

# “How do I tell the story?”: Exploring sexual harassment and victimization among male students in Nigerian universities

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## Abstract

The paper investigated the phenomenon of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It however differs from the well-trodden path of perceiving sexual harassment as limited to the female gender. Sexual harassment is an old phenomenon that has ravaged societies and institutions for decades but has not yet been fully comprehended as a problem afflicting both genders in the society. Conventionally, sexual harassment was perceived as tool used by men to exhibit dominance over women. Incidentally, the paper utilizing qualitative methods of study discovered that even men (mainly male students and men in lower positions in organizations) experienced sexual harassment at one point or another in their lives. It also found out that these experiences are hardly reported or investigated. This situation derives mainly from the patriarchal nature of the African society where men are not socialized to express their pains and emotions openly as the society sees men as the stronger gender. In view of the foregoing, the paper makes a strong case for the utilization of social work approach among other strategies in tackling the problems faced by these silent victims of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment, male students, Nigerian universities, undergraduates, victimization, social work.

## “Como posso contar a história?”: Explorando o assédio sexual e a vitimização entre estudantes do sexo masculino em universidades Nigerianas

### Resumo

O artigo investigou o fenômeno do assédio sexual em instituições terciárias na Nigéria. No entanto, difere do caminho já trilhado de perceber o assédio sexual como limitado ao gênero feminino. O assédio sexual é um fenômeno antigo que tem devastado sociedades e instituições durante décadas, mas ainda não foi totalmente compreendido como um problema que afecta ambos os gêneros na sociedade. Convencionalmente, o assédio sexual era percebido como uma ferramenta utilizada pelos homens para demonstrar domínio sobre as mulheres. Aliás, o artigo que utilizou métodos qualitativos de estudo descobriu que mesmo os homens (principalmente estudantes do sexo masculino e homens em posições inferiores nas organizações) sofreram assédio sexual num momento ou outro das suas vidas. Constatou também que essas experiências dificilmente são relatadas ou investigadas. Esta situação deriva principalmente da natureza patriarcal da sociedade africana, onde os homens não são socializados para expressar abertamente as suas dores e emoções, uma vez que a sociedade vê os homens como o gênero mais forte. Tendo em conta o que precede, o artigo defende fortemente a utilização da abordagem do serviço social, entre outras estratégias, para resolver os problemas enfrentados por estas vítimas silenciosas de assédio sexual em instituições terciárias.

**Palavras-chave:** assédio sexual, estudantes do sexo masculino, universidades Nigerianas, estudantes de graduação, vitimização, serviço social.

### 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is the act in which one intentionally sexually touches another person without that person's consent or coerces or physically forces a person to engage in a sexual act against his/her will (Peter et al., 2011). Sexual harassment in universities in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world has been an ongoing discussion for decades.

It refers to persistent, unsolicited, and unwelcomed sexual advances which could be embodied in visual, physical, verbal and non-verbal gestures and is seen as a disease of present-day tertiary institutions (Oni et al., 2019). Probably, it can be seen as one of the biggest challenges confronting Nigerian university students as the menace may have improved in both scope and regularity overtime.

According to Ladebo et al. (2004), it has been identified as one of the major stressors that constitute a threat to the performance of an individual in organizations or academic institutions. Dziech et al. (1994), stated that sexual harassment involves a range of behavior from mild annoyances to unwanted touching, and in extreme cases, rape, or other sexual assault. Fitzgerald (1993) described sexual harassment as the most common form of sexual victimization and may be conceived as a form of social control by men to keep women in their places. For Pauldi et al. (1991), sexual harassment is a type of harassment involving the use of explicit and implicit sexual overtures, including the unwelcome and inappropriate promises of rewards in exchange for sexual favours. In some cases it is so subtle that it goes unnoticed by unsuspecting victims. According to the aforementioned authors, it can be physical and/or verbal. Unfortunately, it cannot be totally avoided as it takes different forms and can occur in a variety of places no matter the environmental set-up.

