Prevalence, Pattern, and Perception of Female Undergraduates about Sexual Harassment in a Tertiary Institution in Southwestern Nigeria: An Evaluation of the National Bill on Sexual Harassment

Adenike Iyanuoluwa Olugbenga-Bello[1], Oluwatosin Samson Jegede[2], Grace Ijitade[3], Nicholas Aderinto[4], Abolade Oluwatosin Olajide[5]

[1]Department of Community Medicine, College of Health Sciences, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, [4]Department of Surgery, LAUTECH Teaching Hospital, Ogbomoso, Nigeria, [2]Department of Global Public Health, The Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science, University of California, San Diego, CA, [3]Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, College of Public Health, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, USA, [5]FUTA Health Centre, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria

Abstract

Background: A current national bill on sexual harassment proposes jail terms for failure to investigate and prosecute the offenders of sexual harassment at Nigerian colleges and universities. **Aim:** The study aimed to effectively evaluate the impacts of the new bill, we assessed the current prevalence rates and pattern of sexual harassment among female undergraduates in Southwestern, Nigeria. **Materials and Methods:** Data were obtained from 420 respondents in a cross-sectional study design. We included female aged 18 years and above and excluded students in their first year. Data were obtained using a self-administered questionnaire and analysed using IBM SPSS version 28. Multivariate analysis was done to identify the predictors of sexual harassment. **Results:** The prevalence of sexual harassment was 48.2% among participants, and the highest perpetrators of harassment were victims' boyfriends. The common patterns of harassment experienced by respondents include sexual jokes or stories that were insulting or offensive (44.7%), brushing of body parts in an unwelcomed manner (27.8%), and persistent demand for sex by lecturers or students (20.6%) among others. After controlling for possible confounders, the odds of sexual harassment was 0.604 times (95% confidence interval: 0.388–0.942) less likely among students in higher academic years (i.e., 400 and 500 levels) compared to those in lower academic years (200 and 300 levels). **Conclusion:** The high prevalence of sexual harassment in our study indicates that southwestern universities are yet to meet the goals of the national bill. Institutions of higher learning are urged to discourage societal tolerance for sexual harassment by enforcing sexual harassment prevention regulations in the national bill.

Keywords: Adolescents, Nigeria, prevalence, sexual harassment, students

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a severely traumatic experience that affects many adolescents and women and is often associated with different psychological, physical, and social effects.[1,2] Although the definition of sexual harassment used by academicians varies, it covers an array of actions from rape to physically less intrusive sexual intercourse, whether the action is intentional or unintentional.[3] In medicine, rape is not a clinical diagnosis. It is a terminology used in law to describe situations, in which a victim's anus, vagina, or mouth has been unlawfully penetrated by a penis.[3] Additional forms of sexual harassment include forced or coerced vaginal or anal penetration by any other body parts or object, fondling of the breasts or genitalia, and forcefully touching the genitalia of another person.[4] Lack of consent,

Address for correspondence: Dr. Oluwatosin Samson Jegede,
The Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science, University of California San Diego, CA, USA.
E-mail: osjegede@health.ucsd.edu

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the use of physical force, coercion, deception, or threat, as well as the involvement of a victim who is unconscious, asleep, or mentally incapacitated (as a result of deliberate or involuntary drug or alcohol use), are all factors that constitute rape which is a criminal offense.[4]

No one race or socioeconomic class is exempt from sexual harassment. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in three women encounter sexual harassment, and 30% of women worldwide have either experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence or nonpartner sexual assault.[5] Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia have the highest prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women worldwide with prevalence rates of 45.6%, 36.4%, and 40.2%, respectively.[1] Women who have sexual harassment by nonpartners are 1.5 times more likely to have a sexually transmitted disease such as HIV and are 2.3 times more likely to use alcohol; they are 2.6 times more prone to depression and anxiety.[1,6]

Risk factors for sexual violence include age (majorly the youth), alcohol, drug use, history of rape or sexual abuse, violent sexual partners, and poverty.[2] The past studies have shown that women in higher education are more likely than men of the same age in the general population to experience sexual assault.[3]

In 2020, the Nigerian National Assembly passed a bill on sexual harassment, which seeks to prohibit, mitigate, and prevent sexual harassment of students in Nigerian colleges and universities.[7] The bill made it compulsory for school administrators to investigate and prosecute the offenders of sexual harassment of students. However, literature is lacking in the recent evidence on the prevalence of sexual harassment in Southwestern Nigeria since the bill was passed.

