjoyed much research attention.

The outcome of the present research carried out in an African university lends support to the need for more focus on sexual harassment as a psychosocial issue in universities. The current effort also add to a previous report where in 1992, eight female students from the University of New Hampshire charged J. Donald Silva, a writing and communication professor, with sexual harassment (WAGE,1993 reported by Cramer & Kellog). It can be concluded from both reports that sexual harassment in universities is a global problem since it occurs in both developed and developing countries (University of New Hampshire and University of Ibadan).

It is a common knowledge that cases of sexual harassment in academia are becoming more frequent. Unlike past efforts that focus majority of research on settings outside academia (Gutek, 1985; Murell, Olson, & Frieze, 1995), it has become necessary to place more emphasis on universities where female students have been known to drop out of school due to stressful experiences. Sexual harassment might be a major source of stress that can make a female student to drop out of school as a way of freeing herself from the associated problems. Despite the known consequences of sexual harassment on the victim, the attention it has enjoyed comes largely from researches that focus on workers in organizations. The school setting is equally a fertile ground for harassment, especially as it affects the female who can be stigmatized when she reports.

It can therefore be concluded as investigated in this study, that sexual harassment is highly prevalent at the University of Ibadan, but female students perceive it to exist more than their male counterparts. The major implication from the present investigation is that it could provide explanation for some of the psychological challenges that confront female students in the university. It is possible that a number of female students who are finding it difficult to do well in their academic exercises might be facing the problems of sexual harassment which many of them may not be willing to report. It is also possible that many students seeking change of course from their initial course at entry (a common experience in the university) might not be unconnected with sexual harassment experience in present department. A similar position was reported in developed country by Terry et al (2005). The inadequate knowledge about it is further hindered by the lack of known institutional policy to address such problem.

Recommendations

Findings from the present study have lent credence to earlier positions about sexual harassment as a psychosocial problem in work settings. The university as a social setting, like work-settings, is highly vulnerable to prevalence of sexual harassment. Therefore, the University of Ibadan as the oldest in Nigeria would be providing the lead when the authority/management considers the development of institutional policy to address it.

A salient recommendation based on the outcome of this study, is that the management of the university needs to consider the establishment of a center. It will serve to provide sensitization to all students, academic and non academic staff so that each person will have better knowledge about behaviours that constitute sexual harassment and the consequences on victims and perpetrators. This can be done through campus-wide seminars and hand bills distribution. A follow up will involve intervention programmes at the proposed center to assist victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment. All these would help in the prevention and control of sexual harassment as a psychosocial problem that have negative outcomes for the victims and the University.

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