

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Knowledge and Perception of Sexual Harassment in an Institution of Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To find out if Sexual Harassment existed at a higher institute of learning and explore perception of sexual harassment in the university community and to make recommendations based on the findings.

**Methodology:** This was a cross sectional study that collected both primary and secondary data. The participants included 913 students, 90 academic staff and 97 non-academic staff who were selected from within the university community. Questionnaires were administered in class for the students and individually with staff members after obtaining informed consent. Secondary data records from 1996 to 2006 on issues to do with sexual harassment from Registrar's department, Deans of students, counselling center, at the university clinic and records from staff and students were collected.

**Results:** The study found that the majority of the participant (54.1%) knew what sexual harassment was. It was further found that Fifty seven (57%) of the respondents acknowledged that Sexual Harassment does occur at the university with more females indicating the occurrence of Sexual harassment acts. There was however a discrepancy in the understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment with the students being the least to identify sexual harassment acts. The study also revealed that that more female; students and non-academic staff identified more forms of sexual harassment acts and behaviour than the male participants.

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**Conclusion:** It could be concluded that Sexual harassment may be a problem at the university. However, despite the varying responses on perceptions of the occurrence of sexual harassment, a university sexual harassment policy should be formulated and implemented at the university in order to deter the would be harassers and protect the potential victim

## INTRODUCTION

Universities have a diverse population made up of students, teaching staff, non teaching staff as well as support staff and interpersonal relationship is established between the various individuals at the universities.

Sexual harassment is said to be a form of social control by men to 'keep women in their places'. In spite of its importance the issue of sexual harassment occurring in institutions of higher education throughout the world, for many years this issue was never discussed by researchers. Sexual Harassment seems to be common in higher education institution, it is estimated that 20-30% of all college women have been sexually harassed.

There are various definitions of sexual harassment that have been given, but in this study we used the definition of sexual harassment as given in the University of Zambia Sexual Harassment policy. According to this policy, sexual harassment is defined as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects a person's employment or education, unreasonably interferes with a person's work or educational performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive working or learning environment."

Harassment may occur between anyone, and it is also common between members in the campus community; students, faculty, staff, and administrators. It is estimated that over 50% of all women have been sexually harassed. It generally occurs when the harasser holds a position of real or perceived authority over the other individual. Harassment can occur anywhere on campus environment at Universities, this includes classrooms, the workplaces, or student hostels. Sexual harassment experiences have more often than earlier been included in the framework of stress, thereby being seen more as a result of how the work organization function rather than being a result of poor characteristics among individuals. An evaluation of reporting and discipline indicates that overall 1.4% of cases concluded with formal discipline of the perpetrator.

Two types of sexual harassment can be identified by literature: "quid pro quo," the solicitation of sexual acts in return for advances in employment and "hostile environment," the environment that exists as a result of unwelcome sexual advance, or sexist and degrading statements and behaviour. Hostile environment harassment appears to be less clear to people because there are often inconsistencies about what constitutes a hostile environment.<sup>6</sup> For instance, some people find jokes with a sexual content to be sexually harassing, while others see them as part of normal interaction in the work or school setting.<sup>8</sup> In order to understand sexual harassment, it may therefore be necessary to understand individual's perceptions on hostile environments.

Previous research indicates that women are more likely to label various acts as sexual harassment than men. 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. In one of the previous studies, it was 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 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 6.2 incidents of sexual harassment in college. These statistics merit the need for further investigation regarding male victimization in sexual harassment. It has been reported that both heterosexual men and women rated their anticipated response to a sexual advance by someone of the same gender as being highly negative. This implies that the victim or harasser can be any gender.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, past research on sexual harassment in university settings focused on faculty-student sexual harassment, while 27% of participants reported seductive remarks about their appearance, body, or sexual activities from professors, 44% of participants reported experiencing these remarks from another student. The high incidence of peer sexual harassment suggests that universities need to be more concerned with student-student harassment. Many students feel intimidated when they come to the University for the first time. Medical students may feel intimidated as they enter clinical work. This may entail sexual harassment, as described by Van den Muijsenbergh and Lagro-janssen in a study from Nijmegen Medical School. Students should be made aware and be prepared to deal with such occurrences. They deserve a safe environment which the University should provide for students to learn effectively.

A study carried out at UNZA found that sexual harassment was a problem at UNZA and female students were more likely to be affected. There was no gender difference regarding knowledge about sexual harassment ( $p=0.27$ ) but there was a significant difference in the perception of sexual harassment occurring at UNZA, ( $p<0.001$ ). There were significantly more female students who perceived a lot of sexual harassment to be occurring at UNZA compared to their male counterparts.

This study explores the occurrence of sexual harassment in an institution of higher learning in Zambia, to explore perception of sexual harassment in the University community and to make recommendations based on the findings.

## Methodology

### Sample and Procedure

This was a cross sectional study that collected both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from three participant categories: students (n=913), academic staff (n=90) and non-academic staff (n=97). A letter of introduction from Registrar was used to recruit participants. Questionnaires were administered in class for the students and individually with staff members after obtaining informed consent.