The purpose of this study is to determine the prevalence, pattern, and determinants of sexual harassment among female undergraduate students at the Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State. We also assessed respondents' views on the consequences of sexual harassment. We envisage that this study will help to evaluate the changes in the prevalence rates and patterns of sexual harassment since the national bill was passed in 2020. This study will also serve as a reference tool in decision making for university administrators to review existing regulations and implement policies aimed at decreasing sexual harassment on Nigerian campuses.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was carried out at the Federal University of Technology, Akure, which is located in Akure, the capital city of Ondo State, Nigeria. The university comprises eight faculties which are the School of Science, Earth and Mineral Sciences, Environmental Technology, Engineering and Engineering Technology, Agriculture and Agricultural Technology, Management Technology, Health Sciences, Computing, and the School of Basic Medical Sciences.[8]

Study design and study population

This was a cross-sectional study. The study population were undergraduate female students of the Federal University of Technology, Akure. We included female students who were above the age of 18 years. The legal age to give informed consent in Nigeria is 18 years, and this age was used as an inclusion criterion for participants in this study. We excluded female undergraduates in their first year of the study, as they have not been part of the study community for a sufficient duration (less than one year), which might limit their exposure to personal or shared experiences relevant to the research topic.

Sample size determination

The minimum sample was calculated using Leslie Fischer's formula for a population >10,000. Using the prevalence of the current rate of sexual harassment 56.5%,[9] we arrived at a sample size of 378. A nonresponse rate of 10% was anticipated; hence, we increased the sample size to 420.

Sampling method

- Stage 1: A random sampling was done to select four faculties, namely, health sciences, management technology, agriculture, and agric-technology and sciences
- Stage 2: For each faculty, three departments were selected, and the sample size was proportionally allocated to each department
- Stage 3: In the 12 departments, the students were stratified according to their academic year/levels (i.e., 500 L, 400 L, 300 L, and 200 L). The sample size per department in Stage 2 was proportionally allocated to these levels
- Stage 4: Class list was retrieved from the student representative for each class, and numbers were assigned to each class member serially from 1 to k (where k represents the total number of students in the class). A simple random sampling method using electronically generated random numbers was used to select study participants who met the inclusion criteria from the class list. In the situation, where a selected student declines to participate in the study or does not meet the criteria, the next randomly selected person was approached to participate until the sample size was reached.

Data collection method

Data were collected using a self-administered semi-structured questionnaire. Eligible respondents were recruited from selected departments and academic levels. The questionnaires were then administered to the respondents by trained research assistants.

Data analysis and management

Questionnaire response checks and data validation were done daily, on the field, to ensure that incorrect questionnaires were detected as early as possible. This study used quantitative techniques of data analysis. Analysis of the data emphasised the interpretation, description, and identification of demographic data related to our research questions. IBM SPSS Statistics for Mac, version 28.0. IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA; 2022 was

used for the data analysis. Descriptive statistics were presented in frequency tables and a bar chart.

A binary logistic regression model was used to explore the predictors of sexual harassment among students using logistic regression. Before this step, sexual harassment (dependent variable) was disaggregated into two categories (yes and no) and was coded with 0 and 1, respectively. Similarly, age was recategorized as ≤20 (reference category) and >20, tribe was recategorized as Yoruba (reference category) and others, whereas academic year/level was recategorized into lower level for 200 and 300 levels (reference category) and higher level for

400 and 500 levels. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 407 completed questionnaires were analysed giving a response rate of 96.9%. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents. The mean age of the respondents was 22.7 ± 5.8 years. A large proportion of respondents 338 (95.1%) were living off campus and 387 (95.1%) were single. The highest number of respondents was from the 300 level with 284 (71.0%) participants. Three hundred and eighty-five (94.6%) were Christians, while 18 (4.4%) were Muslim.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (*n*=407)

