

Prevalence of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, southeast Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Objective

To assess the prevalence, types and consequences of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in the University.

Methodology

This was a cross sectional descriptive study. Using a cluster sampling method, 295 female students resident in the four campuses of the university were recruited and interviewed with a structured interviewer-administered questionnaire.

Results

One hundred and eight (36.7%) of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment/victimization at least once on campus. Out of this, 35 (32.4%) were forced sexual intercourse while 73 (67.6%) were other forms of unwanted sexual contact including indecent touch, romance and kisses. Majority 53 (49.1%) of the perpetrators were fellow students. Similarly, majority 55 (50.9%) of the harassment/victimization took place in the student's residence, 27 (25.0%) took place at staff offices while 26 (24%) took place in other venues including hotels. The most common adverse consequence of the sexual harassment/victimization was psychosocial distress (89.8%) followed by poor academic performance (56.5%) and sexually transmitted infection (6.5%). However, 12 (11%) of the victims claimed that the harassment resulted to an improved academic performance. Being older (= 30 years) and being married were significantly more associated with being victimized.

Conclusions: About a third of female students in Ebonyi State University had been sexually victimized or harassed. Fellow students were responsible for most of the incidents followed by academic staff and other university employees. Most incidents occurred in the students' hostels or residences and older students and those who were married had higher risk of being harassed

INTRODUCTION

Sexual victimization/harassment has various definitions in research literature. Some authors have defined it as an event in which one person attempts to obtain a sexual behavior (and this includes any unwanted sexual contact) from another individual against her or his wishes using some sort of physical force and / or psychological coercion.^{1,2} Others defined it as any attempt to coerce an unwilling person into a sexual relationship or unwanted sexual attention, for which a refusal to comply attracts a punishment.³ Some other authors defined it as the use of influence, position or power by a male to get a female to satisfy his sexual desires.⁴

In 1989 in Nigeria, a committee of the National Council on Education (NCE), the highest policy making organ in matters of education in Nigeria, was set up by the then Minister of Education, Professor Jubril Aminu, at the instance of the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) to investigate the occurrence of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in Nigerian Universities. The committee's working definition of sexual harassment/victimization was: "*sexual exploitation of an innocent, unsuspecting, helpless or needy individual by another person, who is usually in an advantaged position and who derives pleasure from his/her exploits; the advantaged position may be related to examination marks, employment, admission, scholarship, promotion, material acquisition, eloquence and vital information*".⁵

Within the school setting, sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of unwelcome sexually oriented and gender offensive behaviours that contribute to a hostile learning environment. Such behaviours can be conceptualised on a continuum ranging from the fairly mild to the extreme.⁶ The extreme ones include subtle pressure for sexual activity, physical assault of a sexual nature and outright demand for sexual

favours accompanied by implied or overt threats concerning one's grades.⁷ The fairly mild forms include unnecessary touching and pinching, sexist remarks, leering or ogling and verbal abuse.⁸ Thus, in studies of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in universities and colleges, some scholars have tried to differentiate rape or attempted rape from coercive experiences and stated that the correlates of these two experiences were qualitatively different.^{9, 10} The differences were as follows: (1) Rape and attempted rape involve the use of physical force but coercive experiences results from verbal and emotional pressure; (2) Rape events were more likely to occur under the influence of alcohol /drugs on the part of either the victim or the perpetrator but coercive events may not necessarily involve either the perpetrator or victim being under the influence of alcohol or drugs; and (3) the perpetrators of rape events were more likely to be strangers or acquaintances while in coercive events, perpetrators were more likely to be steady partners. They contended that this distinction is important if preventive measures were to be instituted against behaviours that increase vulnerability to both in schools.