Secondary data included records from 1996 to 2006 on issues to do with sexual harassment from Registrar's department such as grievances, complaints, disciplinary measures; Dean of Students office such as grievances, complaints, disciplinary measures; Counseling center on cases of sexual harassment; University clinic such as cases of sexual harassment; and Records from student and staff unions. For the purpose of this paper, only primary data were analyzed.

### Ethical Consideration

Prior to the commencement of the research, approval was obtained from Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Zambia. An informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to participation in the research. All information was entirely confidential and participants were free to withdraw from study at any time. Data were coded and records were maintained by the Primary Investigator in locked cabinets.

### Data Analysis

Incidents of sexual harassment, gender differences, place of occurrences and other variables on the questionnaire was subject to quantitative analysis using SPSS 11.5, and relationship between variables was analyzed using chi-square and the confidence level was set at 95%.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of participants

The study included 913 students (83%), 90 academic staff (8.2%) and 97 non-academic staff (8.8%). Sex distribution between the three categories did not vary much with 50% of the participants being male (n=443)

and female (n=441) amongst students, 59% male and 41% female among academic staff and 45% male and 55% females among the non-academic staff.

### Knowledge about sexual harassment

The majority of participants (54.1%) reported that they knew what sexual harassment was, 18.6% reported that they did not know and 27.3% were not sure. More males and females among the student and academic staff reported that they knew what sexual harassment was. In the non-academic staff more females (65.2%) knew what sexual harassment was compared to the males (55.3%). However there was no significant gender differences in knowledge among the 3 participant category (p=0.06).

Some commonly given descriptions of sexual harassment by participants were: unwelcome sexual remarks or perceptual sexual relation activities, using ones power over others to gain sexual favours, any act of sex which is against persons will, behaviour towards people that make them feel that their sexual rights are invaded and using unconventional means like fear, duress or force to achieve one's sexual means.

### Understanding of sexual harassment

Table 1 shows that the academic staff correctly and significantly identified more acts of sexual harassment than the non-academic staff and students (p=0.012). Non-academic staff correctly identified two, while students had the least recognition of sexual harassment acts. Three out of nine acts were correctly identified by 50% of the participants.

**Table 1:** Understanding of sexual harassment

Acts of sexual harassment (UNZA HIV and AIDS policy)	Student	Academic Staff	Non-Academic Staff	P-value	Total % Response
Explicit or implicit prepositions	52.2%	57.8%	67.0%	0.016*	53.8%
Explicit statement, jokes, anecdotes or remark of sexual nature	48.7%	55.6%	59.8%	0.068	49.5%
Deliberate, repeated humiliation based upon the sex of the individual	43.4%	64.4%	47.4%	0.001**	45.7%
Remarks about sexual activities or speculations about sexual experience	28.9%	46.7%	36.5%	0.001**	31.6%
Exposure to sexually suggestive visual displays such as photographs	38.3%	56.7%	46.4%	0.002**	40.5%
Persistent, unwanted sexual or romantic attention	66.2%	77.8%	62.9%	0.057	65.6%
Deliberate physical interference with or restriction of individuals	32.2%	45.6%	41.2%	0.012*	34.4%
Subtle or overt pressure for sexual favours	61.4%	77.8%	66.0%	0.008**	62.2%
Intentional touching or physical assault	46.3%	56.7%	67.0%	0.001**	48.9%

*Gender difference in perception of Sexual Harassment*

Table 2 shows that more males than females reported 'no' or 'very little' sexual harassment over occurred, on the other hand, more women believed 'some but not a lot' and 'a lot of sexual harassment occurred'. No statistically significant difference was found in the perceptions of the males and females except for the student group (p=0.002) as shown in table 3 above.

**Table 2:** Gender difference in perception of Sexual Harassment

	Students		Academic Staff		Non-academic Staff	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Not any</b>	9.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	2.2%
<b>Only a little</b>	22.5%	17.0%	0.0%	12.5%	21.1%	8.7%
<b>Some, But not a lot</b>	15.1%	18.2%	45.7%	43.8%	15.8%	30.4%
<b>A lot</b>	17.2%	17.5%	17.4%	15.6%	34.2%	39.1%
<b>Not Sure</b>	36.2%	43.6%	37.0%	28.1%	23.7%	19.6%
<b>P-value</b>	0.002**		0.1		0.292	

**DISCUSSION**

Researchers are interested in sexual harassment among academia. It has been suggested that 19-60% of women in academia and workplace reported some form of sexual harassment.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, research evidence suggest that sexual harassment has a negative impact on the victims; Fitzerland et al<sup>1</sup> reported that anxiety, depression and physical problems are experienced by victims of sexual harassment. Similar evidence show that sexual harassment unreasonably interferes with the person's work or academic performance as well as creating an intimidating, hostile and offensive work or learning environment