Variables	Frequency, *n* (%)
Age (years)	
18–20	28 (6.9)
21–23	345 (84.7)
>23	34 (8.4)
Religion	
Christianity	385 (94.6)
Islam	18 (4.4)
Traditional religion	4 (1.0)
Tribe	
Yoruba	293 (72.0)
Igbo	85 (20.9)
Hausa	29 (7.1)
Marital status	
Engaged	20 (4.9)
Single	387 (95.1)
Place of residence	
Campus	69 (17.0)
Off campus	338 (83.0)
Academic year/level	
200	70 (17.5)
300	284 (71.0)
400	25 (6.2)
500	28 (6.3)
Faculty	
Health science	78 (19.1)
Management technology	76 (18.7)
Agriculture and agricultural technology	93 (22.9)
Sciences	160 (39.3)
Department	
Accounting	43 (10.6)
Economics	27 (6.6)
Biochemistry	22 (5.4)
Agricultural technology	94 (23.1)
Human anatomy	49 (12.0)
Microbiology	52 (12.7)
Mathematics	17 (4.2)
Transport management technology	35 (8.6)
Physiology	24 (5.9)
Food technology	31 (7.6)
Project management technology	13 (3.1)
Mean age (years)	22.7±5.8

Table 2: Prevalence and pattern of sexual harassment (*n*=407)

Variables	Frequency (%)
Ever heard of sexual harassment of close friends in this institution	
Yes	21 (5.2)
No	386 (94.8)
Ever heard of a lecturer, staff, or student making inappropriate or offensive comments about a student's body or appearance in the institution?	
Yes	97 (23.8)
No	310 (76.2)
Ever heard of sexual harassment in exchange for a good grade in this institution	
Yes	32 (7.9)
No	375 (92.1)
Ever experienced any form of sexual harassment	
Yes	196 (48.2)
No	211 (51.8)
Ever experienced sexual jokes or stories that were insulting or offensive in this institution	
Yes	182 (44.7)
No	225 (55.3)
Ever experienced people making sexually offensive gestures toward you in this institution	
Yes	63 (15.5)
No	344 (84.5)
History of lecturer, staff, or student asking you for sex or outing persistently	
Yes	84 (20.6)
No	323 (79.4)
History of someone brushing his/her body against your body parts in an unwelcomed manner in this institution	
Yes	113 (27.8)
No	294 (72.2)
History of attempts to view, see, or look at your private parts (genital areas/sexual organs) without your consent	
Yes	15 (3.7)
No	392 (96.3)
Ever experienced any other forms of invasion of your privacy in a sexually offensive way	
Yes	48 (11.8)
No	359 (88.2)

Table 2 shows the prevalence and pattern of sexual harassment among respondents. The overall prevalence of sexual harassment in this study is 48.2% as 196 (48.2%) self-reported to have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment within the university in the past. The highest perpetrators of harassment were victims' boyfriends. In terms of pattern, 97 (23.8%) of the respondents have heard of a lecturer, staff, or student making inappropriate or offensive comments about students' bodies or appearance in the institution, 84 (20.6%) have had a personal history of a lecturer, staff, or a student asking them for sex or outing persistently, and 63 (15.5%) have experienced people making sexually offensive gestures toward them in the institution. Other results are presented in Table 2.

Table 3 shows the respondent's perceptions of enabling factors of sexual harassment. The majority of the respondents 304 (74.7%) and 60 (14.7%) strongly agree and agree, respectively, that society sees sexual violence as a normal act. One hundred and fifty-two respondents (37.8%) agree that female students who are sexually harassed by men provoked the behaviours by the way they talked, acted, or dressed, whereas 207 (50.9%) strongly disagreed that it is natural for a female student to use their sexuality in exchange for a grade or a favor. A high proportion of the respondents 356 (87.5%) regarded sexual harassment as a criminal behaviour.