For the purposes of this study, we adopted the definition of sexual harassment/victimization of female students to be any attempt to coerce an unwilling female student into a sexual relationship or unwanted sexual attention which may range from the mild to the extreme forms, for which a refusal to comply attract an implied or overt punishment. Sexual harassment/victimization of female university students results from the increase in dating and sexual relationships during this time as well as from ethical erosion in universities.^{11,12}

Three theoretical models have been postulated to explain the occurrence of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in universities. The first is the socio-cultural

model which views harassment as the enforcement of the gender role inequalities in the social system. This model contends that the prevailing patriarchal system subordinates the position of the woman to that of the man. Thus, sexual harassment is seen as a tool of domination to keep the woman perpetually subordinated to men. The second is the natural/biological model. This model posits that the behaviours interpreted by women as harassment were not intended to harm or harass, but that men are naturally aggressive in pursuing their sexual urges. The third model is the organizational model which posits that the existing hierarchical authority relations and structures in organizations are responsible for the incidence of sexual harassment.¹³

Studies from across the globe show that sexual harassment/ victimization of female university students is prevalent. In the Americas, prevalence rates ranged from 15% to 78% depending on the specificity and detail of the questions asked and the reference time period, and samples varied from very large national samples to small isolated samples of single universities or colleges.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

Similar results were obtained from African studies. For example, in Malawi, the study conducted in Chancellor College of the University of Malawi revealed a prevalence rate of 67% on campus, out of which 12.6% were rape cases.¹⁹ In Uganda, 33.1% of female students of Mbarara University of Science and Technology have experienced sexual victimization on campus.²⁰ In Ethiopia, a study carried out among female students of higher institutions in Mekelle town of northern Ethiopia showed prevalence of sexual victimization in a life time, since entering college and in the academic year the study was done as 45.4% (95%CI: 42.4, 48.4), 34.4% (95%CI: 31.5, 37.3) and 28.1% (95%CI: 25.3, 30.9) respectively.²¹

Studies from Nigeria also show similar high

prevalence rates of sexual victimization of female students. In a study conducted among respondents from four higher institutions in Borno State Northeast region of Nigeria (University of Maiduguri, Ramat Polytechnique, Borno State School of Nursing and Midwifery and School of Nursing University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital), a prevalence of 13.8% was found.²²

In a study conducted among female students in higher institutions in Anambra state in the southeast region of Nigeria, it was reported that sexual victimization appeared to have indirectly become legitimized. A practice called "*inconvenience allowance*" by male faculty and staff, and "*sorting*" by students was described whereby female students were expected to pay their way through examinations by sexual gratification of the teachers.²³ A similar study conducted among female students of four tertiary institutions (Obafemi Awolowo University [OAU], Ladoke Akintola University of Technology [LAUTECH], Osun State College of Education [COLLEDU], and Osun State College of Technology [OSCOTECH]) in Osun State Nigeria concluded that sexual harassment is a common crime against women undergraduates in the state. In that study, prevalence of sexual harassment/victimization ranged from 16.3% in OSCOTECH to 28.9% in OAU.²⁴

In a study assessing integrity in the Nigerian university system, major stakeholders of the university system comprising of university administrators and senior academics identified sexual harassment/victimization of female students as one of the factors eroding the integrity of the university system and rated the ability of the universities to curb sexual harassment/victimization of female students at a lowly 28.3%. The study found that 86% of the academic staff in the sampled universities had sexually harassed a female student at one point or the other in his teaching career. Respondents in that study

cut across the six geopolitical zones of the country.²⁵ Another study conducted at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta reported that sexual harassment of female students was prevalent but under reported.²⁶ In studies that have examined the perpetrators of sexual harassment/victimization of female students, perpetrators include male lecturers,^{5,25-27} male peers,^{6, 28-29} other university staff and occasionally those outside the university system.^{22,26}

Several factors have been identified as predisposing factors of sexual victimization of female university students. These include a girl child's experience of sexual victimization at a younger age,³⁰⁻³¹ alcohol consumption,³² having a relatively high number of sexual partners,³³ and male university students' perception that forced sexual intercourse is justified when the woman initiates the date and the man pays the dating expenses.³⁴

Sexual harassment/victimization is known to produce a hostile learning environment for the female student. It is a critical stressor that threatens not only the performance of students individually and collectively, but also the general functioning of the institutions.²⁷ Lecturers who demand sexual gratification from students in exchange for grade or who make sexual gratification a condition to get good grades not only make learning environment hostile but also fail in their responsibility to stimulate students to work to their potential.²³ Unethical behavioural experiences from faculty, staff and peers destroys female students' self esteem, self-efficacy, and self worth. With the presence of sexual harassment in colleges and university campuses, it would be difficult for students to associate and to socialize actively with faculty and peers thereby limiting the opportunities for academic and social growth.²³

Despite anecdotal evidence of pervasive prevalence of sexual harassment/victimization of female students in Ebonyi State University, the authors do not know of any empirical study carried out to verify this phenomenon. This study was therefore aimed at filling this vacuum. The goals of the study included assessing the prevalence of sexual harassment/victimization, the types of sexual victimization going on, the perpetrators of sexual victimization and the associated adverse consequences on the victims. It is hoped that this will provide a baseline data that could help the university authority design an adequate response to the problem.