Though universities are assumed to be citadels of higher learning, it has witnessed very high rates of cases of sexual harassment both between staff and students, among colleagues and in some cases among the students themselves. Owoaje et al. (2010) stated that in Nigerian universities, sexual harassment has become a very topical issue as a result of the incessant complaints by students of various higher institutions. In agreement with the above assertion, Saraki (2016) indicated that sexual harassment incidences are beginning to feature in Nigerian universities at such a dangerous level that can no longer be ignored. These incidences have seen a very reasonable number of academics being relieved of their duties and in some cases resigning as a result of the enormity of the scandal they find themselves involved in (Muoghalu et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, sexual harassment does not only involve forcing an individual to engage in sexual activities (verbally or physically), it also involves the mental health of the individual as the victim either develops an inferiority complex or phobia for future relationships. This more often than not affects their general wellbeing and effectiveness/competencies as individuals. In some cases, if psychotherapy is not introduced, these victims find it very difficult (if not impossible) to fit into the normal routines of life. Muoghalu et al. (2016) asserted that sexual harassment usually has devastating effects on the victims which include poor academic performance, loss of self-confidence, negative health outcomes and well-being thereby making them less productive. In the opinion of Adeokun (2005), it makes the victims uncomfortable, undermines the integrity of the academic environment and prevents the victims from achieving their full potentials.

According to the Muoghalu et al. (2016), this happens because many of the victims feel despondent, used, dirty, guilty, ashamed, unsafe, and angry with themselves and their environments. Other authors assert that the intimidating and hostile environment created by the many cases of sexual harassment oftentimes prevent the victims from achieving maximum productivity based on incessant fear and apprehension, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, loss of womb and other life-long health hazards (Denga et al., 2004; Imonihke et al., 2011).

Be the above as it may, sexual harassment takes different forms and can be found or experienced in any kind of setting. According to Conroy (2013), there are three primary types of sexual harassment in school settings viz: verbal, visual/non-verbal and physical. According to the author, verbal sexual harassment includes unwanted sexual humour, sexual rumors, inappropriate sexual name calling, homophobic slurs, rating others' body parts, pressure for sexual relationships through phone calls or face-to-face interactions among others. Non-verbal/visual sexual harassment the author classified as unwanted written sexual communication (texts messages, notes, letters, emails etc.), unwanted facial expressions/gestures, indecent exposure/showing of sexual pictures amongst others. While physical sexual harassment was classified as sexually brushing against someone, having one's clothes pulled or tugged in a sexual manner, unwanted sexual touching and forced kissing or touching. The incident of sexual harassment in higher institutions does not just have negative consequences for the victims but also for the institutions as it makes a lot of people lose respect and confidence in them.

Though over the years, sexual harassment has mostly been tackled from the angle of female harassment, recent studies and investigations have shown that a reasonable number of men and male students also face a high level of sexual harassment from their female lecturers and in some cases from their male lecturers who turn out to be gay (while pretending not to be). According to Carlton (2022), though most studies on sexual harassment assume that only women encounter sexual abuse, the epidemic does not only affect women but also a reasonable number of men as well. According to the author, men also experience sexual assault as 6.8% of undergraduate men and 2.5% of male graduates in her study reported to have been involved in nonconsensual sexual activities.

Another study by the American Association of University Women showed that male students also reported being sexually harassed with a variety of reactions and effect on the victims to the extent that 5% of the victims transferred to other institutions because of the harassment. According to Basile et al. (2011), over 27% of men and over 32% of women had been sexually victimized at some time in their lives. This implies that a very reasonable percentage of men/boys at some point or another also face sexual harassment. Unfortunately, a good number of male victims either do not cry out due to shame and the few that do cry out do not get as much attention and assistance as the female victims do. This can be attributed to the African mentality that men are the stronger gender and are not expected to be seen crying or showing any emotions that will give them out as weak.

