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Strategies Used in Addressing Students' Sexual Harassment in Selected Secondary Schools in Kiambu and Nyamira Counties, Kenya

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) is a 'burning issue' and a 'silent problem' among students in many learning institutions across the globe. Nonetheless, there is paucity of data documenting the different strategies used by schools to address this vice which is causing many students untold distress leaving them feeling upset and disappointed. In 2001, The United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) expressed fear that unless something was done, student sexual harassment in secondary schools in Kenya would get out of hand as it was slowly registering itself as a growing vice. Certainly, several incidents of a sexual nature have been reported in Kenya's print and electronic media and in field reports testifying to the growing nature of the vice in schools. This descriptive survey research study sought to establish prevalent forms of SH and strategies used by secondary schools to address high school students' sexual harassment. The study, carried out in selected secondary schools in Nyamira and Kiambu Counties targeted 23,659 students, 678 teachers, 88 Deputy Principals and 88 Coordinators of Guidance and Counseling. Samples were obtained through purposive and proportionate random sampling techniques. Data was collected using questionnaires, interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides. Findings revealed that schools used varied strategies to address sexual harassment. Further, the findings revealed that besides school rules and regulations, most institutions preferred addressing SH through the guidance and counseling process. The study nonetheless recommended active stakeholder involvement with a view to stemming SH in schools.

Key Words: *Sexual harassment, prevalent, forms, strategies, secondary schools.*

1. Introduction

Research has established that students face different forms of maltreatment while in school some of which are sexual in nature (Wei & Chen, 2011). Globally, studies by the World Health Organization reveal that despite the existence of varied mechanisms to address sexual abuses, yet over 150 million girls and 70 million boys have suffered and continue enduring painful incidents of Sexual Harassment (SH) in learning institutions (WHO, 2008 & 2002). Thus, sexual harassment, a profound social and public health problem, is experienced in all countries in the world, across all racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups (Hussin, 2015). Researchers believe that SH is a growing epidemic in schools in various countries and consider it therefore a risk factor for lifelong problems including low self-esteem (Witt et al., 2018; Ondicho et al., 2019). According to Smit and Plessis (2011), SH is a 'burning issue' and a 'silent problem' (p. 173) which has unfortunately not received sufficient attention in the education sector yet it is causing many students distress leaving them feeling upset and disappointed. Whereas literature has documented the detrimental effects of SH on students yet not much has been written regarding the approaches used by schools in addressing this emergent vice.

Several definitions regarding SH have been proposed nevertheless, scholars have not agreed on the precise definition of what exactly constitutes SH. According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2011), SH refers to non-consensual sexual behaviour that is detrimental to the victim. Uduma, Samuel and Agbaje



(2015) believe that SH is any unwelcome comment, conduct or gesture directed towards an individual or group of individuals, which is offensive, intimidating, humiliating, malicious, degrading or unpleasant, and which is either repeated or of such significant nature, that it can negatively affect someone's performance. This definition looks at both the forms (e.g comments) and consequences of SH. The Ministry of Education, Kenya defines SH as unwelcome acts of a sexual nature that cause discomfort to the targeted person. These acts include words, persistent requests for sexual favours, gestures, touch, suggestions, coerced sexual intercourse and rape (MOE, 2007, P.v). Notably, SH may occur in the form of verbal sexual harassment, physical sexual harassment and visual sexual harassment.

Empirical studies have revealed that SH is an 'unfortunate part of school culture' which affects the educational experiences of millions of students especially in middle and high schools (AAUW, 2011. p. vii). In the United States of America, over 80% students report being sexually harassed while in school. In Canada, Britain, China, India and The Netherlands, SH is a growing problem both within and outside school. In the UK, an independent inquiry established that SH was especially prevalent in residential schools and many of the measures used to deal with the vice were largely unsuccessful (Ward & Roger, 2018). In Africa, SH ranging from constant derogatory verbal remarks to physical attacks such as rape and other types of Gender Based Violence (GBV) are regularly perpetrated on students (Bunyi, 2003).

In Kenya, in 1990, in a sex-related incident at the St Kizito Secondary school in the then Eastern Province, 19 female students lost their lives after they were raped by their male colleagues for failing to take part in a strike. In 2001, The United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) expressed fear that unless the Kenyan authorities acted, student sexual harassment would get out of hand as it was slowly registering itself as a growing vice in secondary schools (UNICEF, 2001). It is unfortunate that despite measures by the government including the enactment of the 2006 Sexual Offences Act (SOA), there is an escalation of sex-related incidents involving students in learning institutions.