METHODOLOGY

Background

Ebonyi State University (EBSU) is located in Abakaliki, the capital of Ebonyi State southeast Nigeria. It was established in 1997 after the creation of Ebonyi State out of the old Enugu and Abia states in October 1996. There are currently 10 faculties in the university namely: Agriculture and Natural Resources, Management (FARM), Law, Biological Sciences, Natural Sciences, Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Medicine, Education, Management Sciences, Social Sciences, and Arts. The university in addition runs a part-time programme known as Work and Study Programme (WASP). There are also postgraduate programmes at the Master's and Doctoral levels in the various departments.

Study design

This was a cross-sectional descriptive study conducted during the period of January to June 2010.

Sample size and sampling technique:

The required minimum sample size was determined using the formula for sample size determination when the total population is less

than ten thousand ($nf = n/1 + \{n/N\}$; and $n = Z^2PQ/D^2$). (From the school registry, the total number of female students was put at a little over six thousand). An estimated prevalence of 13.8% from the study in Borno state²⁶ was assumed. A minimum sample size of 177 was thus calculated using the formula above. This was increased to 200 to account for attrition but at the data collection stage, 295 female respondents were interviewed.

Respondents were recruited from the private hostels around the four campuses of the university. The four campuses were visited and the hostels identified and numbered. Attempt was made to exclude normal residential houses where families and non-students shared accommodation with student tenants. Very small hostels where less than 20 students live were also excluded. At the end, 28 hostels were selected as suitable to be used for the study. This was not evenly distributed around the campuses. Ishieke campus had the highest number of hostels as they catered for students in both the Ishieke and Permanent site campuses. Thus, Ishieke and Permanent site had 15; Presco had 8 and CAS had 5 hostels. The hostels were not built in an orderly manner and were not designated as male or female hostels. A room that is confirmed to have a female tenant was visited at least three times at different times of the day for recruitment and interview appointment. All the female tenants in every room in the hostels selected and visited, and who consented was enrolled into the study. At the end of the data collection, 295 female students were interviewed.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of two sections with 20 items. Section one consisted of 5 items eliciting information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Section two consisted of 15 items that elicited information

on respondent's awareness of the occurrence of sexual harassment/victimization on campus, respondent's personal experience of sexual harassment/victimization and / or knowledge of someone who has been sexually harassed /victimized in the past, and the behaviours perceived as sexual harassment/victimization by the student. If respondent has personally experienced sexual harassment/victimization on campus, she was asked the level of study when she had the experience, the circumstances of the victimization (did it involve threat to life with a weapon, perpetrator physically overpowering her, under the influence of alcohol or drug by either the perpetrator or victim or both, or was due to coercion and psychological pressure); the venue, and who the perpetrator (Student peer or staff); the adverse effects of the experience on the victim . Finally, respondents were also asked if they reported the incident to the school authority.

Data was analyzed using Epi-Info software package version 3.5.1 (2008 edition). Frequency tables and percentages were constructed. Perception of sexual victimization and experience of sexual victimization were cross-tabulated against sociodemographic variables and circumstances of the victimization. The strength of association was tested using the Chi square statistic. Significance value was set at $P < 0.05$.

Ethical clearance

The ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital research ethics committee. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each respondent before the questionnaire was administered.

RESULT

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. Majority of

the respondents were between the age group of 20-24. The Table shows that those who were less than 20 years of age were 16 (5.4%), those between 20-24 years were 156 (52.9%), those 25-29 were 84 (28.5%) and those aged 30 and above were 39 (13.2%). Majority 262 (88.8%) were single while 33 (11.2%) were married. With respect to the campus of residence, Ishieke had 87 (29.5%) of the respondents, Permanent site had 84 (28.7%) of the respondents, CAS had 67 (22.7%), while CHS had 57 (19.3%) of the respondents respectively. See Table 1.