Respondents' views on the consequences of sexual harassment are displayed in Figure 1. Two hundred and sixty-seven (65.6%) opined that sexual harassment is injurious to the victim's health. About 58.5% of total respondents opined that sexually transmitted infections are major health problems associated with sexual harassment in the society. Other health problems identified include depression (14.5%), suicide (15.7%), and HIV/AIDS (37.1%).

A logistic regression was used to assess the predictors of sexual harassment among students. The factors explored include age, ethnicity, and academic year/levels. The selected model was found to be statistically significant as the omnibus test of the coefficient was statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 53.399$, $P = 0.026$, with the overall correct percentage of 64.8%. The significant coefficient in the model was academic year/level. After controlling for possible confounders, the odds of sexual harassment was 0.604 times (95% confidence interval = 0.388–0.942) less likely among students in higher academic years compared to those in lower academic years [Table 4].

DISCUSSION

The mean age of our respondents is similar to the mean age from previous studies done at the University of Port Harcourt and the University of Calabar which were 22.1 years[10] and 22.3 years,[11] respectively. This is expected in a university setting, where the majority of the students are adolescents and young adults. The large proportion of Yoruba ethnicity among the respondents can be attributed to the location of the university, which is in the Southwestern part of Nigeria.

The prevalence of sexual harassment was 48.2% among the study participants. This is higher than the findings of a research conducted in the Northern region of Nigeria where the prevalence was found to be 13.8%,[12] and higher than the 34% prevalence recorded in a research conducted in Southeastern Nigeria.[13] The discrepancies in the prevalence rates between studies could be related to variances in cultures and religion, as well as levels of awareness regarding sexual assault. The prevalence of sexual harassment among FUTA students is high, according to the findings of this study. This figure fell within the WHO's multi-county lifetime prevalence of sexual partner violence among women aged 15–49 years of 6%–59%.[14] The findings of this study support previous research findings that sexual harassment is common among university students, with males being the perpetrators and females being the common victims.[15,16] The high prevalence of sexual harassment in our study underscores the need for more efforts, by the school's management, to control sexual harassment in the institution by fully implementing the national bill against sexual harassment in Nigerian colleges and universities.[7]

According to the findings of our study, the following elements are perceived to be associated with sexual harassment in universities: social factor (indecent dressing) and economic factor (poverty). These findings appear to be consistent with those of other studies, demonstrating that sexual harassment of students is frequently caused by a variety of social factors such as indecent dressing, which together put students at risk.[17] The studies also demonstrated that students' poor socioeconomic status is linked to
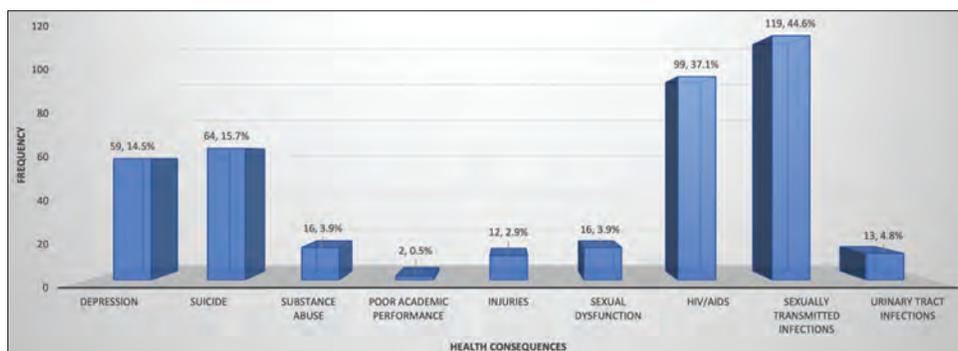

Figure 1: Respondents' opinion about the possible consequences of sexual harassment (*n* = 267)

Table 3: Respondent's perception of enabling factors of sexual harassment (n=407)

