

**TITLE:** Confronting Sexual Harassment in Ghanaian Universities

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**YEAR:** 2006

**PUBLISHERS:** Centre for Development Studies, University of Cape Coast and Ghana Universities Press

**PLACE:** Accra, Ghana

**ISBN:** 9964-3-0339-4

**PAGES:** 143

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Sexually-related abuses, offences and/or crimes have gained prominence in the recent history of Ghana. Women's and gender activists around gender-based discrimination have contributed in raising greater awareness on various forms of violations that Ghanaian women experience including sexual harassment. Particularly, Ghanaian women's activists and gender networking around domestic violence and the drawing up of the Domestic Violence Bill, which has now become law through a parliamentary instrument, raised media frenzy on gender based violence. Public debates, sometimes reactionary, had centered on the sexual harassment of women, which served to catapult awareness on the issue. Mass media reports do not only reflect the activists and reactions but also the increasing levels of reporting of sexually-related violations. The reports show that sexually-related violations and crimes occur in any place at any time, and affect women and girls the most. Various institutions, public and/or private, including workplaces, institutions of learning, communities and homes often serve as sites for violations. Universities as institutions of higher learning are often not an immediate site for attention on matters relating to sexual harassment. Yet, like any other institution, Universities are also rife with various forms of sexually-related violations. Their outlook as places of higher education where leaders, professionals and innovators are trained and placed portends an image of high moral grounds. Yet, as social institutions, universities are not immune to the moral corruptions of the society. Recent reports on transactional sex, accusations of prostitution and so-called provocative dressing in higher education institutions, especially Universities and polytechnics, are beginning to raise questions regarding ethics, morality but also gender rights and justice. Hence, a study on sexual harassment in Ghanaian universities is important for highlighting the issue within the specific context of the complexities of universities as higher education institutions where middle level personnel, future leaders and technocrats are trained as well as a place where research is of particular value.

In their book, *Confronting Sexual Harassment in Ghanaian Universities*, Akua O. Britwum and Nana Ama Anokye, place a searchlight on one form of moral corruption that grips Ghanaian universities today. The choice of the title suggests an effort at a critical interrogation and unraveling of the myths of universities and exposing the realities of sexual and related violations that occur on the campuses. In the study, Britwum and Anokye identify forms of harassment, describe experiences, examine attitudes and perceptions, assess institutional capacities and identify provisions for management. This, they detail out using both conceptual and empirical evidence. Their critical analysis of both evidences is revealing of the complex manifestation of sexual harassment in that setting to reveal a gendered, classed and multi-dimensional picture. Although insiders, their bold attempt at venturing into the ivory towers of Ghanaian universities with their shields and insulations to investigate an issue almost taboo, is very risky. Yet as insiders, and with skill and tact, they were able to facilitate engagements and navigate boundaries that corroborate suspicions and allegations of the prevalence of sexual violations on the campuses. Although their book does not focus on incidence and presents very little information in that regard, their investigation is revealing of the historical and conceptual bases of sexual harassment in universities to the extent of shaking up the moral core of universities. The book which details critical conceptual and empirical research serves as an important effort, a ground breaking one, at unraveling the myths and realities of sexual and related violations and crimes within universities. The varied theoretical and historical sources as well as participatory strategies employed in investigating the issue enabled them to generate knowledge on a domain often considered private and better placed out of public spaces. Above all, their ability to engage the various publics of the public universities of Ghana on such a sensitive topic and to facilitate discussions that draw out such sensitive and revealing information attests to the skill with which the research was framed.

Britwum and Anokye set out to investigate perceptions on and experiences of sexual harassment, management systems for dealing with it as well as prospects within existing structures for developing sexual harassment policies. The staff and students of five public universities of Ghana, namely, University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University for Development Studies, were engaged in extensive interactions including workshops, questionnaire, focal group discussions and key informant interviews. The primary data from such interactions corroborate the equally extensive and deep conceptual analysis that informed the study.

The study makes three key assertions regarding knowledge, experience and management of sexual harassments in the public universities. On knowledge, Britwum and Anokye identified two intertwined explanations of sexual harassment, which can be categorized into, behavior-instigating and environmentally-mitigating types. The former is often personal and includes body language, verbal utterances and personal advances such as dressing, facial expressions, profane gestures, pornographic dis-

plays, touching and/or invitation while the latter is often social and entails sexually hostile conditions and situations such as threats, being in "wrong places," participating in particular events, membership of particular sex, class, IQ and/or, office. Although the two were construed as affecting both males and females, women are the real victims. Women in miniskirts were said to be harassing men while women in night clubs were inviting harassment.

Also, the book examines the sex harassment triggers, which were found to be culturally-biased and rooted in the skewed politics of gender inequality. The authors trace some explanations and justifications for harassments to the politics of male conquest, macho culture and sexual exploits to explain the nature of the violations and the imbalance in the experience. The high vulnerability of female students and staff, whose subjugated positions in the hierarchy of the institutional structures was found to create or elicit sexually-harassing environments and behaviors. Gendered power and institutional authority allowed male bosses, faculty and even students to take advantage of and place female staff, students and even faculty in sexually harassing situations such as yielding to sexually coercive behavior, offering sexual favors and/or exposure to sexual objectification. The authors make evident, meanings and interpretations that are rooted in the sexual politics of the broader socio-cultural milieu. By extension, notions of male power (conquering, controlling, assertive, deciding) and female power (shy, luring, undecided, domesticated, exhibiting) with deep implications for the framings of femininity and masculinity play out in the perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment. Indeed, among many Ghanaian cultures, where women hardly have any negotiating power, men often set the mood and boundaries of engagements and negotiations. While this might occur almost invariably in domestic and private domains, it would appear that the privileges that men wield in those spheres are transported into the formal domain. In universities, male bosses and staff extend their domestic powers in ways that translate into sexually harassing behaviors such as unsolicited advances, use of sexed-up language and even touch women without permission. For those women who resist, as reported by Britwum and Anokye, various threats and sanctions are issued. In cases where subordinate staff and students are unable to resist, they are taken advantage off by the super-ordinates resulting in rape and other variations of sexual violence.