Awareness, Prevalence and level of study when sexually harassed/victimized

Majority 265 (89.5%) of the respondents were aware that sexual harassment/victimization of female students do occur on campus. However, 108 (36.7%) have had a personal experience of sexual harassment/victimization, out of which 29 (26.4%) know someone else who has been sexually harassed/victimized. The level of study when student was sexually harassed/victimized showed that majority 43(39.5%) were 100 level students, 35 (32.4%) were 200 level students, 21(19.8%) were 300

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (n = 295)
Age:		
< 20	16	5.4
20-24	156	52.9
25-29	84	28.5
..	39	13.2
Marital Status:		
Single	262	88.8
Married	33	11.2
Campus:		
CAS	67	22.7
CHS	57	19.3
ISHIEKE	87	29.5
PERMANENT SITE	84	28.5

Table 2. Awareness, personal experience and level of study when sexually victimized

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Aware of female students' risk of sexual victimization in this University? (n = 295)		
YES	265	89.5
NO	30	10.3
Have you personally experienced sexual victimization in this university before? (n = 295)		
YES	108	36.7
NO	187	63.3
Do you know any other student who has been so victimized? (n = 108)		
YES	29	26.4
NO	79	73.6
Level of study when victimized? (n = 108)		
100 level	43	39.5
200 level	35	32.4
300 level	21	19.8
= 400 level	9	8.3

Table 3. Perpetrators, Type, Venue, adverse effects and actions taken by victims, of sexual victimization

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (n = 108)
Perpetrator of sexual victimization:		
Fellow Student	53	49.1
Lecturer	43	39.8
Non-academic staff	12	11.1
Type of sexual contact obtained by perpetrator:		
Complete sexual contact (Penetrated vaginal sex)	35	32.4
Unwanted touch (Forced deep romance, indecent touch and deep kisses)	73	67.6
Venue of sexual victimization:		
In the victim's hostel residence	55	50.9
In the perpetrator's office	27	25.0
In a hotel	13	12.0
Other venues (Open field, dark alleys, classroom)	13	12.0
Effects of sexual victimization*:		
Poor academic performance	61	56.5
Improved academic performance	12	11.0
Psychosocial distress	96	89.8
Sexually transmitted infection	7	6.5
Reported incidence:		
To school authority	12	11.1
To parents/religious leader	25	23.1
To a friend	71	65.8

* Respondents ticked more than one option.

Table 4. Factors associated with sexual victimization

	Sexually victimized			
	Yes	No	Total	
Age:				X^2
< 20	5	11	16	=
20-29	82	158	240	9.09;
= 30	23	16	39	P<0.01
Marital status:				
Single	87	175	262	X^2
Married	18	15	33	=
				5.82
				P<0.02

DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that sexual harassment/victimization of female students in Nigerian universities have been widely studied, the problem has continued unabated. This study was undertaken to empirically document the occurrence and prevalence of sexual harassment/victimization of female undergraduates in Ebonyi State University Abakaliki. The prevalence of 36.7% recorded in this study is similar to the findings from similar studies abroad,⁷⁻¹⁰ and locally.²⁴⁻²⁶ It is outrageous that one out of every three female undergraduate student in this study had experienced sexual harassment/victimization in school.

Sexual harassment/victimization of female undergraduates is a cankerworm that has to be fought vigorously in our universities because of its adverse consequences. First, it poses a moral danger for everyone and especially for the university system. This is because sexual coercion has been causally linked to a range of risky sexual behaviours such as early sexual debut, many sexual partners and inconsistent condom use that increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.³⁰⁻³⁴ Second, sexual harassment/victimization coupled with other gender-related problems jointly militate against the progress of women in higher education in Africa.^{23,35} Sexual harassment/victimization is known to produce a hostile learning environment for the female student. It is a critical stressor that threatens not only the performance of students individually and collectively, but also the general functioning of the institutions.²⁷ Lecturers who demand sexual gratification from students in exchange for grade or who make sexual gratification a condition to get good grades not only make learning environment hostile but also fail in their responsibility to stimulate students to work to their potential.²³ Unethical behavioural experiences from faculty, staff and peers destroys female students' self esteem, self-