In 2018, two girls were raped at Moi Nairobi Girls as they used the bathrooms at night despite security measures put in place including the presence of security guards to man the school premises during the day and at night. In March 2017, the principal of a national boys' secondary school from Nyanza region was interdicted for not taking action in a case in which a student was gang raped by form three and form four boys. In 2016, St. Caritas Mariana secondary school in Thika West was temporarily closed after students were sexual abused in the school headed by a Nigeria Priest (www.citizensnews.co.ke). In 2014, at Kakamega Boys high school, a male student was reportedly sodomised by peers. The same year, at Loreto Girls Msongari in Kiambu, a female student was forced to transfer school after she was fondled and touched as she slept. Several other secondary schools have previously reported sexual harassment cases including Keveye girls from Western Kenya in 1996, Mareira Mixed Secondary School in 1996, Bombolulu, Secondary School in 1998, Kangubiri Girls in Nyeri in 2006 and Hawinga Girls.

Article 34 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) obligates governments to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation by taking appropriate measures to prevent their occurrence (UNHR, 1990). Many countries that are signatory to the UN protocol have crafted laws and regulations governing sexual conduct. The American Association of University Women which has conducted substantial studies on SH especially in middle and high schools in the USA believes that with the right strategies put in place, SH in schools can be prevented (AAUW, 2004). Some of these strategies are legislative. The law in the USA mandates every publicly funded school to have in place sexual harassment policies and procedures (Robertson et al., 1988). It is reported that 79.9% such schools have met this requirement. This is probably why SH cases in schools in the USA have dropped from a high of 90% in 1997 according to a study conducted by the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education ((ACRWC) to 83% for girls and 78 % for boys in 2002 (AAUW, 2002) and further down to 66% for girls and 62% for boys in 2006 (AAUW, 2006). The AAUW in a manual designed at ending SH in schools proposes several mechanisms for the prevention of SH. The manual places a lot of responsibility on the student who is a potential harasser or 'harassee' including:

- Modelling appropriate behaviour by adults in schools
- Students telling those sexually harassing them to stop
- Reporting sexual harassment acts to a trusted adult
- Maintaining a School Sexual Harassment Policy (SSHP)
- Placing a penalty on perpetrators of SH (AAUW, 2004)



Implementation of the Conventions of the Rights of the Child (CRC) has pushed governments to craft home grown strategies to address SH directed at students. UNICEF (2016) observes that most of the crafted strategies are in South Asia. In Bangladesh, for example, an initiative dubbed 'Breaking the Silence' saw girls and boys form groups to send out messages against the sexual abuse of children. In Nepal, 'Girls Taking Action to End Sexual harassment' was started as an initiative by girls to educate boys and men on ways of making the environment sexually safe. In Delhi, 'The know violence in childhood initiative' was launched in 2014 aimed at developing strategies to end violence. Most of the strategies from the South Asian region aim at sensitizing stakeholders on GBV in schools, employing mentors and availing suggestion boxes for use to report cases of SH.

A study by Apriliana (2018) in schools in Indonesia established that Guidance and Counselling (G/C) was critical in the prevention of SH among students. Mohamed et al. (2015) on the other hand recommend the installation of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) to act as a psychological deterrent in monitoring the behavioural patterns of students, teachers and visitors besides reducing too much privacy in the school. This recommendation is based on the assumption that having more open spaces in school is likely to deter potential perpetrators hence saving victims. Mamaru et al. (2015) nonetheless, believe that as SH becomes much more common in educational settings, new strategies will continue to be sought to address it in order to curb its effects on students in schools.

Schools have a duty to ensure that students have a safe and conducive learning environment free from any form of sexual abuses including sexual harassment. Nonetheless, reports indicate that SH is on an upward trajectory in secondary schools in Kenya. It remains unknown however the prevalent forms of harassment and the strategies schools have put in place to address these rising cases which have the potential to affect students physically, academically, psychologically and emotionally.

2. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design embracing qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. The study was located in Nyamira South and Thika West sub counties of Nyamira and Kiambu Counties respectively. Majority of the inhabitants of Nyamira County are of the Abagusii tribe who are patriarchal by nature while the bulk of the inhabitants in Kiambu County are of the Agikuyu tribe who are matriarchal (Johnstone, 2002). Stratified simple and purposive random sampling designs were used in arriving at the desired sample. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using questionnaires, interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and presented in frequencies, percentages and tables while qualitative data were analyzed based on emerging themes and presented in narratives and in the voices of the informants. Consent was sought from the study participants prior to conducting the study. The ethics of anonymity and confidentiality were upheld during and after the study.