To buttress the above fact, the extant literature suggests that although female victims of sexual assaults have garnered a great deal of necessary attention, there seems not to be a commensurate body of work focusing on men as victims of sexual violence (Whitton et al., 2019; Stephenson et al., 2011; Hickson et al., 1994; Donnelley et al., 1996). It is in recognition of the above lacuna that the present paper examines the lives of male victims of sexual harassment in Nigerian universities and how the experience impacts on their general wellbeing. There is no gainsaying the fact that a reliable antidote to the problem cannot be achieved without a holistic view of the phenomenon. The paper therefore, examines the phenomenon of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It however differs from the well-trodden path of perceiving sexual harassment as limited to the female gender. It thus interrogates sexual harassment from the perspective of male students and the probable role of social work in mitigating this hardly openly discussed scourge of tertiary education.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### *2.1 Data collection and sample size*

The paper adopts a largely qualitative methodology. In other words, information/data was derived from unstructured interviews conducted among university students. To this end, a sample size of 75 respondents was selected from the 15 faculties in a Nigerian university (i.e. 5 respondents from each faculty); (name of university withheld for confidential purposes). The selected respondents were young men who are between the ages of 18 and 35. As the study was carried out with human objects, ethical clearance was gotten from the Directorate of Strategic Contacts, Ethics and Publications office of the University with clearance code: UNN/EC/010-IDS/1002/MAR-08/24.

### *2.2 Sampling technique*

The sample selection for the study was done purposively; the essence of the purposive selection was to ensure that only young men who fall within the given age range, have been or are still in the university, and are aware of the topic are chosen in the sample. The study obtained the informed and voluntary consent of the respondents. In addition, the study assured the respondents of confidentiality and the strict utilization of the information for research purposes. To ensure that respondents do not harbour any fears of possible repercussions from participating in the study, they were not asked to disclose their true names (identity), actual departments, and other personal identifiers. The interviews were conducted at venues and times chosen by the respondents.

### *2.3 Data analysis*

Data from the interviews were analyzed adopting the thematic analytical approach (Braun et al., 2006). This helped to make sense of the information collected from the interviews. The themes equally enabled the study to consummate the overarching goal of the study i.e., to unravel the nature and manifestations of sexual harassment among male undergraduate students in Nigeria.

## **3. Results**

Sexual harassment can be considered as old problem in the society; can be traced back to as far back as the commencement of tertiary education itself. However, the study/concern with sexual harassment in universities and other tertiary institutions have always focused on female victims leaving a lot of young male victims depressed and in extreme cases wasted for life. This is because most times, the male victims do not report the cases for fear of being tagged “weak” or “as lacking swag”. In the words of a 30-year-old university graduate assistant:

It happened when I was in first year of my undergraduate studies; I couldn't tell

anyone about it because I was too embarrassed about it. I wasn't responding to her touches because they repulsed me, but my roommates described not being responsive to a woman's touch as a sign of weakness or lack of swag. I wasn't going to allow anyone call me weak or describe me as lacking swag because I know I am a very handsome guy with a very good fashion sense, so I endured it as much as I hated it. She was my lecturer and academic advisor; I was a class representative and had to see her very often. Sometimes she would send for me for no reason at all. Then, she would start squeezing my buttocks and caressing my chest. I tried washing off her hands from my body with water, but I couldn't wash them off my mind. It continued until my third year when I finally opened up to my mother and she sent my uncle to confront my abuser. I couldn't have any relationship with any girl till after my youth service because I saw her in every woman and that disgusted me.

Typically, male victims often try to put up brave faces during and after the harassment simply because they feel embarrassed, or they do not want to be referred to as weaklings. They do not just suffer from the very common experiences and feelings that come with or follow harassment, they often face additional problems due the societal expectations, attitudes and beliefs about men and masculinity. One respondent in the survey revealed that he was silent about his abuse until it moved from affecting him emotionally/mentally to him losing his health physically.