Variables	Frequency, n (%)
Society sees harassment violence as a normal act	
Strongly agree	304 (74.7)
Agree	60 (14.7)
Disagree	13 (3.2)
Strongly disagree	30 (7.4)
A female student who is sexually harassed by a man provoked his behaviour by the way they talk, act, or dress	
Strongly agree	109 (26.8)
Agree	152 (37.3)
Disagree	46 (11.3)
Strongly disagree	100 (24.6)
It is natural for a female student to use their sexuality as an exchange for marks or a favor	
Strongly agree	124 (30.5)
Agree	11 (2.7)
Disagree	65 (16.0)
Strongly disagree	207 (50.9)
Night crawling/night party is an enabling factor for sexual harassment	
Strongly agree	84 (20.6)
Agree	137 (33.7)
Disagree	128 (31.4)
Strongly disagree	58 (14.3)
Alcohol and drug use	
Strongly agree	49 (12.0)
Agree	145 (35.6)
Disagree	197 (48.4)
Strongly disagree	16 (3.9)
Intimacy with the opposite sex	
Strongly agree	141 (12.0)
Agree	212 (52.1)
Disagree	52 (12.8)
Strongly disagree	2 (0.5)
Indecent dressing is an enabling factor for sexual harassment	
Strongly agree	101 (24.8)
Agree	216 (53.1)
Disagree	51 (12.5)
Strongly disagree	39 (9.6)
The economic factor (poverty) is an enabling factor for sexual harassment	
Strongly agree	86 (21.1)
Agree	126 (31.0)
Disagree	171 (42.0)
Strongly disagree	24 (5.9)
Any circumstances, in which sexual harassment may be justified is an enabling factor for sexual harassment	
Strongly agree	125 (30.7)
Agree	0
Disagree	144 (35.4)
Strongly disagree	138 (33.9)

Contd...

Table 3: Contd...

Variables	Frequency, n (%)
How would you regard sexual harassment?	
A criminal behaviour	356 (87.5)
As a normal behaviour	23 (5.6)
Don't know	28 (6.9)

Table 4: Predictors of sexual harassment among students using logistic regression

Explanatory factors	B	OR (95% CI)	df (P)
Age			
≤20 (ref)			
>20	0.192	1.211 (0.600–2.443)	1 (0.593)
Tribe			
Yoruba (ref)			
Others	−0.056	0.945 (0.534–1.673)	1 (0.847)
Educational level			
Low level (ref)			
High level	−0.504	0.604 (0.388–0.942)	1 (0.026*)

Omnibus test; χ^2=53.399; *P*=0.106. Correct classification 64.8%.
Ref: Reference category, OR: Odds ratio, CI: Confidence interval.
*Significant at a *p*-value less than 0.05

sexual harassment among university students. This demonstrates the importance of a student's household's economic condition in determining their vulnerability to sexual harassment.[18]

The study findings revealed that the majority of the respondents perceived that the major consequences of sexual harassment in society include sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, as well as suicide and depression. This supports the findings by Okeke *et al.* that sexual harassment has a substantial negative impact on victims' health.[18] It is important to note that, when sexual harassment dehumanizes and disempowers its targets (victims), emotional and physical stress, as well as stress-related mental and physical disorders, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, can occur. Fear, anger, self-consciousness or shame, withdrawal, fear of new people in new situations, lack of trust, loss of focus, self-preoccupation, negative attitudes, trauma, and probable sexual disorder are all psychological effects of sexual harassment, according to some researchers.[19]

The main predictor of sexual harassment in our study was academic year/level. Higher academic level was associated with less sexual harassment among the students. This may be partly attributed to increased awareness of female students about the patterns of sexual harassment due to their duration of stay in the university and an advanced age of students which will correlate with their ability to protect themselves.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Despite an existing national bill, which has a zero tolerance for sexual harassment, the prevalence of sexual harassment in this study was high. A major cause for concern was the fact that the affected population was adolescents and young girls.

Therefore, institutions of higher learning must discourage the seeming tolerance for sexual harassment by enforcing the national bill and policy on sexual harassment prevention.

As higher educational level was found to be associated with lesser harassment, it would be of great value to introduce sex education in the orientation programs for newly admitted students (freshmen). Furthermore, it is vital to integrate sex education courses into universities' academic curriculum as it is being done in some foreign universities. Finally, research into the interrelationship between economic factors such as poverty and sexual harassment would be of great benefit.

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Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

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