3. Findings and Discussions

Out of a sample of 18 schools, 17 schools (94.4%) participated in this study. One school rescheduled its exams to coincide with the data collection dates hence students were unable to be coopted into the study. Of these schools, 14(82.4%) were public and 3(17.6%) were private secondary schools of which 9(52.9%) were mixed secondary schools, 5(29.4%) were girls only secondary schools and 3(17.6%) were boys only secondary 176(45.4%) students were in the age bracket of 16-17 schools. This was expected given that there is a disproportionately higher number of mixed secondary school than single sex secondary schools in Kenya. The disaggregated data presented on table 4.1 reveals that there were slightly more female 199(51.3%) than male 189(48.7%) student participants in the study. In regard to age, years 160(41.2%) were between 14 and 15 years and 52(13.1%) students were above 18 years. Table 4.1 shows that 20(51.3%) teachers were female and 15(48.7%) were male. In terms of age 70.6% of the teachers were 21-35 years old and the rest (29.4%) were aged 36 years and above. This finding was significant to this study as the ages depict the youthfulness of majority of the teachers an aspect which may be interpreted to mean that the teachers lacked experience and firmness in addressing SH may not address matters of SH with firmness as the students may consider them young. It may also mean that the teachers' experience in handling issues of SH is still young.



Table 1 Respondents Gender and Age Profiles

Students' Age and gender Profiles	F	%
Gender:		
Male	189	48.7
Female	199	51.3
Age:		
14-5 years	176	45.4
16-17 years	160	41.2
18-19 years	52	13.4
Teachers' age and gender profiles	F	%
Gender:		
Male	15	48.7
Female	20	51.3
Age:		
21-25 years	9	26.5
26-30 years	8	23.5
31-35 years	7	20.6
36-40 years	2	5.9
Over 41 years	8	23.5

The study sought to find out the prevalent forms of SH.

Table 2: Prevalent Forms of Sexual Harassment

	Students' views		Teachers' views	
	F	%	F	%
Verbal sexual harassment	141	40.3%	19	70.4%
Physical sexual harassment	125	35.7%	4	14.8%
Visual sexual harassment	84	24.0%	4	14.8%

Findings on table 4.2 show that verbal sexual harassment was the most prevalent form of SH in schools followed by physical sexual harassment. Visual sexual harassment was the least prevalent according to 84(24.0%) teachers and 14.8% teachers. Studies by the AAUW found that unwanted sexual comments, jokes or gestures and name calling were quite prevalent in schools (AAUW, 1993 & 2001). Witkowska and Menckel (2005) in a study involving a sample of 540 students found that sexualized conversations, attractiveness rating, and name calling, comments about gender and sexual comments were the most prevalent forms of SH in Swedish schools.

Table 4.3 presents different actions taken to address SH in secondary schools in the study locale. These actions to majority of the teachers 17(25.0%) and students 139(18.8%) include punishing the perpetrators, referring them to the counselling office (17(25.0% teachers and 130(17.6%) students), suspending them from school (11(16.2%) teachers, 166(22.5%) students) and giving them a warning 9(13.2%) teachers, 109(14.7%) students).The results show that in very few instances was no action taken against the perpetrators.

Table 3: Actions Taken to Address SH in Schools

Action taken	Teachers' views		Students' views	
	F	%	F	%
The perpetrator is punished	17	25.0%	139	18.8%
The perpetrator is given a warning	9	13.2%	109	14.7%
The perpetrator is suspended from school	11	16.2%	166	22.5%
The perpetrator is asked to apologize	8	11.8%	97	13.1%
The perpetrator is referred to counselling office	17	25.0%	130	17.6%
The perpetrator is sent to the disciplinary committee	5	7.4%	72	9.7%



No action was taken	1	1.5%	26	3.5%
Total	68	100.0%	739	100.0%

Depending on the severity of the SH issue, a G/C coordinator reported that she was sometimes forced to refer the perpetrator of SH for more specialized counselling outside the school.

I have referred several such students to external counsellors especially when I realize they are not giving truthful stories. You know, some of these students come here giving us stories which do not add up. When I realize I am not making headway I refer them. Students who persistently harass others have a problem. At that point I have no option but to refer them for more specialized counselling outside the school. That is the only way I can assist them.

In some cases, action involved a reorganisation of the school. One deputy principal confessed thus:

As you know our school is officially registered as mixed school....We have been forced to have separate classes for boys and girls because the boys came to complain to us that the girls were sexually harassing them by demanding that they cuddle and touch them. Initially the boys were happy but when the demands became too much the boys decided to report. We took a drastic step as a staff. We now have separate classes for boys and girls...

Findings indicated that whereas more than 50% of the teaching staff were satisfied with the actions taken to address SH in their schools 53.7% of the students were either moderately satisfied, slightly satisfied or not satisfied at all with these actions as shown on table 4.3.