According to him:

My dad always accused me of being a mummy's boy or a girlie. He always scolded me to man-up. So, when my lecturer started making sexual advances at me, I couldn't talk to my mum about it because she would have told my dad, and I couldn't talk to my dad either because we didn't have a very good father-son relationship. At first, I thought I could manage everything on my own; I thought I could man-up (in my dad's words). But then, the abuse became more intense, more frequent and I started avoiding school. I wasn't happy with my performance in school, but I knew why. I kept hoping it would end with me being away from classes, but the sexual harassment continued telephonically. I started losing appetite for food and drive for even extracurricular activities. When I was rushed to the medical center after passing out outside my lodge and my mum and dad took me home, I opened up and told them my story. My dad came to the school and confronted the Head of Department with the story. When summoned, my abuser denied all accusations but when my dad threatened to press charges, she confessed but pleaded to be saved from the disgrace. Sadly, she has a husband and children who from all indication do not know her true nature.

The experience of some of those interviewed shows that sexual harassment can also take the form of non-physical contact especially after the initial face-to-face contact. However, the affects remain largely the same. According to one other respondent who just finished his 3<sup>rd</sup> year in a 4-year programme:

I lost my sanity and peace of mind after so many months of being abused sexually by my lecturer. When I wasn't having sex with her physically, I was having sex with her over the phone as she made me have sex with her via video calls. Most of the time, she used to send me nude pictures of her and insisted on me doing the same. Initially I kept making excuses for not reporting her to my parents; I was always telling myself that I was too young and that was why I didn't have the courage to do so. Unfortunately, I was gradually turning into a mental case. After many failed attempts to make me confide in her, my mum introduced me to her friend who is a psychologist because like everyone else around me, she had realized that I was depressed over something. Even the sessions with the psychologist didn't do much for me. Then, my abuser travelled abroad for a fellowship and that was the break I needed. I knew that her absence was my opportunity to speak up; however, though I had just finished 3<sup>rd</sup> year and about starting my final year even that didn't give me the courage I needed to speak to my mum because I was totally embarrassed about the whole thing. I had to send some of the nude pictures to my mum's psychologist friend and that was the beginning of my freedom and eventually treatment sessions.

Some of the respondents were convinced that the incidence of sexual harassment of male students is far higher than usually expected. In other words, they believe a good number of male students have been victims at one time

or the other. In the words of one of such respondents:

“I don’t believe I am alone on this path; I believe a whole lot of students (especially male students like me) are in this kind of situation in this university and even in other universities. Unfortunately, as it is not easy even for girls to talk about being abused, you can now imagine how tough it is for us”.

In some other cases, the male victims settled into the situation as a way of life when fighting it fails. Thus, one of the respondents in his early 20s narrated how his older cousin became gay because of sexual harassment and abuse from a male lecturer whom he fought for a while then gave in to and had a 3-year sexual relationship with. In his words,

By the time my family found out, he was already too deep into it and forcing other younger boys in the family to have sex with him. When he was interrogated, it was discovered that he had been having sexual relations with his lecturer since his third semester in the school. According to him, he resisted the man’s advances for a while but due to the kind of notes and videos he usually sent him, he started developing feelings for him and before he knew it, they were having sex. Initially it was an occasional thing, but the victim became too dependent on the satisfaction gotten from the abuse that he practically begged for it. The abuse went on for too long that he got addicted to it and during school breaks, when he is far away from his abuser, he started seeking satisfaction around him.