efficacy, and self worth. With the presence of sexual harassment in colleges and university campuses, it would be difficult for students to associate and to socialize actively with faculty and peers thereby limiting the opportunities for academic and social growth.²³ Students who get involved in the learning process through continuous interaction with instructors and peers excel in their studies, and the most persuasive form of involvement are academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups,³⁶⁻³⁸ and results from the study among female college and university students in Anambra state showed that the perception or fear of sexual harassment from faculty or peer prevented approximately 39.5% of female undergraduates from seeking academic help from instructors and peers, 20% from socializing with their peers and led about 25.2% into alienating themselves from their academic community.²³

In our study, older students (= 30 years) and married students were significantly more harassed/victimized than their younger and unmarried colleagues. This finding differed from the findings of the study amongst tertiary institutions in Osun State.²⁴ These associations could in part be explained by the findings of two previous studies in Nigeria, one from Ebonyi State University and the other from the University of Ilorin in southeast and southwest Nigeria respectively.³⁹⁻⁴⁰ Those studies compared the academic performance of married and unmarried female medical students and found that the married female students were older, had more re-sit examinations than their male and single female counterparts, and concluded that marriage and child bearing which play a central and prominent role in the traditional African culture, may serve as an additional burden on the Nigerian female medical student, affecting her academic performance. It is possible that these older married female students who were sexually harassed/victimized in the present study had more academic problems than the

others that made them either more vulnerable or more desperate. One study conducted in southwest Nigeria showed that female students who were weak academically propositioned their academic teachers in exchange for academic rewards.²⁷ Our data lends some credence to this as 11% of those who experienced sexual harassment/victimization in our study claimed that it affected their academics positively. It is possible that such victims may have actually engaged in sexual intercourse in exchange for 'assistance' in their academic problems, either with fellow students or with academic staff. Nevertheless, a 'quid pro quo' basis for sexual relationship is not acceptable especially in the university environment. The finding that majority (50.9%) of the sexual harassment/victimization occurred in the students' residences might have resulted from the non-residential nature of the university that made students live independently. Private hostels without any form of control by the university authorities have sprung up around the four campuses of the university and anecdotal evidence abounds that male and female students co-habit in the same room. As one study¹⁸ noted, though youths' living arrangements have received little attention in the literature, there may also be associated victimization risk as college students who live independently are likely to be more vulnerable than their counterparts who reside with their parents.

Experiencing sexual victimization in adolescence or young adulthood can have far reaching consequences including unwanted pregnancy and increased risk of psychological, sexual and reproductive health problems.¹⁹⁻²⁰ This agree with our findings. Thus, 89.8% of the respondents in our study suffered psychosocial distress and 6.5% claimed that they had one form of sexually transmitted infection or the other following the experience.

In our study, none of the victims of sexual harassment/victimization reported to the school authority. This finding is different from the findings of another study in Nigeria where up to 8.8% of the respondents claimed to have reported to the university authority.²⁴ Majority of the victims rather disclosed their experience to friends, parents or religious leaders. Though we did not enquire from our respondents the reasons for not reporting their experiences to the university authority, findings from similar studies show that victims of sexual harassment/victimization in universities are apprehensive of reporting such cases because of fear of the outcome and because of the perceived tendency to have cases swept under the carpet by the school authority, as many Nigerian universities do not have effective grievance procedure and clear policy guidelines on sexual harassment in their institutions.^{3,23,24,27}

C O N C L U S I O N A N D R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

There is a high prevalence (36.7%) of sexual harassment/victimization in Ebonyi State University and 32.4% of the times, it involved forced sexual intercourse. Most of the cases of sexual harassment occurred in the students' residences and student peers were the commonest perpetrators. The adverse consequence of the sexual harassment/victimization for majority of the victims was psychosocial distress followed by poor academic performance. However, some others claimed that the harassment resulted to an improved academic performance. None of the victims reported her experience to the school authority.

There is the need to create a general awareness of the phenomenon of sexual harassment/victimization amongst both students and staff in the school, especially during the yearly orientation programme for fresh students. Efforts at creating attitudinal change through teaching courses that would

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