We found a significant difference in understanding what constitutes sexual harassment among the participants in the study. For instance, students were least able to identify sexual harassment acts. During the study, 'Remarks about sexual activities or speculations about sexual experiences' and 'Deliberate physical interference with or restriction of individuals' were the least recognized by the participants as acts of sexual harassment. This could be true in that what constitutes sexual harassment vary among and within societies as perception depend on how men and women are socialized within that community, the existence of gender stereotypes, of socio-economic

hierarchies that they exist in private and public life as well as the set notions ad hierarchies within the workplace. For example, at University of Lagos in Nigeria students defined sexual harassment as ranging from innuendos, insinuations to unwanted pressures that could be verbal or physical such as rape.<sup>22</sup>

Besides, it was revealed that more female participants were able to recognize 'Remarks about sexual activities or speculations about sexual experience' and 'deliberate physical interference with or restriction of individuals' as

acts of sexual harassment. This could be attributed to the fact that in most instances females are likely to have experienced various forms of sexual harassment than males thereby placing them in a position to provide more information on those acts or gestures they perceive as constituting sexual

harassment. The academic staff better understood, repeated humiliation based upon the sex, remarks about sexual activities, exposure to sexually suggestive visual displays, physical interference with individuals and overt pressure for sexual favours to be sexual harassment, where non-academic staff better understood 'Explicit or implicit prepositions and intentional touching to constitute sexual harassment.

In addition, a majority of the participants considered persistent, unwanted sexual or romantic attention (65.6%); subtle or overt pressure for sexual favours (62.2%); and explicit or implicit prepositions (53.8%) to be acts of sexual harassment. Only a small percentage of the respondents considered remarks about sexual activities, or speculations about sexual experience and deliberate physical interference with or restrictions of individuals, to be acts of sexual harassment. The respondents' variant responses regarding what they understood to constitute sexual harassment, asserts the fact that there are several forms rather than one form of behaviour that could be described as sexual harassment.<sup>22</sup> This may suggest the need for a strategic policy to address sexual harassment. An earlier study observed that college students may not know what sexual harassment is if they have not been sensitized, this may be the case with our sample as there are no programs to

sensitize the university community on sexual harassment.

The results also show clear differences with regards to how sexual harassment is perceived from a gender perspective by many within the university community. This is evident in that more female; students and non-academic staff identified more forms of sexual harassment acts and behaviour than the male folk (Table 3). Such marked gender differences in the correct knowledge about sexual harassment can be viewed in the light of the results of an earlier study report that majority (80%) of their sample did not perceive pressures for dates, jokes to be sexual harassment. Similarly a study on college students in South Africa found that only unwelcome touching or fondling was included in the students' definition of sexual harassment. In another study among university students in Nigeria however, more males (78%) than females (22%) responses defined sexual harassment in a subtle way as indecent sexual dressing which included dress styles such as see through, low cut necklines, long slits and bare back labeled as sexually provocative.<sup>22</sup> This may also be explained in a cultural context that many of the acts labeled as sexual harassment at a particular place or institution may not be as such elsewhere.

Previous research evidence suggest that it is obvious for females to identify more forms of sexual violence than men in that the hierarchical nature of the universities together with the patriarchal cultures of leadership, implies that there are multiple zones of seniority operating within the campus and those considered junior are consistently vulnerable to unwanted sexualization from senior men.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the current study suggest that sexual harassment may be a problem at the university. Female, students and staff are more likely to be affected. The variations in the number of responses by participants regarding knowledge and perceptions of the conducts which constitute sexual harassment is suggestive of the fact that it is not possible to compile an exhaustive list of acts of sexual harassment which should be prohibited within a higher learning institution. It has also been established that though there are differences in

perceptions and awareness regarding what constitutes sexual harassment among members of the university community, a universal consensus on the key features of the definition of sexual harassment exists, with the most essential ones being that it is unwanted and unwelcome by the victim.

Despite the varying responses on perceptions of the occurrence of sexual harassment at the institution, we are of the view that if left unchecked, sexual harassment has the potential to interfere with academic welfare by creating an intimidating learning, working and social environment. Therefore, in order to create university climates that do not perpetuate sexual harassment, the present study suggests that; a university sexual harassment policy should be formulated and implemented at the institution in order to deter the would be harassers and protect the potential victims. Gender equality between men and women, members of staff and students must be promoted. This implies that institutions of higher learning must not be male dominated but gender balanced. More so, anti-harassment and awareness programs must be put in place to disseminate sexual harassment condemnation messages both within and outside the university communities. This can be done through various fora such as students' and staff clubs, community radio stations, bill boards and many other avenues. Immediate action must also be meted out against the harassers in order to deter such behavior, and promote less hostile learning and working environments in which core values of social justice, integrity and inclusiveness are not compromised.

## **Limitations.**

The results of the study may have been an over estimation of sexual harassment due to the vast scope in the definition of sexual harassment. The personal background of the participants may have had influence on their responses. It was not possible for us to assess if there were any significant differences in the characteristics of those who participated and did not participate in this study due to the confidential nature of the study. Lastly the findings of the study cannot be directly generalized to other institutions of higher learning due to sample specificity. The study however, provides valuable insight

on the knowledge and perception of sexual harassment within a higher learning institution in sub-Saharan Africa and suggests ways on how such behaviour may be alleviated.

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