Though men are conventionally perceived to be less affected by sexual harassment, there is evidence to support the idea that sexual victimization affects male victims mentally as much as it affects female victims and may even be linked to worse results (Peterson et al., 2011). To affirm the above assertion, one of the respondents stated:

I never believed it when I hear that someone is bisexual until my lecturer started making advances at me. I knew some of the female classmates he was already sleeping with; so, I couldn’t understand exactly what he wanted from me given that I am a boy. When he wouldn’t back off, I summoned the courage to confront him, and he confirmed to me that he fancies me as much as he fancied those girls. It didn’t sound real to me; it disgusted me. My greater shock came when I confronted one of the girls he was sleeping with, and she confirmed to me that she knew it was sexual victimization going on with her and the lecturer and it was wrong, but she cared more about graduating than what the man was doing since he would not see her to sleep with her again once she graduates. I tried adopting that mindset, but I couldn’t. After fighting him off for three semesters, I went for a change of course hence I’m here now. Each time I remember that I should have graduated if not that I changed departments, I lose my peace; especially since I had never been able to talk to anyone about my experiences before now”.

From the foregoing, female victims may deal with the abuse better and show more tolerance for the perpetrator than the male victims. This is in line with the opinion of Pranthier et al. (2018) who stated that few women are always willing to endure the damage to reputation and prospects for marriage that follow being raped. As a matter of fact, the fieldwork exercise for this paper revealed that males are the most unwilling to talk about their experience. But even beyond this, an ingrained and culturally bred notion of masculinity hinders the males from coming forward or raising the alarm even to parents and close family members. Thus, only a few of our respondents showed any genuine desire to discuss their experiences and a good number clamped up totally or suddenly became tongue-tied in the interview sessions.

Be the above as it may, what is known about male sexual victimization is dwarfed by the knowledgebase on female victimization because while female sexual harassment has garnered a great deal of attention, the body of literature examining men as victims of sexual violence is lacking (Whitton et al., 2019; Stephenson et al., 2011; Hickson et al., 1994; Donnelley et al., 1996; Bullock et al., 2011; Hail-Jares et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2018). Donne et al. (2017) and Thomas et al. (2023) opined that the help and support for male victims is over 20 years behind that of female victims. According to the authors, male victims have fewer resources and greater stigma than female victims.

Another worrisome aspect of sexual harassment in schools is the aspect that has nothing to do with the gender of the victims. This is the aspect of trust reposed on teachers and the institution to be a haven for students. According to Celik et al. (2012), the environment is considered the most reliable source of safety for students; however, issues

of educator sexual misconduct with students have helped to provide a sense of insecurity for many families. In cases where the students cry out, it oftentimes seems like their word against the teachers'. Shakeshaft (2004) and Ruffin (2017) stated that schools are places where teachers are most commonly believed when they deny students' claims of misconduct due to their power and status and as a result, incidents of educator misconduct becomes difficult for many schools to deal with and more often than not require well-trained professionals to step in and assist with providing support throughout towards dealing with such incidents. These assertions are further underlined by the questions raised by one of the respondents. According to him:

“Who do you talk to? Where do you start and who will believe your story? With all these lecturers acting like saints and always preaching about God and good behaviour, who will believe that they are guilty of what you say they did or are doing?”

In this sense, a lot of victims simply resign to fate. A resignation bred by sentiments like the above which question the credibility of such acts especially since teachers are perceived as both role models and guardians of morality in these institutions.

#### 4. Discussion

The foregoing findings, sexual harassment, going from the narratives of the victims can have both psychological and physical impacts. Thus, sexual harassment can have negative health outcomes in addition to affecting academic performance and generating loss of self-confidence (Muoghalu et al., 2016). The findings also indicate that as has been argued by Conroy (2013) sexual harassment exist in different forms ranging from physical to verbal and non-verbal abuse. The respondents often described sexual harassment that occurred verbally especially using the telephone.