Table 4: Respondents’ Levels of Satisfaction of Actions Taken to Address SH

	Teachers’ views		Students’ views	
	N	%	N	%
Very satisfied	14	51.9	132	46.3
Moderately satisfied	5	18.5	47	16.5
Slightly satisfied	6	22.2	34	11.9
Not satisfied	2	7.4	72	25.3
Total	27	100.0	285	100.0

Further results revealed that 88.2% of the schools had rules and regulations governing the sexual conduct of students. In some schools these rules and regulations had been in place for a period spanning more than 8 years. This was confirmed during the interviews with a deputy principal:

We have clear rules regarding sexual harassment. We do not tolerate use of foul and disrespectful language in school. We consider language with sexual overtones as foul and disrespectful. We also do not allow students to come to school with mobile phones for fear they may misuse them wrongly to access sites they are not supposed to or to communicate love messages and organize for rendezvous. However, what they do with these phones outside school is beyond our control.

The study further sought teachers’ opinions on the effectiveness of the school rules and regulations in dealing with SH. The findings are summarized in figure 1.

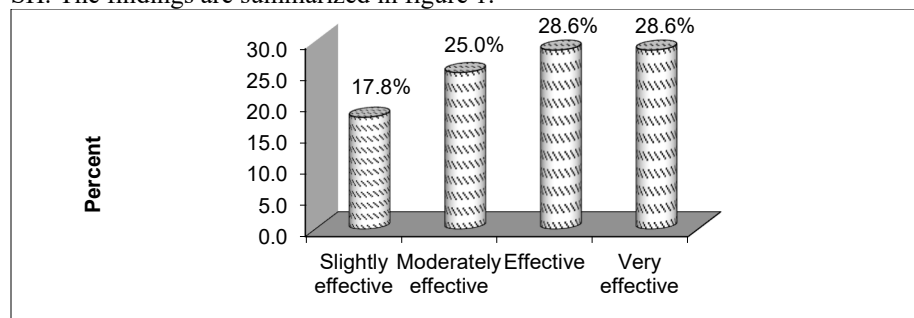


Figure 1: Teachers’ Opinions on the Effectiveness of Sexual Harassment Rules and Regulations



From figure 4.1 it can be discerned that majority 16(57.2%) of teachers were of the view that the school rules and regulations were either very effective or effective in addressing SH incidents among students. The remaining 42.8% teachers were of a contrary view. Their responses revealed that the rules and regulations were only moderately or slightly effective probably explaining the escalating cases of SH in schools. Literature has established that in schools where there are clear and effective guidelines and procedures of dealing with cases of sexual abuse, the number of reported cases is significantly reduced (AAUW, 2004). However, much more needs to be done by teachers to ensure that SH is eliminated in schools. The USA department of Education places the responsibility of instituting measures to address SH on the teacher (OCR, 2008). In S. Africa, the *in loco parentis* principle also demands that teachers ensure students are protected while in school (De Plessis et al, 2011).

As shown on table 4.5 Guidance and Counselling emerged as the most effective strategy in the consideration of teachers that schools can use to address SH. According to the findings of Bendixen et al. (2018) on SH in school in Norway students who have been sexually harassed need psychosocial support which is best provided under the armptit of a trained counsellor in schools. Bendixen et al. established that psychosocial support will increase students' levels of awareness which in turn will guide students in determining effective actions to take to address the challenges of SH.

Table 5: Teachers Perceptions on Effective Strategies of addressing SH

Strategy	F	%
Counselling of both the victims and perpetrators	19	55.9
Creating awareness of SH	2	5.9
Follow school regulations and encourage self- esteem	2	5.9
Emphasis on Parental care	1	2.9
Perpetrator to be sensitized of the dire consequences of sexual harassment	1	2.9
Consider it a criminal offense and Punish the criminal	6	17.6
Suspending student perpetrators of sexual harassment	1	2.9
Teaching Life Skills in Education	1	2.9
Tracing the students with sexual cases and advising them so that they can understand themselves	1	2.9

Table 4.5 shows that 17.6% teachers expressed the view that SH should be considered criminal even within the school and the offender punished. However, 10% of the teachers proposed increased creation of awareness, sensitization on the dire consequences of SH, following school rules, and increased parental care as well as behaviour change through talk. One key informant remarked:

There is need for behaviour change. Talking and talking is the only way out this can be achieved. Some of the students who harass others do not the consequences but when they get to a level and they discover what they were doing was wrong they will change. For now they feel think it is normal. So let's keep talking to them.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study revealed that schools addressed sexual harassment in different ways. Nonetheless, the findings revealed that punishment was one of the key actions utilized by the schools. Majority of the teacher respondents most likely based on their experience considered guidance and counseling as a most effective way of dealing with SH in schools. This finding presents a need for serious reflection on all stakeholders in the field of education to consolidate their efforts, skills and knowledge to address sexual harassment in schools in a manner considered satisfactory to the victims in schools.

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