On management, Britwum and Anokye found no systematic structures and programmes but possibilities for mitigating change. The counseling systems and facilities, legal instruments and management structure offer potentials for systemizing policy, complaints procedures and correctional mechanisms. The authors identify potential areas such as the university statutes, which are the legal and policy documents guiding university operations. Indeed, equal opportunities provisions, including gender equality commitments and sexual harassment policies and structures, in such documents, become legally binding on the universities and their various publics. Above all, when sections on disciplinary matters provide for sexual harassment they offer immediate guide for addressing sexual issues as all administrators are guided by

such statutes. The absence of formal structures and systems for redress compels survivors to explore alternate avenues such as the counseling centers. Yet these centers exist in only those universities with Education Faculties such as University of Education and University of Cape Coast. Those with academic and residential counseling systems as well as the administration system have also used those structures and rarely, the courts. Yet, the publics of universities are broader than students. What happens to the many other publics, third party victims such as food sellers, errand boys and girls, hawkers and contract workers?

Critical of the institutional undermining and generations of sexual harassment, Britwum and Anokye raise three very important issues that warrant more systematic interventions than the universities have been able to address. The authors argue that sexual harassment is a real issue and necessitates concerted mitigating actions. The many misconceptions about what constitutes harassment, inability to name the harassments appropriately, lack of support mechanisms and inequalities in gender relations serve to compound and underpin the naming and construction of the problem of sexual harassment.

Secondly, Britwum and Anokye found that the existing structures although present great potentials require efforts to enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of survivors but especially to protect vulnerable groups such as fresh women, non-residents, hawkers, academically weak females, attractive females and female secretaries; the near all female categories. Non-residents and hawkers are quiet interesting. In the case of the former, one finds that universities are expanding admissions far in excess of residence facilities at a time when very young people are entering the university. These young but also even mature ones have to live in communities and commute to their campuses at regular but also odd hours, a situation which threatens the safety and heightens vulnerabilities. Also, hawkers and errand boys and girls find themselves in often far worse situations as the non-public or third party public of the universities. As third parties, who contribute informally to the universities and are often not covered under university statutory procedures, the traditional modes of redress and support are not within their reach. Hence, the harassments of such persons but also other third parties such as hired labor, contractors and business operators, who render invaluable services to university staff and students, especially under the era of the ongoing privatization policies are hardly covered under existing disciplinary procedures.

Another important issue that Britwum and Anokye highlight is the role of sexual politics in the framing of harassment. Public debates on the now Domestic Violence Act, suggested, amply, that most Ghanaians conceive of violence and sexual abuse with women as victims. Although the research attempts to defuse such notions, the facts on the grounds demonstrate that women more than men are often affected. The work by Coker-Appiah and Cusack (1999), Osam (2004) and Bortey-Doku Aryeetey (2004) among others, demonstrate that amply. In fact, the authors' own conceptual

excavations and empirical evidence reflect a situation of an imbalance against women. The cases that they analyze regarding men were rather too problematic. In the first place, very powerful deans, heads of departments, lecturers and teaching assistant were said to experience harassments by women and female students who offer sex for academic favors. The seeming acceptance of such conceptions and perceptions constitutes a minimalization of the critical analysis and revelations unraveled in their conceptual analysis. Such perceptions and arguments constitute a denial and dismissal of the systemic challenges such as limited spaces (female residence and the undue competition) that place women in positions to explore all means to get and stay in, including the unorthodox ones such as trading sex for admission and/or marks. Yet, we cannot disregard the fact that some university managers, teachers and assistants use marks to elicit sex from female students. The lack of transparency in university operations and clarity on interpersonal relations also compound and further create conditions (environmentally-mitigating) situations for the various forms of harassment.

An added dimension to male experiences comes from the weak argument of provocative dressing. In institutions where there are no dress codes, such statements should be taken with a pinch of salt. It extends the case of male control over women's bodies. Male students and staff expect women to dress in particular ways otherwise they are inviting harassment on themselves; it is often suggested. That particularly hollow argument can only be justified under the patriarchal and patrimonial structures and systems of which universities are not insulated.

In concluding, Britwum and Anokye explain that although there were hardly any formal policies on sexual harassment in the public universities there was room within existing structures and systems for generating, formulating and systematizing various provisions to form the basis for developing policies and procedures for confronting sexual harassments. Legal provisions within the universities and those of national character such as labor laws and constitution are important starting points. Also, the authors are right in requiring that sexual harassment within universities have to be confronted from the broader perspective of gender politics. The adequacy of the existing systems in managing sexual violence, however, raises questions regarding their ability to deal with the complexities that their own investigations unravel. An important area of concern would be the bureaucratic, patriarchal and paternalistic nature of the university systems. How could they possibly cater to sexual harassment matters that are personal, revealing and crisis-oriented? Do the current perceptions provide any guarantees for taking the matter seriously? Do universities have the expertise beyond the general to manage? I think these questions will have to be taken seriously and addressed in attempts to develop policies to combat sexual harassment.