Equally the findings support the notion that sexual harassment even when not perpetrated as a form of exchange for reward (perhaps in the form of better grades), the knowledge that refusal can have negative academic effects may often hold victims' hostage to their abuses. Therefore, sexual harassment can be perceived as utilizing explicit and implicit sexual overtures including promise of reward [even where such is not explicitly stated] to attain sexual favours (Pauldi et al., 1991). Also interesting is the discovery that sexual harassment emerges as a form of stressor on the victims. In other words, the findings corroborate the views of Ladebo et al. (2004) that sexual harassment is a stressor that negatively impacts on the performance of individuals in organizations and educational institutions.

##### 4.1 *The role of social work in tackling sexual harassment*

As has been seen and stated in literature, sexual harassment does not only involve tampering with the physical body of individuals, it extends to the distortion or damage of the human within the physical body. Social workers are trained to identify even the unspoken words and the subtlest forms of abuse in individuals even when they are unwilling to talk about it. They do not only have the ability to sense these subtle signs of abuse, they also have the resources to get victims of abuse to safe places and more often than not provide legal resources and mental health care (University of Nevada, 2013). Being a helping profession, when dealing with sexual harassment, social work assists the victims get justice where possible, helps them rediscover their lost self-esteem and guides them through the healing process. This is achieved through a variety of methods and approaches such as:

- i. **Advocacy:** social workers oftentimes speak on behalf of sexual harassment victims in the bid to get justice for them against their abusers. In some other cases, they influence policy changes that address sexual harassment by collaborating with policymakers, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive policies and legislation aimed at effectively preventing and responding to sexual harassment (Patel, 2023). According to the author, they achieve this by providing the victims with adequate information and appropriate support system with regards to seeking and achieving the deserved justice and redress.
- ii. **Education:** through seminars and workshops, social workers help people gain better understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, what to tolerate and what not to tolerate, when to cry out, when to seek help and where to seek the needed help. Through these, they create a culture of respect and empathy, and by helping the people know their rights, they challenge harmful behaviours and attitudes (Patel, 2023; Patel et al., 2022).
- iii. **Trauma-Focused treatment:** this is treatment meant for victims of trauma of all nature (including that as a result of sexual harassment) aimed at helping them regain their self-worth and function well

in spite of what they have been through. This type of treatment oftentimes involves sessions that stretch up to 12 to 20 times to ensure that the victim has come to a point where he is she can live optimally without being affected by the past (Tripathi, 2016). According to Patel (2023), social workers oftentimes adopt the trauma-informed approach to care for, recognize the individual's strength and resilience while acknowledging the trauma they have experienced.

## **5. Conclusions**

The study reported here should be considered a modest contribution towards unravelling the male gender dimension to sexual harassment. Given a culture of masculinity and societal perception of men as usually strong characters and initiators of sexual liaison, male victims of sexual harassment are often in a quandary about how to access help or even open-up about their experience. Therefore, though female victims due to their soft nature and frequent emotional breakdowns open up easier than male victims leading to them seeking and getting help fast, male victims usually do not seek help easily due to the feeling of masculinity and the initial assumption that they can deal with it on their own.

Also, while the extant literature is grossly overstretched with the examination or focus on women as victims of sexual harassment, there seems a literature lacuna with regards to the incidence of sexual harassment of males especially in tertiary institutions. While the above scenario challenges scholars to address the nature, dimensions, and manifestations of sexual harassment as a male-experience, it also opens a scope for innovative social work practice. Therefore, social workers who use traditional social work approaches in dealing with sexual abuse mainly as a problem confronting females now need a rethink towards tailoring social work services that address the challenges of male victims of sexual harassment. Thus, while such time tested approaches as adversary, education/awareness and even trauma counselling may suffice, there is need for a fundamental paradigm shift that sees males as equally victims.

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## **7. Authors' Contributions**

The article a sole-authored. All work - idea, writing, reading, outlining topics, corrections and submission were all done by author<sup>1</sup>.

## **8. Conflicts of Interest**

No conflict of interests

## **9. Ethics Approval**

Yes. Ethical clearance code: UNN/EC/010-IDS/1002/MAR-08/24.

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